The Influence of Educational Supports for African American Female Students in Middle School

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Dedication

In the words of Marian Wright Edelman, “Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it,” that is my mission of what I strive to do. Thank you to my father, Jerry Smith, for his many years of experience as an educator. Your inspiration and example continue to shape my career ambitions. Your loving support helps sustain me.

To my mother, Charlene Smith, thank you for your continued support and encouragement as I journey through this thing called life. Your positive energy transfers to me are lifesaving. If I can embody even a fraction of your grace and strength, I have done well.

Thanks to my “Gran Lucy” for always showing concern and giving hard, honest advice and assessments to her “Toot.”

Thank God for his grace and mercy as I work to be the best humanitarian and woman of conviction I can possibly be.

Lastly, to all the young girls in the world who face challenges daily, this is dedicated to you. May we all one day finally be able to say that our greatest potential has been fulfilled, regardless of the obstacles in our paths.

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Abstract of Dissertation

The Influence of Educational Supports for African American Female Students in Middle School

Research suggests that current school structures and teaching strategies allow for a performance gap between African American female students compared to their counterparts from other racial backgrounds (Bonomo, 2010; Bouchamma et al., 2014; Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015; Crenshaw, 2010; Evans-Winters, 2011; Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018b; Ricks, 2014a). Eradicating this performance gap and changing the current academic trends for many African American female students, school leaders, teachers, and society requires understanding and infusing the mechanisms and strategies known to positively impact their learning experience.

This study sought to identify and research best practices incorporated by administrators and teachers to create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school. The theoretical framework for this study, Critical Race Feminism, known as (CRF), is a derivative of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which according to the work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), offers "a way to rethink traditional educational scholarship" (p. 60). This study utilized interviews from several schools on the East Coast of the United States with programs designed to improve African American middle school female students' academic outcomes.

The best choice of methodology to examine the academic structures supporting African American girls is a basic interpretive qualitative study (Merriam, 2009a; Saldaña, 2016a). Semi-structured interviews with 13 teachers or administrative team members.

This study also explored the perceived impact of targeted educational practices through interviews with administrators and teachers.

It is important to note that a global pandemic, SARS-CoV-2, or COVID 19, occurred during this study, which caused significant disruptions on an international scale. Regarding this study, this virus impacted the researcher's ability to conduct in-person interviews. The changes to all aspects of life likely impacted potential participants' availability.

The data collected from this descriptive study will help school leaders select strategies to adapt to educational settings for this specific subgroup of students. Findings from the data analysis included the following:

1. Relationship building between students and teachers was vital in building a positive culture for African American female students.
2. Gender-based affinity space was central to the structure of the participant's schools.
3. Expectations of building student accountability were central to participants.
4. Exposure and representation of African American females in careers were frequently employed practices that participants deemed effective.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Across the nation, African American female students continue to perform below their White counterparts in crucial subject areas required for graduation, such as English and Language Arts (NCES, 2017). The 2017 NAEP dataset shows that 16% of eighth-grade White students scored below the basic level, while 40% of African American students scored below the basic range (NCES, 2017). Thirty-four percent of African American female students scored in the 'below basic' range compared to their White female counterparts, only 12% of whom scored below the basic range (NCES, 2017). Unfortunately, the 2019 NAEP dataset shows that 18% of White students scored below the basic level while 46% of African American students scored below the basic range (NCES, 2019), a decrease in proficiency from 2017. Thirty-nine percent of African American female students scored in the 'below basic' range compared to 14% of White female students who scored below the basic range (NCES, 2017).

Flemings (2000) reports that young women are eager to begin their education; however, they will likely experience decreased confidence and overall enjoyment in pursuing academics by the fourth year of school. According to the 2014 report, co-authored by the NAACP Legal Defense Educational Fund and the National Women's Law Center, disproportional education attainment could lead to a less productive workforce for a large segment of the U.S. The United States population is a diverse mix of approximately 328 million individuals from various racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. African Americans comprise a unique subgroup of approximately 12.8% of the national population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The U.S. Census Bureaus

(2019) indicates that of the 41,989,671 citizens identifying solely as African American, this unique portion of the American demographic consists of a majority female population (52.2%) compared to males (47.8%). Based on reports analyzed by the National Women's Law Center and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (2014), this subgroup of female students "earned [grades] on regularly assigned classwork in 2009, for non-Hispanic African American female twelfth-graders having the lowest overall grade point averages when compared to female students of any other racial or ethnic group (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund et al., 2014b, p. 29)." This study sampled public and private high school transcripts from students that took the NAEP assessments in public or private institutions. The researchers analyzed the student's grade point average (GPA), which necessitates course credit and grade information.

This study sought to identify and research best practices incorporated by administrators and teachers to create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle schools. The research utilized data from several administrators and teachers in the United States with programs designed to improve African American middle school female students' academic outcomes. This study also explored the perceived student impact of targeted educational practices through a series of interviews. The data collected from this descriptive study can help school leaders select strategies to adapt to educational settings for this specific subgroup of students.

Statement of the Problem

There were several gaps and paucity in the literature about academic strategies to support African American female students compared to their White counterparts (Epstein

et al. 1998; Evans & Winters 2011; Jha & Kelleher 2006; Lingard et al. 2002). National assessment data further verifies the achievement gap between races and gender (NCES, 2017). The research highlights the theories of critical race theory, critical race feminism, and culturally responsive pedagogy, as well as gender-specific learning strategies, curricular styles, and community supports that may improve academic outcomes for African American female students (Berry, 2010; Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015; Erickson & Phillips, 2012; Lac, 2017; Tsui, 2007).

NAEP data revealed a substantial academic gap for African American students compared to other racial subgroups in reading. To eradicate this performance gap and change the current academic trends for many African American female students, school leaders, teachers, and society must understand and infuse the mechanisms and strategies known to impact their learning experience positively. Evans and Winters (2015) highlighted a gap in the research focused on students of color, allowing for an almost exclusive focus on the "education of White female students and women… [furthermore], race-based epistemologies tend to be consumed with the educational barriers negatively affecting Black boys, the educational needs of Black female students have fallen through the cracks" (p. 12).

Ricks (2014a) problematizes a lack in research about the academics of African American female students by stating that this oversight "add[s] to the invisibility of Black females and continue[s] to support narratives of resistance and/or acting out" which further justifies the underperformance of Black female students (p. 17). Connor and Craig (2006) described the achievement gap as "observable across a broad range of measures of school success, including grade point average, enrollments in special education versus

gifted programs, suspension rates, high school graduation rates, [and] college enrollment" (p. 771). The achievement gap has generated national interest in African American young men (Ferguson, 2000; Ghaill, 1994; Hooks, 2004; Lopez, 2003; Price, 1999; Sewell, 2000). Society has placed a lesser focus on the academic outcomes for African American female students, while scrutiny has increased in both media, legislative attention, and funding for young men (Davis, 2003; Duane et al., 2009; Lynn et al., 2010; Milner, 2007; Noguera, 2009; Roderick, 2003). In 2019, African American students constituted 11,553,211 of the 53,591,923 kindergarten through twelfth-grade students enrolled in school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

This study identified factors in education that may create a culture of achievement for African American female middle school students. Through the lens of critical race feminism, this research explored African American middle school female students' development and the intentional support initiated by schools to support academic success. Based on the research gaps, the purpose of this study was to spur school districts and creators of curricular content to develop policies, curricula, and social initiatives to improve educational outcomes for African American female students.

Research Question

This qualitative study addressed the following central research question: How do administrators and teachers create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school? The districts and schools selected had programming structures designed to support African American female students' academic success. Due to a low saturation rate, academic institutions and interviewees also referred potential participants

matching the criteria mentioned above. The study's expansion allowed additional participants from other school districts who support African American female students. This expansion benefited the study because if the interviewees school system did not suggest that the participant contribute their knowledge, their insight would have been lost. Through interviews with school administrators and teachers, it was evident that the strategies the participants used are the most effective mechanisms and strategies known to impact their learning experience positively. This study also discerned those practices participants deemed less effective in supporting these students.

This study sought to identify and research best practices incorporated by administrators and teachers to create a culture of achievement for African American female students in a middle school. The theoretical framework for this study, Critical Race Feminism, known as (CRF), is a derivative of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which according to the work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), offers "a way to rethink traditional educational scholarship" (p. 60). This study utilized interviews from several schools on the East Coast of the United States with programs designed to improve African American middle school female students' academic outcomes.

The best choice of methodology to examine the academic structures supporting African American girls was a basic interpretive qualitative study (Merriam, 2009a; Saldaña, 2016a). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 participants, serving as teachers or school administrators. This study explored the perceived impact of targeted educational practices through interviews with administrators and teachers. The original design of the study intended to focus on teachers and administrators, defined as assistant principals and principals. However, due to factors related to COVID-19, saturation could

not be reached. Therefore, the study was expanded through snowballing and referral sampling. The four referred participants identified as current or former administrators in the roles of instructional coaches, district leaders, and school improvement plan administrators.

Statement of Potential Significance

African American female students enrolled in middle school in the United States disproportionately fail to experience mastery of concepts in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies compared to female students in the White racial group (Crenshaw, 2010; NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund et al., 2014c, p. 36). This chapter will discuss possible impacts and implications, findings, and policy and societal implications within the forthcoming sections. The research outcomes from this study suggest the following:

1. Relationship building between students and teachers was essential in building a positive culture for African American female students.
2. Gender-based affinity space was central to the structure of the participant's schools.
3. Expectations of building student accountability were central to participants.
4. Exposure and representation of African American females in careers were commonly employed practices that participants deemed effective.

The data can help understand the factors contributing to African American female middle school students' academic outcomes. This study could conceivably encourage interest in adding to the literature on the types of high expectations, instructional practices, and community relationships school districts endorse to promote positive

academic outcomes for African American middle school female students. This study can help school leaders adjust school structures used in a school serving predominantly African American female students. Teachers can utilize this information to create classroom-based programs, ensuring best practices and academic success for African American female students.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study, Critical Race Feminism, known as (CRF), is a derivative of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which according to the work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), offered "a way to rethink traditional educational scholarship" (p. 60). As Hughes posits in his 1945 work, this frame for analyzing a population is an essential measure of race and status in the United States (Hughes, 1945). Unlike traditional feminism, CRF disrupts the concept of a monolithic female experience, which often skews toward that of the financially secure White woman Wing (1996a). Regarding critical race feminism, stated this theory "explores the lives of those facing multiple discrimination based on their race, gender, and class revealing how all of these factors interact within a system of White male patriarchy and racist oppression" (p. 948).

The term CRF, coined by the U.S. Legal Academy in the 1990s, highlights the discrepancies in women of color (Stange et al., 2011). CRF expounds upon the theories of feminism that challenge the patriarchal structures and hierarchies based on gender and Walker's (1983) 'womanist' theology, compared to their dominant race counterparts. Critical Race Feminism allows a framework to view the student's experience and cultural background as a strength, rather than a deficit. This framework also contextualizes African American women's education and social movements through the frame of race

and power. CRF allows incorporating feminist perspectives through a review of African American female students' academic advancement. These epistemological perspectives align with studies of empowerment and are best suited to research focused on change and emancipation.

This lens serves as much more than a framework for the subsequent research. CRF served as a barrier between the readers and the researcher and may prevent practitioners from making assumptions that any negative academic trends associated with African American female students are attributable to an inherent lack of intelligence. O'Connor et al. (2007b) warned against the dangers of the Black community's homogenization in research. O'Connor (1997) stated "that racial data should not be used as proxies for traits (such as intelligence or motivation) and subsequently interpreted as innate or culturally ingrained" (p. 771). By using a qualitative, interview-based research design that utilizes CRF as its theoretical foundation, the research can create a balanced view of the challenges facing African American female students, as well as learning the academic structures that school leaders and teachers can implement to create successful academic outcomes defined by proficient standardized test scores.

This study's conceptual framework, based on critical race feminism, will focus on the culture's impact on African American middle school females' achievement. For this study, the culture will include high expectations, instructional practices, and community relationships. The forthcoming qualitative research study focused on identifying positive practices that create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school while reflecting and valuing their principles and culture. Staff in schools facilitating an environment of academic success for African American female students

will be well-versed in strategies to support this subgroup of girls in the core subjects of reading, mathematics, science, social studies, and other supporting disciplines such as the study of a foreign language. Also, staff considered what strategies they believe will positively contribute to their mastery of concepts. The interview questions sought to ascertain the participants' perception of student relationships with staff, school-based administration, and the larger community regarding structures supporting a positive learning environment.

Summary of the Methodology

A qualitative analysis was the best method to identify adequate academic supports that enhance the likelihood of academic achievement for African American middle school female students (Saldaña, 2016b, p. 4). Qualitative data allows the researcher to gain insight and understanding of phenomena through an intensive collection of narrative data. To understand best practices for African American female students, the researcher conducted a series of interviews with teachers and administrators to understand schools' structure with a high success rate among African American female students as measured by publicly available standardized assessment data. Additionally, participants were referred from those interviewees mentioned above and academic instructions, allowing for 'successful' teachers and principals to share their experiences that may not be noted within a school system's metrics but known to be successful by their peers.

This essential interpretive qualitative study's original structure analyzed the interviews of up to twenty-five administrators and teachers from one urban school district serving approximately fifty thousand students. The study expanded to include participants referred from the George Washington University and referrals made through

previous interviewees. Each semi-structured interview occurred by phone for no more than sixty minutes. If the participant or the researcher wanted to follow up for additional clarification, the researcher reserved the option for an additional conversation.

Limitations

The primary limitation to this study was the social distancing requirement due to a global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic caused many school districts and educators across the world to conduct all interactions virtually. This study, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, required participants to refrain from close contact with the researcher so in-person research would present an apparent health concern. Therefore, a modification was submitted to request interviews be conducted by phone for the safety of all. Also, several potential participants lost contact with the researcher due to personal scheduling, reassignment, or separation from their employer. Initially, this study's primary concern was the participants' willingness to provide accurate information regarding their best practices perceptions. However, this issue may have been unexpectedly amplified because of the inability to conduct in-person interviews. During the interview, the participants' comfort level, coupled with the researcher's lack of proximity to the interviewee, could have inhibited the staff's responses.

Additional limitations include only researching a small segment of the population, middle school students. While these concerns limit the study's scope, it is essential to be cognizant of the researcher's capacity. Additional concerns include prior knowledge of the school system and the possible bias based on personal race-based experiences. For those participating in this study through their school system, it is critical to ensure the participant did not conflate the researcher's role within the school system with the

research interviewer's role. To ensure this, the researchers provide clear documentation that delineates between roles and ensures the participants know their rights. As a non-supervisory researcher, the participants' employment will not be helped or hindered by their participation.

Participants were provided with ample information on this study's purpose and benefits to mitigate the challenge of participants' willingness and comfort level. Many of the potential teachers have dedicated their careers to serving young people, in many cases educating young women of color. In this case, the desire to help students furthest from opportunity became an area of increased focus for many educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Available participants appeared to be more willing to participate and more forthcoming with information because they were aware of the benefits to a population they dedicated their career to serving.

Although a potential limitation of the researcher's connection to the school system selected for the initial sample size was possible, it is also important to note the potential benefits of prior knowledge about the school system that was the original focus of this study. This connection allowed for many conversations to occur without participants pausing to clarify the use of local terminology. For participants interviewed through referral, acknowledgment of their expertise from a colleague could encourage more forthcoming responses.

Delimitations

Several ethnic groups could not be substantially represented in this study, including those who identify solely as Native American, Alaskan, Native Hawaiian, Middle Eastern, North African, and Pacific Islander students. According to the 2019

Census, an extended geographic distance exists between the researcher and a substantial populous of these ethnic subgroups. Social distancing requirements and research restrictions further compounded this during 2019-2020 due to COVID-19. A minimal segment of the population of other racial groups exists in the schools included in this study. Additionally, this study cannot request that participants decide between students not identifying as solely male or female.

Assumptions

In order to ground this research in unbiased literature and research practices, this study makes three primary assumptions:

1. When presented with a range of academic experiences and programs, teachers of African American female students are self-aware of the educational environments most conducive to their learning.
2. When presented with best practices explained in student-friendly terms, participants (administrators and students) can identify the mechanisms and strategies that positively and negatively impacted their students' learning experiences.
3. This study will assume that African American female students possess a similar intellectual ability to their peers from other racial subgroups.

Definition of Key Terms

The diversity of cultural communities and the specificity of the subgroup examined in this study necessitates defining several key terms. The following definitions will allow the reader to access specific terms concerning this study's purpose.

1) African American: An ethnic subgroup of Americans with ancestry from any sub-Saharan racial groups derived from Africa. For this study, due to the limited sample size, the focus will be on African American female students who can trace their ancestry through American slavery. For this study, the term 'African American' will serve as a synonym for African American, Afro-American, Black American, and Black.

2) Young woman or girl: In this study, "young woman" or "girl" will refer to middle school girls.

3) Intermediate, middle, or junior high school: Compulsory education for students in grades sixth through eight. Enrollment in these grade levels does not depend on the child's chronological age. Depending on the region, this range of grades can be described as middle, intermediate, or junior high school serves interchangeably.

4) Critical Race Feminism: Critical race feminism, otherwise known as CRF, holds that racism is a fundamental part of U.S. society and that people of color (in this case, female students of color) have a 'distinctive voice' when it comes to describing their experiences of their oppression at this time. CRF emphasizes that women of color experience a "multiple consciousnesses," raising their "awareness of oppression they face based simultaneously on their race/ethnicity and gender" (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016, p. 99).

5) *Administrators and teachers*: For this study, the term 'administrators and teachers will encompass the role of an administrator, educator, or any adult staff member providing instruction to students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

This chapter will inform the subsequent argument proposed by this study and establish a need to research the academic supports successfully empowering African American middle school female students within the body of existing educational literature. As referenced in the previous chapter, the purpose of this study is to determine the mechanisms that lead to empowerment through academics for African American middle school female students.

Introduction

This literature review documents how middle schools facilitate a culture of academic achievement through empowerment for African American female students. This review will also establish a need for this study within the body of educational literature. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019), dataset shows that 18% of White students scored at the below basic level while 46% of African American students scored in the below basic range (NCES, 2019) a decrease in proficiency from 2017. Thirty-nine percent of African American female students scored in the 'below basic' range compared to 14% of White female students who scored below the basic range (NCES, 2019).

According to the 2017 NAEP data, approximately 24% of all students in the United States scored in the 'below basic' range of reading achievement (NCES, 2017). The 2017 NAEP dataset also reveals that 16% of White students scored below the basic level, while 40% of African American students scored below the basic range (NCES, 2017). Furthermore, when the research disaggregates students' race or gender, the

achievement gap widens. Thirty-four percent of African American female students scored in the 'below basic' range compared to their White female counterparts, only 12% of whom scored below the basic range (NCES, 2017).

A similar trend exposing a lack of mastery for African American female students in English/Language Arts and Mathematics becomes evident when examining The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) data. The PARCC assesses the ability to problem solve and think critically and readiness for college or a career. The most recent 2018 PARCC data from one of the school districts indicates their population has seen steady improvement on PARCC for the third year in a row. During the 2018 school year, an increase from 10% in ELA and 9% in math occurred. Gains were also seen from 24.9% in 2015 to 35.1% in 2018 in ELA and 20.9% in 2015 to 30.5% in 2018 in math. According to the 2016-2017 PARCC results, 31% of students in language arts and 27% in math scored on level four or meeting expectations. Like the previously referenced NAEP data, the number of students decreases when factoring in the students' gender as females and their race as African American. Only 31.6% of female students received a four on the PARCC in Language Arts, and 26.1% received a four in math. Twenty-two percent of African Americans scored at a level four in language arts, and 18.6% achieved level four in math.[1]

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the issue of potential disparities in the creation of a culture of academic achievement through empowerment for African American female students in a middle school. This review attempts to discern practices

[1] Source redacted to avoid identification of district. Information retrieved from profile on district website.

that successfully support these students to answer the research question, how do administrators and teachers create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school?

This chapter will begin with a review of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks used to guide this analysis. Subsequently, this literature review will be followed by discussing the procedures used to collect and analyze the relevant literature and a historical overview of African American female students' educational opportunities. The remaining components of the review consist of four sections. The first section introduces the historical differences in academic options available to African American female students. The second section focuses on gender-specific instructional practices related to learning styles, curricular styles, and biological differences. The third section will examine community-based support prevalent in the African American community and its impact on African American female students' academic outcomes. This section will also discuss professional and culturally relevant leadership development. Specifically, this section will discuss educators' options and these enrichment opportunities to help educators support African American female students in internalizing a positive academic posture. The fourth section of this compendium will yield a summary of the research and implications for future research. This literature will create a foundation to address the stated research problem: how do educational leaders facilitate a culture of achievement through the empowerment of African American female students in middle school?

Literature Search Methodology

It is important to identify relevant literature and have criteria for accepting and reviewing empirical literature. The research process began by reviewing dissertations and their reference pages with similar topics and searching seminal works related to the topic. For this study, exclusionary criteria applied to studies focusing on students not classified as middle, intermediate, or junior high school students, except research focusing on mental or biological progression. Examples of the search terms used included combinations of the following: "African American" or "Black"; "female" or "female students"; "intermediate", "middle school", or "junior high school"; "education", "academics", "instruction", "curriculum", "culturally-relevant", and "feminism". No time restrictions initially applied for publication to allow for a larger body of available research. Studies focusing exclusively on student behavior were excluded. The results uncovered many similar dissertations and influential theorists; however, most of these works focused on African American young men's behavioral support or environmental challenges facing African American female students.

Historical Overview

Understanding the state of education for African American female students requires considering the history that has led to today's structures. In the modern classroom, tailoring instruction based on racial subgrouping or gender can serve as a powerful tool to adjust instruction while empowering and valuing students. Modern scholars cannot genuinely quantify the original intent of gender-based modifications within teaching; however, substantial documentation exists to demonstrate that the suppression or segregation of female academic pursuits has been the norm throughout formal education history. While this narrative is not an exhaustive account of all

historical events, the following description will highlight conceptual theorist interpretation of events, concepts, or the national tone during a specific era.

The Path to Equality (1600 to 1860)

Early European-Americans began with a focus on survival rather than enlightenment. Few European American settlers would have been fortunate enough to receive a primary education typically focusing on religious tenets, basic literacy, and arithmetic skills. Access to education reserved for the White mother demonstrated society's respect in her ability to positively influence and educate her children (Eisenmann, 1998).

Murray (1982) indicated that the 1900s marked a period during which sociologists believe Whites were superior to those of the Black race because they had a natural aversion to African descent (p. 119). Reuter (1969) cited that those Africans considered closest in racial origin to Whites, known during this period as Mulatos, believed to overcome the innate inabilities associated with Blackness. By creating a status quo held in higher esteem, White descent's achievements compared to achievement from those of African descent.

Post-Reconstruction (1860 to 1877)

According to Turner's (1978) conceptual overview of sociology in the United States, the social scientist viewed African Americans as innately inferior (p. 3). In the late 19th century post-Reconstruction era, many leading advocates for the advancement of African American female students and their supporters established schools specifically to serve African American female students. Two early and influential figures, Nannie Helen Burroughs, founder of the National Training School for Women and female students, and

Mary McLeod Bethune, creator of Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro female students -- postulated that improving the societal position of the Black woman would "uplift the entire race" (Thomas & Jackson, 2007, p. 357).

The academic pursuits of all women did not typically fare well during other noted periods of humanity's strides toward educationally-based enlightenment. Ross (2010) described a society that viewed an educated woman as an oddity who risked sacrificing her 'virtues' and femininity if she progressed beyond basic literacy, mathematics, and religious concepts (p. 74). However, as European women observed their fathers, husbands, and sons elevate the philosophers of their day to declare their rights to self-determination, female philosophers advocating for women's rights also found their voice.

Understanding the achievement gap related to African American middle school female students required this chapter to present a historical exploration of African Americans' struggles to gain formal education access in the United States. For many years, African Americans, unless their bloodline and skin color indicated a White ancestor, did not have access to formal education (Murray, 1982). To further compound equality, women were only encouraged to learn basic academic concepts (Ross, 2010). Coupling the access level for women previously held with the denial of access due to race can help the reader contextualize why a gap in the research exists during the early years of the United States targeting African American women's academic advancements.

The latter portions of this literature review will focus on the two interconnecting domains of the conceptual framework connected to positive academic practices for African American young women. Those domains are instructional practices as well as internal and external community influences. This document's instructional practices will

review relevant literature about learning styles, curricular styles, and response to academics termed as an academic posture, academic access, and biological differences. The subsequent sections focusing on internal and external community influences will review inward and outward forces for this document. This document will also examine community involvement, cultural engagement, and litigation related to the African American young woman's academics.

Litigation and Case Law

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 provided students with low socioeconomic classes protected access to equal education opportunities by distributing funding to schools and school districts with a high percentage of students from low-income families. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, resurfaced the performance differences between Black students and their Caucasian counterparts.

Despite a large and a disproportionate gap in academics and discipline, much of the current research remains focused on the behavioral norms of African American girls; a shocking six times greater to be removed from the academic environment compared to their Caucasian counterparts (Blake et al., 2011). A misnomer exists amongst educators that female students exhibit fewer behavioral issues during instruction and, therefore, are the 'better' students (Younger et al., 1999). The American Civil Liberties Union (2012) released a preliminary report on the "Teach Kids, Not Stereotypes" campaign, which described the basis of several school districts' efforts to provide gender-specific programming. This attempt described as "a significant number of the schools articulated no justification whatsoever for their programs, other than a belief that gender-differentiated teaching is it is good" (p. 4). Legal challenges and reports such as the

ACLU's *Leaving Girls Behind* (2016), focused on the separation of males and female students, labeled by some to be exclusionary and not representative of the co-ed workforce young people are prepared for contradicts the benefits of single-gender programming. While many studies, such as Hart (2016a) laud the ability of a single-gender education environment to create an uninhibited space for female students or men to interact, many social organizations such as the ACLU highlighted concerns regarding this type of programming. Specifically, this legal organization contests the legality of any single-gender publicly-funded educational platform because of potential segregation created within a single-gender environment, which many suggest may hinder female students and men from preparing for interactions in a world that requires interaction between the sexes (American Civil Liberties Union, 2012).

Detractors of single-gender education specifically oppose the public funding of such environments through public schools. Currently, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (P.L. No. 92-318, 86 Stat. 373) allows for the funding of single-sex elementary and secondary classes and extracurricular activities with specific stipulations to ensure 'equal interaction' such as requiring equal facilities for female students and young men. The American Civil Liberties Union (2012) report also clarifies certain necessary conditions, such as the students' option to attend one mixed-gender class. This report suggests that no concrete evidence exists to support males' and females' separation during instruction beyond feeble or misconstrued studies (p. 7). Despite the research as mentioned above and it’s benefits, the legality of these settings has challenged by organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union or ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union, 2012) based on the belief that single-gender environments create

separate, unequal, and unjustified programming stating "teachers in the single-sex classes incorporated into their stereotyped teaching attitudes about boys' and female students' purportedly different interests, talents, and capacities" (pp. 3-4).

Researchers have found several internal factors, such as the perception of biases, that negatively affect African American female students' academic performance. However, community support outside of traditional instruction, such as faith-based activities, may increase the likelihood of positive educational outcomes for African American females. Community supports may lessen the impact of negative stereotypes (Erickson & Phillips, 2012). The effect of negative stereotypes reduced by parental support and a positive socialization sphere (Alliman-Brisset et al. 2004a; Young et al., 2017).

Biological Differences

The research regarding gender, specifically the biological differences between how the brain processes knowledge for males and females, is ongoing within the academic community. Natural aptitudes of female students positively affect educational content based on reading compared to their male counterparts (Kush & Watkins, 1996; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004; Smith, 1990). According to Moir and Jessel (1989), the male brain prefers non-concrete and physical-spatial functions, including object manipulation or thinking about mechanical concepts.

Lenroot and Giedd (2010) suggest that "brain activity have shown different patterns of activation in the presence of equal cognitive performance, suggesting that male and female brains may follow slightly different paths to achieve similar levels of function" (p. 52). While causality between brain function and the normal maturation

process has not been established, Bonomo's 2010 research further challenged the assertion that brain activity determined a child's mental and physical development. The study determined that a "combination of developmental differences affects the brain, sensory-motor, and physical development" (p. 257).

Kommer (2006) postulated that female verbal skills are often more advanced than males in a preschool education setting. Lenroot and Giedd (2010) also suggested that female students work better in organic groups, while young men prefer highly structured teams. Timm's (1999) work subsequently expounded upon this theory of cultural learning style preferences for African Americans by highlighting a communal culture developed in response to the degradation of communities through enslavement. As a result, Timm postulates that African Americans learn better in environments with a close student to teacher relationship and settings that allow for social connectedness. African Americans were also found to prefer modalities of conveying knowledge that incorporate auditory processing. However, this is reminiscent of a preference not assigned to any racial subgroup, but rather research suggesting that the female brain is more apt to prefer auditory and communal learning environments (Timm, 1999).

While academically-based training is essential to ensuring equitable academic outcomes, the confluence of bias and content delivery is also relevant. Casteel (1998) highlighted a startling disparity in the frequency of positive interactions African American students receive compared to their peers. The findings revealed that "White American students received a greater portion of positive interactions such as being praised more often, receiving more positive feedback, and being given more clues by their teachers than African American students" (p. 119). These findings suggest that

educators must receive training on the content provided and instructed on how to deliver that content to students.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) enhances the "students' capacity to integrate skills, attitudes, and behaviors to deal effectively and ethically with daily tasks and challenges" (Axelrod, 2010). CASEL's framework supports intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive competence. The five core competencies of the framework include:

- Self-awareness: Is defined according to the framework as the capacity to interpret feelings, recognize one's emotions, attitudes, morals, and how it impacts behaviors.
- Self-management: Relates to the regulation of emotions and managing personal ambitions.
- Social awareness: Describes the ability to be considerate of those from other cultures.
- Relationship skills: Refers to creating and continuing healthy communication and the ability to work together.
- Responsible decision-making: Suggest that individuals make considerate and socially acceptable choices (Axelrod, 2010).

In the absence of academic strategies directly correlated to successful educational outcomes for African American female students, aspiring and current educators who participate in professional training may not receive instruction regarding the best support to provide for these female students. However, professional development is available for educators to mitigate unconscious biases that may dissuade their African American female students from taking an academic risk and attempting to master advanced content.

Many different curricular styles exist, with smaller studies showing arts integration offering academic structures to support female students' proposed learning style preferences. Similarly, STEAM/STEM programs may be beneficial programs specifically for African American female students. They provide a means to combat existing societal stereotypes that would suggest that female students of color may not be well-suited for the fields of science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics. While research is ongoing, contemporary literature suggests a difference exists between the way male and female brains process information. Tendencies to remain in one space during instruction or a preference towards learning as a community have attributed to neurologically-based choices. However, a counterargument exists, that these tendencies may result from nature versus nurture Bonomo (2010). Bouchamma et al. (2014) postulate that students' performance is attributed to the academic stages to understand the content, rather than innate ability. The literature also shows that some differences in academic outcomes can increase due to the confluence of stereotypes and societal expectations. This demonstrates that bias, not biology, can influence a student's educational trajectory. Entwisle et al. (1997) and Gregory (1997) affirm students' rewards when their skill level increases. The effects of a negative bias can further mitigate by infusing the tenets of critical race feminism (CRF) into the academic space. CRF offers a means to challenge preconceptions instead of a federal legal precedent requiring the intersectionality of existing as an African American and a female interpreted as a cultural asset in middle schools.

Shucard and Shucard (1990) postulated that pieces of the cerebrum do not create similarly or at a similar rate in females as in men. Njemanze (2007) expounded upon this

research by suggesting the early left-half of the globe improvement that is answerable for the early bit of leeway that young women have in verbal abilities.

Theoretical Foundation Lens

Critical Race Feminism, known as (CRF), is a derivative of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and is a crucial tool for analyzing a population as the author posits that race is an essential measure of status in the United States (Hughes, 1945). Unlike traditional feminism, CRF disrupts the concept of a monolithic female experience, often skewed toward that of the financially secure White woman, Wing (1996a), regarding critical race feminism, stated that this theory "explores the lives of those facing multiple discrimination on the basis of their race, gender, and class revealing how all of these factors interact within a system of White male patriarchy and racist oppression" (p. 948).

The theoretical framework for this study, Critical Race Feminism (CRF), guides this research. As it pertains to this study, the intersectionality of CRT and CRF, which emphasizes African American feminism during instruction, is crucial to African American female students' academic success. CRF assists in analyzing an additional barrier to access that can be directly linked to gender inequality. The CRF lens acknowledges the impacts of racism and considers the challenges of access that comes with being female. These two theories, connected to education through the lens of critical race theory as it relates to pedagogy where barriers created by gender and race if addressed, could allow African American female students to succeed academically. CRF enables a framework to view the student's experience and cultural background as a strength, rather than a deficit. These frameworks will provide a lens to probe African American women's education and social movements through the frame of race and

power. These epistemological perspectives align with studies of empowerment and are best suited to research focused on change and emancipation.

When combined, this lens serves as much more than a framework to quantify the subsequent research. It also serves as a barrier between the researcher and the readers, making assumptions that any negative academic trends associated with African American female students are attributable to an inherent lack of intelligence. O'Connor et al. (2007b) warned against the dangers of the Black community's homogenization in research. O'Connor et al. (2007a) stated "that racial data should not be used as proxies for traits (such as intelligence or motivation) and subsequently interpreted as innate or culturally ingrained" (p. 771). By using a qualitative, interview-based research design that utilizes CRF as its theoretical foundations, the research can create a balanced view of the challenges facing African American female students, as well as learning the academic structures that school leaders and educators can implement to create successful educational outcomes.

The forthcoming qualitative research study will identify factors in education positively impacting a school culture of achievement through the empowerment of African American female students while reflecting and valuing the organic principles and moral fabric of the student's culture. Administrators in a school facilitate academic success for African American female students in the core subjects of reading, mathematics, science, and social studies, reflecting what strategies they believe contributed to the students' mastery of concepts positively. The interview questions will also probe the administrators' perception of student relationships with staff, school-based

administration, and the larger community regarding structures supporting a positive learning environment.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Race Feminism (CRF) encapsulates the impact of race juxtaposed to the constraints of sexism. This theory illustrated below, in conjunction with the two significant themes found in most studies, instructional practices and community support, creates the conceptual framework that will guide the subsequent research (Figure 1). This study will focus on how school leaders facilitate a culture of achievement through empowerment for African American female students.

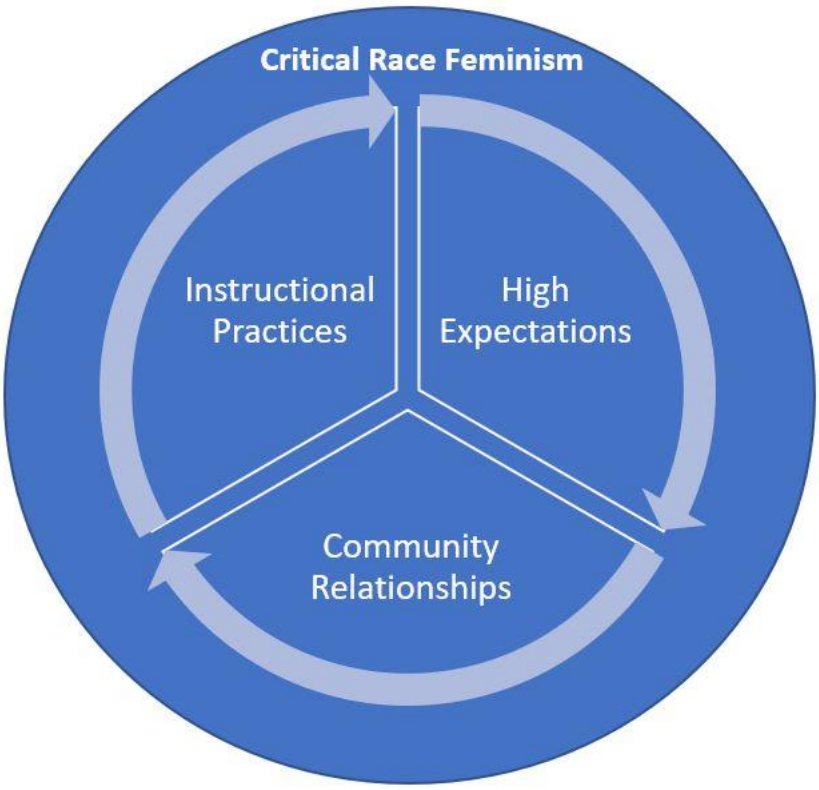


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

According to the World Health Organization (2017), gender exists as "the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men" (para. 1). For this framework's purposes, gender will henceforth be defined as any person who identifies as female, which includes students intending to transition or transitioning to a female identity.

Those individuals who identify as female and African American and how they interface with the academic world shall be a component of this research. For this study, the race will focus on African Americans as an individual of African descent who self-identifies as an African American. There are many ways to determine who qualifies as an African American, for example, the Racial Identity Attitude Scale (Helms & Parham, 1981), which defines Blackness by four levels of self-concepts. This scales four levels include:

1. Conformity, measuring rejection or decreased consciousness of individual significance to typical racial dynamics;
2. Dissonance, measuring bewilderment when the individual becomes aware of racially-based forces;
3. Immersion/Resistance, measuring bodily and mental withdrawing into the individuals racial sub-group; and
4. Internalization, measuring incorporation of positive ethnic identification in one's sub-group while appreciating positive associations with the majority racial group.

However, the U.S. Census Bureau (2018) classifies those considered to be African American or Black as "a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of

Africa" (para. 1). For this study, organizations considered internal or external community support will include, but not limited to, any charitable, religious, mentoring, or tutoring organizations. While this is similar to the types of organizations acknowledged by the Internal Revenue Code ("IRC") section 501(c)(3), the organizations discussed in this document are not limited to community support exempt under federal tax law (Internal Revenue Service, 2018). Accepting only tax-exempt entities may inadvertently deem an organization ineffective in contributing to African American female students' academic environment.

The areas represent the conceptual framework for this study and the primary categories of an educational experience that may influence African American female students' academic outcomes. The collection of concepts most frequently referenced in the literature, gender and race, instructional practices, and community support will create the conceptual framework to guide this chapter (Ogbu, 1999b). Acknowledging the structures that research consistently identifies as necessary for a positive academic experience for African American female students is required to help the reader understand the research's inclusion, referenced in the subsequent sections (Crenshaw, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Critical Race Feminism (CRF)

Critical race feminism or CRF is an outgrowth of critical race theory. Before discussing CRF, it is crucial to understand the theoretical predecessor, critical race theory. Based on Delgado's 1995 work, critical race theory "sprang up in the mid-1970s with the early work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, both of whom were deeply concerned over the slow pace of racial reform in the U.S." (p. xiii). Critical legal scholars

began the work of highlighting the inequities in American culture, specifically as it pertained to race. According to the seminal author, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings 1999 compendium of the works of literature of diversity and teacher education, "CLS scholars critiqued mainstream legal ideology for its portrayal of U.S. society as a meritocracy, but they failed to include racism in their critique" (p. 212). Based on Dr. Ladson-Billings 1999 work, CRT can be generally codified by four major themes:

1. Social justice is one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations.
2. Departs from mainstream legal scholarship by sometimes employing storytelling to "analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdom that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down" (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv).
3. Insist on a critique of liberalism.
4. argues that Caucasian's have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation

Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw, the author of the term' intersectionality,’ illustrates the maltreatment of African American women by introducing intersectionality to describe the way people's social identities can overlap. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) suggested that women's activist and antiracist talks have customarily neglected to consider intersectional personalities, not allowing for the opinions of non-white females on the same platform. For this study, critical race feminism pursues an understanding of society and its relation to intersections of race, gender, class, and other forms of social striations through the counter telling of stories while legitimizing women of color's voices.

Crenshaw (1991) states that her disappointment in women's activists addressing race implied that the techniques they utilized would regularly repeat the abuse of ethnic minorities. The frustration of antiracists to address man-centric society would frequently recreate the mistreatment of women. One of the conclusions drawn by Black women's activists and researchers was the prevalence of research into women's issues directed by White women regarding their encounters. Nevertheless, this experience was regularly summed up to represent all, accordingly, speaking to an essentialized womanhood (Collins, 1990; Spelman, 1988).

Current research is insufficient in qualitative analysis focusing on the academics for African American females (Henry, 1998; O'Connor, 1997). Studies have surmised that the African American female students must choose between educational success and their own racial identity (Ford, 1995; Ford & Harris, 1997; Fordham, 1993; Grantham & Ford, 1998; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Schultz, 1999). Wing's 1996 work discussing the tenants of critical race feminism summarizes the theory's major components.

1. Addresses essentialism and anti-essentialism/intersectionality;
2. Normalizes race and racism;
3. Provides a framework to discuss interest convergence;
4. Dismantles color-blind notions of equality;
5. Discusses race as a social construction;
6. Promotes the use of storytelling/counter storytelling for people of color.

Instructional Practices

When considering an educator's instructional practices preferences, it is essential to note that myriad curricular styles and methods exist to present knowledge to a child in

a modern school system. Layard et al. (2014) recommend the scholarly presentation in secondary school is one of the most strong indicators of sufficient progress to a substantial and financially secure adult life. Carter et al. (2008) suggest that when scholars perceive support, they internalize a competent and confident view of self.

Sarah Theule Lubienski (2002) reviewed the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data of fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders in 1990, 1996, and 2000 to reveal a significant gap between African American and Caucasian students, even when socioeconomic factors were controlled for. This study focused on math instruction and quite surprisingly found that most high-leverage instructional practices were not used. Wenglinsky (2004), reviewing NEAP math data of 15,694 students from 2000, concluded three findings of interest:

1. The study showed that what occurs in elementary school is not the sole factor in middle school success or failure
2. With the right techniques, the achievement gap can be closed
3. urban schools with racial difference can close the achievement gap too

Learning Styles. Providing a curriculum that meets the needs of a diverse group of students requires more cognitive analysis than merely selecting a style of instruction. Schubert (2010) stated, "exclusion is obvious in the dominant curriculum field that has been disproportionately White, male, Western European, and American" (p. 61). The advent of non-assimilationist curricula in the United States has spurred several frameworks and prominence for several leading theorists. Ladson-Billings (1994) elevated the term "culturally relevant pedagogy" and provided a blueprint for much of the culturally responsive curriculum used today. According to Ladson-Billings (1994),

"culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes...they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right" (p. 20). Ladson-Billings (1994) asserted that culturally relevant pedagogy is more than an attempt to bridge a difference between dominant and minority cultures.

Attempts to create a color-blind teaching force dedicated to assimilationist ideals is not only futile but ultimately ineffective. Instead, Ladson-Billings (1994) touted the benefits of a collaborative learning environment where teachers see themselves as part of the community where knowledge is simultaneously created, recycled, and viewed critically. Perhaps the most relevant component of Ladson-Billings's (1994) theories is her guidance regarding literacy. Key tenets include:

- Creating student leaders from difficult backgrounds and encouraging those students to become intellectual leaders in the classroom;
- Students should be apprentices in a learning community instead of isolated, learning unrelated content;
- Students' real-life experiences legitimized and incorporated into a curriculum that includes written literature and oratory-based content.
- They embrace and endorse a collective struggle against the status quo while being conscious and regularly conducting self-examinations of political preferences.

While it is possible to reduce culturally relevant pedagogy to relatively simplistic tenants, educators and school leaders must use caution to avoid oversimplify implementing this change in interaction with students. An example of a distortion of this

theory can be found in the Oakland School District's attempt to incorporate African American linguistic patterns into their teaching practices. This research is derived from a two-year ethnographic study of a Black speech community. The primary objectives of this research included explaining sociolinguistic factors that impact Black children as well as demonstrating "a connection between the children's dialect beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in school with those of their parents and community (Ogbu, 1999b, p. 147). However, Ogbu (1999a) believed that "it is not only the degree of differences in dialects per se that counts. What also seems to count is the cultural meanings of those dialect differences" (p. 147). Ogbu concludes by implying that this study represents a larger problem facing school leaders, which requires Black children to reject their native culture rather than embrace their consciousness's plurality.

Today, administrators and educators may choose from a wide selection of management styles, curricula, and staff training programs to educate all young people. While some schools receive more support or take a less conventional approach than others, schools' need to identify the best method to empower their students within the curriculum is critical to success (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Holcomb-McCoy and Moore-Thomas's (2001) article described successful strategies used by school counselors to empower adolescents. The authors suggest that school leaders and their staff successfully supporting African American female students would benefit from engaging in the following:

> "Analyze one's own attitudes, stereotypes, and biases regarding African Americans and, in particular, African American females. Read relevant literature pertaining to African- American culture, particularly that of African- American females. Develop a professional support network with African- American female counseling professionals. Participate in professional development activities (e.g.,

> workshops, conference sessions) that specifically address issues related to African American females, particularly young African- American females." (p. 24)

When implementing curricula, Shade (1997) suggest that non-Anglo students will respond best to educators who demonstrate support, tolerance, and flexibility. For African American pupils, research indicates that students note and consider interpersonal cues such as the educators' facial expressions and social nuances to be critical instead of rules when making decisions (Banks, 1995, p. 324).

Curricular and Instructional Styles. According to Wilkerson, 1992 "whatever is absent from that curriculum is made either invisible or marginal [and] their invisibility in the curriculum immediately calls into question their right to be there, their intellectual capacities, and their very existence" (p. 59). The importance of the educators' perceptions of the student and their gender and racial equivalency with the student has been well established in recent literature (Egalite & Kisida, 2018). However, a direct correlation between an affinity for a specific curriculum based on a student's gender or race has not been well-established in contemporary research. Several studies indicate that female students' biology may allow students to be more apt to acquire knowledge using individual curricular styles. While this document does not capture an exhaustive list of curricular types, some curricular formats in this literature review include arts integration, flipped classroom, project-based learning, or STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics) education.

Curricula can be classified in a variety of ways. For this document, curricula will be categorized as a product-based or process-based model. A product-based curriculum focuses on final 'results' such as final grades or demonstrating mastery of an objective. This type of learning aligned with the works of Krathwohl et al. (1967), Gagne (1967),

Kerr (1968), Mager (1962), Tyler (1949), and Wheeler (1967). By contrast, a process-based learning model focuses on the pupil's thought process with future learning applications. This 'open-ended' learning style intended to 'reducing the complexity, and the clutter' is described in the work of Bruner (1971). This study will review relevant product-based curricula literature focused on explicit instructional models of reading and language arts, science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) instruction models. Process-based learning curricular studies will focus on arts-integration, flipped classrooms, and project-based models of instruction.

Project-based learning is another educational approach available to school leaders. Identifiable by its unique collaborative methods, offering additional exploration time into real-world, inquiry-based problems. Fredricks et al. (2018) analyzed the catalytic and contextual influences engaging female students and young men using semi-structured interviews with thirty-eight middle school students. This study, structured as an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design that examined the impact of contextual and motivational influences on boys' and females' interest in math and science. The authors suggested that "female students were more likely to discuss teacher support and personally relevant instruction as important to their engagement in math and science" (Fredricks et al., 2018). Historically, limitations have been placed on females seeking access to traditionally male-dominated fields (U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, 2011). According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration (2011), women hold approximately half of all jobs in the United States, but less than 25% of all STEM-based jobs. Ro and Loya's 2015 study examines self-reported learning outcomes of

engineering students by their gender, race, and ethnicity, and intersectionality. According to Ro and Loya (2015), there were 5,249 students, from "32 four-year colleges that are representative of all four-year U.S. engineering schools offering two or more ABET-accredited programs in seven engineering disciplines: biomedical/ bioengineering, chemical, civil, electrical, general, industrial, and mechanical (p. 367)." Using a Chi-square Goodness-of-Fit tests the researcher's determined that it was critical to "revise the curricula to include more diverse examples and general content that values and represents multiple groups, particularly in the courses with core engineering skills."

Internalizing knowledge, through the process of processed-based learning, is one method of conveying information to students. Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) defined process-based learning curriculums as "an attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice." This curriculum targets developing a continuous and evolving understanding of the content rather than demonstrating mastery within a final product. A more modern approach to traditional compulsory education, the flipped classroom, allows educators to introduce new content via homework, followed by classroom dialogue and practical application. Unal and Unal (2017) used a small-scale study to explore the benefits of this environment. They noted that the students made academic gains, despite technological, accessibility, and planning challenges. The authors attributed these gains to prior activation of knowledge.

Explicit Instruction. Explicit instruction allows the educator to present content to students using direct, structured education. Unlike product-based learning, which s encourages students to acquire knowledge of the content by doing a project. Sheehan

(1986) describes a product-based learning curriculum as "the intended outcome (the product) of a learning experience is prescribed beforehand (p. 673)." This learning process's critical components typically include defining objectives, knowledge, experience, and evaluation (Sheehan, 1986, p. 673).

Regarding explicit instruction, when analyzing a student's ability to learn different concepts unrelated to biological differences in the brain, the existing research is less conclusive regarding the impact of gender on students' ability to learn. Wucherer and Reiterer (2018) analyzed sixty-four students of similar age, education, linguistic history, gender, and affect. The study exposed a "gender gap in two domains of L2 [second language learners] expertise and cast doubt on the idea of a general female language advantage: male subjects outperformed their female counterparts in phonetic speech imitation ability" (p. 118). While the common native language shared by the students was not English, rather Hindi, the most significant ($t(62) = 2.099$; $p = .040$*) language ability was found within the male group (Wucherer & Reiterer, 2018). This study questions the previously articulated conclusion that linguistic achievement is exclusively innate to the female student. Bouchamma et al. (2014) revealed that the literacy success a student experiences in Canada is due to the student using more strategies such as applying background knowledge. This data was derived from the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP-13) Reading Assessment in 2007. The researchers used a questionnaire given to twenty thousand, ninety-four students, and then used a T-test and uncovered that female student's applied strategies more frequently than young men (p. 322). The group of thirteen-year-old students utilized an independent t-test and a logistic regression. The t-test revealed significant gender differences ($p < 0.001$) for almost all reading strategies

except analyzing word parts or word origins. This study did not control for socioeconomic or ethnic differences. It is also important to note that this study did not disclose a response rate for the students' participation. The research regarding gender, specifically the biological differences between how the brain processes knowledge for males and females, is ongoing within the academic community. Concerning natural aptitudes, female students tend to positively affect educational content based on reading compared to their male counterparts (Kush & Watkins, 1996; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004; Smith, 1990).

Many African American female students face ingrained societal stereotypes that bolster race-based and gender-related biases (Morris, 2007). Existing research also points to gender-based stereotypes that may cause a student's tendency, resulting in a lack of equal access to educational opportunities. In Glasser's (2012) study of two single-gender middle school classes, educators held the common assumption that female students would naturally perform better academically than young men. In this study, educators vocalized a 'scientific' basis for their stereotype, stating, "because of their poor hearing or poor verbal capacity, both of which were seen as inevitable due to biology," the male students were likely to underperform compared to female students" (p. 387). These assumptions, echoed in Jethwani (2015), discovered that students in this study perceived those female students would be more academically successful. In this study of thirty-five Bermudian fourteen-year-old young men and female students, interviews revealed that their academic expectations were internalized.

> Female students have more of an educational brain than boys...Because in science I was learning about how the girl's brains develop differently from the boy's

> brains and so that's why boys are more technical and female students, well, they get better grades than the boys most of the time. (p. 3)

While potentially biased by the unpublished questions used to begin the conversations, this student testimonial could offer a glimpse into the bias's children learn at an early age. The perception of a more productive learning environment amongst female students is reminiscent of studies by Entwisle et al. (1997) and Gregory (1997), which noted that African American females excelled in adapting a classroom environment compared to their male counterparts. The researchers attributed female students' acculturation to more positive experiences for African American female students in elementary school, which increased their confidence in their academic skills and abilities, enhanced their feelings of self-worth, and bolstered the chance for a reward from the school district (Entwisle et al., 1997; Gregory, 1997).

Angela et al. (2008) research on modern single-gender environments offer an argument for an increased focus on creating meaningful connections to scientific concepts for female students within the same district for male and female students, a compelling counterpoint to these claims. This one-year ethnographic case study, despite the small sample size, conducted with less than 20 female students across three schools with middle grades showed connecting real-world occurrences with scientific research can "resist categorizing practices in ways that promote either stereotypical or essentialized experiences for urban girls from African American and Latina backgrounds" (p. 98). This study advocates for a change in the presentation of curricula to incorporate scientific practices to increase female students' comfort level with scientific concepts, which the authors postulate will lead to positive academic outcomes in the understanding of science by female students.

Science, math-based professions are on the rise, with the demand for these professions projected to increase. However, women account for one-quarter or less of the current positions (Lacey & Wright, 2009; National Science Board, 2010). Following the publication of statistics describing the employment of women in fields derived from mathematics and science, numerous studies were conducted on factors influencing students' choice of a college major (Beggs et al., 2008; DeMarie & Aloise-Young, 2003; House, 2000; Kuechler et al., 2009; Malgwi et al., 2005; Schwartz, 2004; Tan & Laswad, 2009). That has spurred the creation of Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics education, henceforth known as STEAM education. This approach uses the lens of science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics to encourage inquiry-based and critical learning. Tsui (2007) suggests an excellently crafted STEM program, incorporates equitable pathways for students of color. According to the author, this includes mentoring and/or tutoring, career counseling, centralized study centers, academic advising, and financial support. Encouraging a higher rate of female students transitioning into STEM careers following a post-secondary education may also necessitate a restructuring of American society's image of a scientist. Jones et al. (2000) study indicated that the current mental schema leads many to envision a White male, not an African American woman. This study examined the interest of 437 sixth grade students of diverse gender and ethnic backgrounds from five schools in rural, urban, and suburban communities from the southeastern United States. A self-concept leads away from a STEM career but one that directly contradicts the notion that an African American woman suited for such work would be a difficult task for the average teenage student to overcome independently of adult support and reframing. The precise academic

improvements a school can anticipate if they incorporate support similar to the previously mentioned STEAM programming to address the self-concept concerns derived from societal pressures or a 'stereotype threat' is still unknown. Existing research indicates that apprehension occurs when faced with a pertinent stereotype that endangers their social identity or self-esteem (Nosek et al., 2009). According to a study conducted across thirty-four countries, "nation-level implicit stereotype predicted nation-level sex differences in 8th-grade science and mathematics achievement" (Nosek et al., 2009). This study examined the National Center for Educational Statistics, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which showed variability across several nations in which gender performed best in math or science. However, when approximately 500,000 participants from the same countries were surveyed, more than 70% of men and women showed a tendency to associate male[s] with science and female[s] with liberal arts" (Nosek et al., 2009). This survey reveals a propensity to associate scientific scholarship with males despite international data demonstrating female students' ability to achieve at the same or higher levels. However, Borman and Grigg (2013), which addressed closing the academic performance gaps between African American and White students, showed no evidence of a positive impact of self-affirmations on closing the black-white achievement gap. Ireland et al. (2018) review of 60 research studies revealed that four tenants are crucial to encouraging African American female student's participation in STEM education: "identity, STEM interest, achievement and ability perceptions, and socializers and support systems" (p. 234).

Arts integration is a teaching method that combines fine and performing arts as an essential avenue for acquiring knowledge. The Kennedy Center's Changing Education

Through the Arts Program is grounded in the belief that learning is actively built, experiential, evolving, collaborative, problem-solving, and reflective (Duma, 2014). The creation and interpretation of art as required in an arts integration curriculum typically needed individuals to use their sense of hearing and sight. The existing literature regarding the differences between male and female spatial visualization processing reveals that typically, male performance on spatial visualization is superior to female performance (Harris, 1981; Liben, 1981; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Sherman, 1980). However, several researchers are careful to highlight the inconclusive research regarding biological factors and their impact on visual-spatial abilities compared to the sociological effects on developing visual-spatial skills (Harris, 1981; Linn & Petersen, 1985). While research has not conclusively identified the impact of arts integration instruction for only African American female students, research suggests that arts integration can increase retention of academic concepts for all students. Hardiman et al. (2014) conducted a quasi-experimental study of pedagogical practice of art integrated educational content delivery. This small study mapped and compared arts-integrated (A.I.) with conventional science instruction in a predominantly urban, African American elementary school. The results revealed no differences in initial learning. However, the study did show a significant increase in retention when arts integration was implemented. According to this study, the "mean retention was approximately .2 S.D. greater in the A.I. [arts integration] condition ($M = .912$) than in the control condition ($M = .866$)—an effect size that is "small" based on Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, but relatively typical of effective educational interventions" (Hill et al., 2008). The study also revealed that increased retention was most significant for students at the lowest reading achievement levels.

High Expectations

Zahn-Waxler et al. (2008) elevated desires for young women to display passionate, thoughtful, aloof, and criticism looking for practices that have been connected to higher school accomplishment and more danger for tension and burdensome indications contrasted and young men, particularly among prior developing young women. Black young women are chastised by school staff for "being loud" or mentalities disjointed with educators' desires to behave like a lady (Frazier-Kouassi, 2002). The American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (1998) postulated Black young women, ordinarily, speak freely, real to life, and autonomous, and are frequently generalized as miscreants instead of pioneers. Russell (2005) instructor expectations apply a critical impact on academic outcomes and inspiration. Saunders et al. (2004) indicate that a student's view affects their intellectual progress.

Academic Posture. When considering why students process and respond to bias in a particular way, the study of behaviorism can be a useful lens. The cornerstone of behaviorism rests on the school of thought born from Skinner's (1953) work, which observes a response to stimuli. Skinner's 1963 landmark study entitled, "Operant Behavior" for the American Psychologist chronicled an experiment using rodents that would produce modern behaviorist thought foundations. The study revealed the impact of positive reinforcement and negative stimuli. Skinner's rodents quickly learned the ramifications of performing as expected with the assurance of tangible rewards and the type of motivation that ensures the participant continues the desired response. This response was later applied to the human response, implying that behaviors reinforced on an inconsistent schedule are difficult to extinguish. Direct parallels cannot and should not

oversimplify the relationship between this experiment and the complexities of existing as an African American female student. However, a gap in the literature exists when defining if African American female students who adopt a bias set forth by society generates a stimulus that would cause young women to repeat the behavior.

Academic Access. The feminist movement seeks to address inequality issues, not unlike the previously referenced unequal supports for African American young men compared to African American female students. Lane (2017) suggested that "feminist pedagogy as it relates to African Americans promotes the increase of positive social and academic identities among African American female youth" (p.13). However, the feminist approach, which was not explicitly created to serve African American women, fails to capture the obstacles women of color, and does not consider the intersectionality of gender and race. This gap was first brought to prominence by Crenshaw (2010), who noted the importance of an anti-essentialism stance dispelling the myth of a singular female experience while acknowledging the critical impact of race intersectionality and gender has on the occasion of a minority woman.

Due to the multiplicity of consciousnesses and the identities they experienced, Black women must directly confront gender, race, and oppressive societal forces (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Acknowledging this theory has the potential to reduce the exclusively White male-centered educational policies and educational structures (Kridel, 2010). The United States has historically crafted societal constructs governed by racial differences, which continue to impact the African American community (Span, 2015). Discrimination can present itself in many forms, including intentional or explicit, subtle or unconscious, statistical or profiling, and organizational discrimination (National

Research Council, 2004, pp. 55-66). Allport (1954) offered the progression a person typically takes against another racial group, including rhetorical animosity, evasion, dissociation, physically demanding, physical attack, and elimination. Only receiving repeated exposure to verbal hostility targeted at an individual due to their race can result in aggressive educational environments (Essed, 1997; Feagin, 1991). The instantaneous response to a person of another race can trigger primal biological angst allowing individuals to apply unfavorable stereotypes and take biased actions (Bargh and Chartrand, 1999; Fazio and Olson, 2003; Hart et al., 2000; Phelps et al., 2000).

These constructs often precluded Blacks from engaging in formal academic pursuits. Gershenson and Papageorge (2018a) conducted a study of 6,000 tenth-grade students, including student and educator surveys, standardized math and ELA tests data, and administrative data. Using an econometric model, this study isolated and subsequently "examined the causal impact of teacher expectations on college completion" (p. 16). This study examined this economic phenomenon showed, "teacher expectations do not merely forecast student outcomes, but that they also influence outcomes by becoming self-fulfilling prophecies" (p.70). Using a sample derived from the 2002 Education Longitudinal Study, which is socioeconomic and demographically diverse, is a sample of a nationally representative survey of the cohort of U.S. students in the tenth grade as of 2002. Of the 6,060 students, 12,130 of those teachers were included in this study, analyzing data using both linear and straightforward bivariate regressions. The impact of a subset of society that cannot obtain the same employment opportunities and the detrimental outcomes on the economy has been established in the previous chapter. According to Bobo (2011), the African American community's concerns could go

unnoticed by mainstream society as complaints attributed to 'Black victimology.' Bobo describes this phenomenon as "Black complaints and grievances about inequality and discrimination are well worn tales, at least passe if not now pointedly false assessments of the main challenges facing Blacks in a world largely free of the dismal burdens of overt racial divisions and oppression" (p. 13).

Since the civil rights reform era, limited legal directives have been specifically targeted to support African American female students' educational advancement. The landmark Supreme Court ruling of Brown v. Board of Education (347 US 483 (1954) of Topeka, Kansas overturned the precedent set by Plessy v. Ferguson (163 U.S. 537, 539 (1896), which allowed for "separate but equal" public facilities (Hoffer, 2012). However, most of the early legislation was only proposed and adopted when the laws suggested benefited the dominant White race. Bell (1980) postulated that the rise of legislation providing social relief for African Americans would only come to prominence if the bill was able to "secure, advance, or at least not harm" the dominant society, specifically White middle-class citizens (p. 523). To draw attention to the lack of social equality, critical race theory was born. Monaghan (1993) discussed the origins of critical race theory as an attempt by minority scholars who perceived that their concerns are not addressed by essential legal studies, which were supposed to examine "the way law encodes cultural norms" (p. A7).

To allow a singular focus on female students' best practices, some educational institutions only serve female students. Hart (2016b) used qualitative interview data gathered over three years in one single-gender school focused on sixth-grade female students identified that the all-female student's classroom offered more significant

support than a traditional mixed-sex classroom. The study concluded that middle school females who participate in single-sex programs could benefit from a decrease in social anxieties experienced in middle school. The authors attributed this to a sense of perceived security that encouraged the single-gender environment (p. 38). Emerging themes included perceived improvement of academic performance and increased focus and engagement. Overall, results indicated that participation in single-sex programs could help in easing social anxieties for middle school females.

A single-sex academic environment may seek to not only ease social anxieties but mitigate any perceived adverse effects by removing the presence of the opposite gender. Hart (2016b) revealed a perception by female students that "they also perceived that their learning environment was negatively impacted by the presence of boys" (p. 38). Similar evidence of academic success in academic environments for female students in a single-gender education setting has been offered. Lee and Bryk (1988a, 1989) and Bryk et al. (1993) focused on several control variables such as social background and a student's prior achievement. These studies positively impacted female students' academic performance, community, and social and personal growth in a single-gender all-female student environment. Using Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), this study reviewed data from 160 schools. While the data set is older, capturing schools from 1908-1982, the study suggests that an educator must master content delivery and attend to the student's unique needs, which in this instance includes gender differences. Yet, Gilson's (1999) comparative study of 467 eighth-grade female students from 10 independent all-girls middle schools and 208 girls from 10 independent, coeducational middle schools. The study also included 123 eleventh- and twelfth-grade girls from two independent,

coeducational high schools. Using an attitude questionnaire from 10 all-female students' middle schools found no differences in mathematics and quantitative ability test scores between single-sex and coeducational school female students.

Community Relationships

Myriad factors may influence a school environment and educational outcomes for its students. Internal and external factors can alter a young woman's ability to perform academically to the point that their biological capacity demonstrates truncated knowledge. To assess the factors impacting African American female students' educational journey accurately, it is crucial to consider both the internal and external factors facing these students. These factors exist at the national, state, district, and school levels.

Internal and external bias may decrease a student's chances to obtain academic success. Diminished academic outcomes can be attributed to collaborative practices that are not conducive to academic success. This site attempted to mitigate any adverse community effects by highlighting successful community members (Ogbu and Simons, 1998; Ogbu, 2004).

Internal Influences. Steele and Aronson (2004) reviewed the relationship between African American's participation in a testing situation and the variability of their performance, thereby fulfilling the racial stereotypes about their intellectual ability yielded actual results for future considerations. The experiment began with a diagnostic questionnaire to determine the student's race, followed by an exam of lexical access processing (LAP) and higher verbal reasoning (HVR) for students identifying as African American. The ungraded exam did reveal preconceived notions regarding the

participants' perception of their ability. These biases were based on their consciousness of their race or their willingness to identify themselves as people of color. The authors concluded that a stereotype could negatively affect a stigmatized group of any race, gender, or class. Steele and Aronson (2004) highlighted the importance of stereotypes.

> Blacks underperformed concerning Whites in the ability-diagnostic condition but not in the nondiagnostic state (with Scholastic Aptitude Tests controlled). The study showed that mere salience of the stereotype could impair Blacks' performance even when the test was not [an] ability diagnostic. (p. 797)

When crafting an educational experience, it is impossible to understate the importance of self-efficacy, which is defined as an individual's belief in their ability to excel. One's sense of self-efficacy can play a significant role in approaching goals, tasks, and challenges. Usher and Pajares (2006) research analyzed the origin of academic and self-regulatory efficacy beliefs of entering middle school students by examining Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy hypothesis on the intellectual and self-regulatory efficacy beliefs with two hundred and sixty-three middle schoolers to determine whether confidence differs based on gender, reading ability, and race/ethnicity (p. 125). This study concluded that African American students' mastery experiences and social persuasions predicted their academic self-efficacy. Students' experiences became a determinant factor in their ability to persevere, defined within Mead's (1910) theory of how social experience develops an individual's personality. However, in this case, mastery experience did not predict the self-efficacy beliefs of low-achieving students. The student's innate confidence in his or her ability to achieve goals is critical to academic success, as self-efficacy can influence the student's ability to sustain their academic outcome and potentially retain a more significant amount of educational materials (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). According to the qualitative interview study of

Booker and Lim (2018), African American girls and their teachers found "a supportive interpersonal relationship and authentic pedagogy seem to bolster young African American adolescent girls' positive learning experiences and continued performance in the subject area."

Hollins (2011) asserts that "an understanding of the cultural dimensions of learning is essential to effective teaching [and] must become a key component of educational programs throughout the country" (p. 11). Culturally relevant leadership, defined as a disposition instead of a paradigm of practice that also demands certain non-traditional behaviors outside of school that include building bridges and crossing borders between school and community (Brooks, 2009; Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Merchant & Shoho, 2006). In a study conducted by Reitzug and Patterson (1998), an African American female middle school leader discovered that empowering students in an urban school setting was more organic to her leadership style than imposing a series of directives. While the study's scope is narrow in terms of the limited number of participants, the study did conclude that "focusing on connections with other people and putting people and individual contextual circumstances before bureaucratic rules and regulations" (p. 179) is advised. To further avoid the pitfalls of 'equity traps' as coined by McKenzie and Scheurich (2004), 'equity audits' could benefit school systems (Skrla et al., 2004). Creating truly equitable academic spaces, rather than perfunctory actions designed to create the illusion of equity, are required to make educational spaces where minority students can not only excel but thrive.

Community Involvement

Research has shown that external programming can be beneficial to an African American student's intellectual development. Irvin et al. (2010a) tracked this subgroup's participation in school, community, and church activities and their academic achievement level quantified by end-of-year school grades. The participants included 280 students with both genders represented (177 female students and 103 boys) in the seventh and eighth-grades of two public middle schools. Irvin et al. (2010b) indicated that based upon the educator's and students' self-reports while controlling for school-based activities and other variables, participation in church activities was related to academic outcomes (p. 15). The findings suggest that participation in extracurricular activities may support the achievement of African American youth. This research highlights the importance of examining the impact of social programming offered outside the school day.

Unlike Freire's (1970) transformational work, many researchers have touted the use of religion as a starting point to define the path of liberation for female students. Freire (1970) described a clear difference between the types of systems that can genuinely empower, noting "a distinction between systematic education, which can only be changed by political power, and educational projects, which should be carried out with the oppressed in the process of organizing them" (p. 36). This should be cause for concern as the formalized systems in the United States are state-funded and mostly dominant culture-created systems to educate. These systems are numerous, most notably the public education sector. In recent years, the number of school systems employing women of color as decision-makers has risen, but private initiatives' political interest and funders largely remain influenced or controlled by the dominant culture, specifically

White males.

Cultural Engagement. Parental involvement and community support can determine female students and men's success, regardless of age, race, or socioeconomic class. For this literature review, parental involvement will encompass only interactions conducted between the school staff, student, and the child's legal guardian. Community support will refer to all contact, primarily led by an adult individual who is not the student's guardian or a school staff member. Research suggests that parental involvement can contribute to the formation of positive or negative academic behaviors (Kaisa et al., 2011). In their longitudinal study, the association between children's intellectual skill development, task-avoidance behavior, and parental beliefs success were examined (p. 666). The study concluded that "task-avoidant behavior predicted the mothers' subsequent beliefs about their children's school success but not vice versa" (p. 664). Such a potentially profound impact on a student's academic success must be considered when discussing the factors contributing to success for African American female students. Alliman-Brissett et al. (2004a) explored the impact of parental support for African American young men and women in terms of parent ability to encourage self-efficacy and increase positive outcomes. Based on the theories of Bandura (1997), Alliman-Brissett et al. (2004b) discovered that African American adolescent female students respond more to their parent's emotional support; however, young men respond more to the modeling of successful careers (p. 30). The study also concludes, "when female students receive their parents' emotional support, they perceive that they will be able to make effective career choices and that their career decisions will yield positive consequences" (p. 129). Therefore, the subsequent interviews conducted to ascertain the

factors that contribute to academic success for African American female students must offer questions that assess the impact of community support.

Young et al. (2017) determined that family and community members needed to create a 'sphere of socialization' used to change African American female students' aversion to mathematics. This sphere consisted of socializing agents in the immediate family, educators, student peers, pop culture, and those responsible for selecting or creating curricula. The authors posited that these role models allow students to practice mathematics in an environment devoid of pressure while intentionally crafting lessons and curricula that reflect the student's interest and culture.

School needs based on their unique population are as varied as the tapestry of subgroups in the United States. McGinn (2002) reviewed how student support services contribute to recruiting and retaining African American students at the graduate school level. The research suggested many strategies to address African American student recruitment and retention. This includes efforts to leverage the community pillars most African American female students may identify and access in predominantly minority communities; incorporating the support of local religious organizations, providing child care for those in need; and partnering with community organizations focused on safety, childcare, housing, transportation, and wellness opportunities for those in need (McGinn, 2002). This approach underscores the need for the African American community to construct ample social support and initiatives that foster a wellness concept for all students.

Implications for Forthcoming Study

The reviewed studies' findings point to the importance of exploring issues and conversations regarding the education of African American female students and actively

facilitating an educational environment within which African American female students can master necessary academic concepts. Understanding how educators conceptualize, identify, and support their multiple identities (Crenshaw, 2010) is key to understanding how to promote and engage the participants in this research. Incorporating critical race theory, critical race feminism, and critical race pedagogy as a response to a historical lack of access and stereotypes presented about African American female students can help empower school leaders to select academic programming structures that support theoretical concepts' mastery. Future research may also inspire a conscious shift in resources toward improving educational environments for young Black women.

In conclusion, the researcher reviewed three significant literature concerning academics for middle school African American female students: representations of race and gender, instructional practices, and external or internal community support. African American female students collectively developed a positive academic posture towards academics despite negative societal representations and socioeconomic exclusion through varied subpar, non-culturally relevant educational experiences. In the next chapter, the researcher will introduce the proposed methodology for this study.

Conclusion

The United States non-Hispanic, Caucasian population is estimated to decrease from 199 million in 2020 to 179 million in 2060 (United States Population Projections, 2008). Nevertheless, a large subgroup of this non-Hispanic, Caucasian population, African American female students, remains underserved by a "national discourse on education. Asking this population to subsume themselves under other group identities (by gender and/or race) is educationally unsound and inequitable" (Ricks, 2014b, p. 10).

This research reviewed several internal and external factors directly correlated to a lack of positive educational outcomes for African American women than female students from the dominant culture. Researchers suggest that absent or limited access to social capital in legislative, school-based, parental support, and community support, contributes negatively to an overwhelming deficit among young African American female students in the United States. To enhance African American female students' opportunities, we must counterbalance by leveraging/utilizing federal, local, and community-based supports.

The different learning needs of male and female students, with many female students preferring socially based learning, is exact. While these different learning styles can coexist in the same academic spaces, educators need to construct a cognizant classroom of all learning styles.

Educational supports for young African American women reviewed through critical race feminism allows for pedagogies analysis before implementing strategies to support African American students; this frame acts as a 'filter' to remove any mechanisms that do not focus on the issues of influence, oppression, and conflict rooted in feminist theory. The framework can also generate instructional changes: pedagogy, which requires a review of biases, creating a curriculum, and adjusting interactions with students and the community.

The disproportionate representation of women in mathematics and science-related fields is a vital indicator of role models' importance in young women's lives. The research conclusively shows a need for social constructs that encourage female students' involvement in all academic areas. However, the research also clearly stated the need for these social groups coupled with support from the students' parents or guardians.

The research that ensures academic success for African American female students requires a multifaceted, intentional, and holistic approach to crafting an educational experience for these female students. The biological differences attributed to female students suggests a need for socially based learning environments with ample opportunities to engage in inductive and deductive reasoning. An environment tailored to young women's biology would most likely include lessons steeped in verbal exchanges, conferencing, and content delivered using auditory methods.

Based on the previously referenced research, the achievement gap plaguing African American female students must be addressed to ensure a sizeable American populace segment can contribute to the labor force. The current disparities will inevitably lead to a further gap in wages and educational milestones for African American female students compared to their White counterparts. In 2014, the United States Census Bureau estimated that the wage gap between Black women and their White male counterparts amounts to $19,399 per year. Even more troubling is the Census Bureau's assertion that over forty years, this imbalance will cost the African American woman approximately $776,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). With such a large gap in earning potential, the potential for the ‘average’ African American can provide the same level of access to an advanced degree, or costly educational support such as tutoring for a child is rapidly diminishing. This financial apartheid will inevitably lead to a further striation of class based on race in American society, which is harmful to the collective national ideals and values of equality.

Unfortunately, due to the limited number of previous studies focused on determining academic best practices for African American female students, it is possible

that the previously referenced research is not representative of all African American female students' educational experiences. Misrepresentation, in this case, could lead to an unsupported conclusion. The literature and national data clearly illustrate a large-scale deficit that threatens the outcomes of a sizable subset of the population.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter aims to describe the design of the study, the positionality of the researcher, the research structure, and the proposed data analysis method. The first section of this chapter establishes the researcher's purpose and the potential significance of this study. The second section provides a brief review of the literature and the epistemology and methodology applied to this study. The third section reviews the research question and the theoretical framework and the study's design. The fourth section of this chapter will propose data collection methods and the proposed data analysis methods. This section also acquaints the reader with the study sites, including demographics, an overview of the sample studied, the research instruments, and the data collection tools. This section will conclude by examining the researcher's efforts to maintain trustworthiness and protections for the research subjects.

Overview of Methodology

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, "The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than outcome or product) of meaning-making and describe how people interpret what they experience" (p. 15). The research suggested a qualitative analysis will identify a consistent use of culturally relevant instruction leading to a positive academic achievement correlation. This study's initial scope explored this relationship using interviews of up to 25 participants from a single school district, including administrators and teachers. This multi-pronged initiative utilizes a combination of grants, curricula, and mentoring to build a sense of community, confidence, and leadership skills for young women of color, which, given the demographics, will serve mostly African American

female students. These targeted resources are projected to lead to a decrease in disparities and increased student satisfaction, graduation rates, and standardized assessment scores. Due to an inability to achieve saturation, the study was expanded to include referrals from previous interviewees and the George Washington University. The importance of interviewing in an organic setting is made evident in the work of Ravitch and Carl. This critical work stated, "Qualitative research attempts to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in their natural settings in ways that are conceptualized and reflect the meaning that people make out of their own experiences" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 2). Data gathered included analyzing schools exhibiting a high success rate with African American female students with teachers' applying critical race feminism principles during instruction. The data included publicly available school proficiency data, such as standardized or summative assessment outcomes. This study's original design hoped to find evidence of CRF's implementation in the school setting, verbalized by the participants using one or more of the following vital phrases or a variant of the terms below (Berry, 2010).

- power, oppression, or centralized conflict
- essentialism, anti-essentialism, and intersectionality
- normalization of race and racism

Any variation of these phrases and subsequent acknowledgment of the implementation of academic supports related to CRF considered an application of theory for this study would be coded as such by the interviewer. Throughout the interview process, the additional terms and synonyms of terms were articulated frequently. Although none of the critical phrases appeared at a frequency of more than ten times

during the interviews conducted in this study, ideas relating to these concepts were often expressed. Some of the ways these terms were expressed can be found below.

- CRF: culturally relevant, culture, reflect/represent/identity, and gender.
- Instructional Practices: academics, data, and instruction.
- High Expectations: expectations
- Community Relationships: advisory, community, leadership, opportunity, and relationships.

Research Question Factors

The research question that guided this study is how administrators and teachers create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school. This study was designed to identify mechanisms administrators and teachers are utilizing to support critical race feminism. To ensure that the teachers from the school sites participating in this study had the latitude to explore the strategies and mechanisms that empower African American female students, the initial study design required the schools selected from a single school district would participate in the district's female empowerment program. This program provides professional development, nonacademic curricular resources, and funding for extracurricular activities to support students' intrapersonal development. Participants who were subsequently interviewed through snowballing were referred because of their perceived success supporting African American female students as quantified by standardized test results or changes in student engagement leading to measurable academic outcomes. Recruited participants also participated in professional development specifically targeting the support of African American female students.

The first iteration of this study recruited participants from five school sites via email. The participants' email addresses were requested from the school district's human resources office after IRB approval was obtained. Research sites were exposed to curricula and professional development based on critical race feminism by participating in the district's female empowerment curriculum. The school staff utilizing this program for African American female students using gender-specific programming will reflect on what they believe to be successful and how they developed these ideas into routines. Questions probed educators and administration regarding the high expectations, instructional practices, and the more extensive community relations that effectively support an educational environment.

Epistemology

Epistemology, defined as the study of knowledge and justified belief [specifically] epistemology is about issues were having to do with the creation and dissemination of experience in particular areas of inquiry (Audi, 2011). It is the philosophy by which we decide that knowledge is both adequate and legitimate. Creswell's 2014 work offers a relevant epistemology, focusing on the transformative worldview that intertwines a political change agenda to confront oppression, which matches this research's premise. The goal of these studies, according to Creswell, is to raise consciousness and focus on diverse groups marginalized by their lack of political capital and power.

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study focused on identifying factors from the participant's perspective in education positively impacting a school culture of achievement through the

empowerment of African American female students. Research sites reflected the organic principles and moral fabric of the student's culture by implementing CRF. Within the school district of initial focus, the school sites received funding to create spaces for female students of color to build community, confidence, and leadership skills. This female-focused empowerment program is designed to improve both the academic and social outcomes for female students of color by focusing on intellectual development and social-emotional support. Administrators in a school utilizing this program reflected on what they believed to be successful strategies to support them and how they developed these ideas into routines. Questions probed their perception of student relationships to staff, administration, and the larger community, as well as effective rules to support a particular environment. For interviewees participating by referral, due to the school's sites similar academic progress for African American girls and professional development, the same questions were posed.

Research Design and Procedures

The original structure of this study focused on the perspectives of up to twenty-five teachers and administrators. The proposed sample size was inflated to ensure comprehensive data and mitigate any issues with administrative or educator departure during the study. The interviews focused on efforts to improve academics through empowerment. The five original school sites used for this research were located in an urban district of approximately fifty thousand students in the United States. These schools are located in an urban setting with a high concentration of African American female students. Before conducting this research, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought. Based on each district's current population, a majority of African

American students were enrolled in a school. A majority defined for this study as greater than 50% of the school's student population.

Sampling

The original format of the study sought participants recruited from five school sites via email. The participants' email addresses were requested from the school district's human resources office after IRB approval was obtained. This qualitative study focused on identifying factors from the participant's perspective in education positively impacting a school culture of achievement through the empowerment of African American female students. Research sites were exposed to curricula and professional development based on critical race feminism by participating in the district's female empowerment curriculum. The school's principles and values were identifiable in part by their participation in a female empowerment program. The staff in a school facilitated a culture of empowerment for African American female students using gender-specific programming reflected on what they believe to be successful and how they developed these ideas into routines. Questions also probed educators and administration regarding the high expectations, instructional practices, and the larger community relations that effectively support an educational environment.

As outlined in the previous chapters, critical race feminism (CRF) served as the theoretical framework anchoring this study. As indicated in the research, Critical Race Feminism (CRF) captures the Critical Race Theory (CRT). The theory that birthed CRF and helped contextualize the African American experience and the African American feminist movement that is essential to African American female students' academic success. The origins of CRF began in a quest to explain how practices of discrimination

can disadvantage people of color. Critical race feminism, based on the premise that racial interactions are "based in law, sociology, history, and education" (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004).

A low response rate was observed for several months due to staff transitions and intense interest in scheduling participation during the social distancing period associated with Covid-19. As a result, it was unlikely that saturation was obtainable with the participants currently offered by the five middle schools within the original school system. The study requested a modification allowing personal recommendations through previous participants or referrals through the George Washington University instead of school system employee selections. The implementation of chain-referral or snowball sampling increased the likelihood of the researcher interviewing subjects actively facilitating support for African American female students in ways that were not captured under the study's previous scope. For example, an educator or school leader who managed an independent support group for African American girls may know their colleagues. Still, this work would not have been captured on the HR records of a school system.

Regarding participants referred via a snowballing or recommendation, after reviewing the MOA associated with this study and IRB application, the terms of contact with potential participants by referral were not explicitly stated. The application indicated the terms of communication as being conducted through the original school system's human resource department. Security protocols for participant data and contact remained in-place. Since the study did not specify the method of obtaining additional participants without the original school system's support and the risk to any participant remained low,

a modification was not warranted at that time. The initial IRB application did not specify that educators could not be referred to participate by other educators. The current study governed interactions with the original school systems human resources department, specifically as it pertained to requesting the contact information of teachers and administrators through the central office of this school system. Through a professional network, the researcher had access to many administrators and educators, which yielded participants with experience supporting educational outcomes for African American girls that would not be captured in the records of a school system or educational agency. Extending the invitation for participation on an individual basis did not require a revision to the application. However, the email consent required for participation required removing a singular reference to a participant's employment. The MOA and IRB application did not specify that participants could not be referred from current study participants through chain-referral or snowballing. Instead, IRB required a protocol to receive contact information if the school system provided the original participant's email address. Therefore, a new or separate notification for any participant was not required at that time. Participants who wished to participate in the study previously responded to the researcher via email. The researcher asked participants who completed an interview if they had any additional recommendations for colleagues who may have insight into educational support for African American middle school girls. When scheduling interviews, the researcher informed participants that a colleague recommended them for this study without disclosing any identifying information of the previous participant. Current participants did not need to be notified of any changes to the regulations guiding their study participation. Similarly, the existing consent applied to any referred

participants. Additionally, a revision to the application was not required; this method of obtaining contact information without a school system's assistance was not specified.

Initial Participants Study Design. This study focused on creating an academic environment for African American female students and the thought-process by school leaders during the 2019-2020 school year. After receiving initial IRB approval, contacting began with the school system for the schools' names participating in their female empowerment initiative. All email addresses were solicited using information obtained from the district. Personal data, even if it was publicly available, was not utilized. Contact with school leaders was made via email to their school system email accounts. This information was publicly available online; however, to ensure trustworthiness, the researchers used a George Washington University email account and specify that while they may recognize the name from previous interactions, this study is for external research purposes. For participants in teachers' roles, the researcher began by inviting teachers from five middle schools to participate in the study mentioned above. This primary district sampled for this study consisted of approximately fifty thousand male and female students.

After receiving IRB approval, the researcher began by contacting the school system for the schools' names participating in their female empowerment initiative. Contact with school leaders was made via email to their school system email accounts. The study contacted the head or primary principal of the school first, if saturation was not achieved in two weeks, assistant principals were invited to participate. This information was publicly available online; however, to ensure trustworthiness, a university email account was used and specified that while they may recognize the researchers name, this

study is for external research purposes. For participants who serve as teachers, teachers were invited from five middle schools to participate in the aforementioned empowerment program. If teachers did not respond within two weeks to the invitation via email, an additional reminder email was sent. If saturation was not achieved, additional middle school teachers' sites with the previously mentioned female empowerment program were invited. All tangible addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers were obtained using information obtained from the district. Personal data, even if it was publicly available, was not utilized.

Research sites from the school district initially targeted have been exposed to internal, not publicly available curricula and professional development based on critical race feminism theory by participating in the district's female empowerment curriculum. Participants referred by The George Washington University or other interviews were also exposed to professional development focusing on the same subgroup. The staff in a school utilizing this program for African- American female students using gender-specific programming was asked to reflect on what they believe to be successful and how they developed these ideas into routines. Questions also probed educators and administration regarding the high expectations, instructional practices, and the more extensive community relations that effectively support an educational environment.

As of 2017- 2018, 76% of teachers were female, and 24% were male. Concerning administrative demographics, 67% of principals were female, and 33% were male. Candidates to serve as an administrator must be eligible for a teaching license, which requires the educator to:

- Have completed a state-approved teacher preparation program, and

- Achieved passing scores for the Praxis I Core or the equivalent, Praxis II content knowledge, and Praxis II pedagogy exams.

Candidates to serve as a principal must possess the following professional qualifications:

- Applicants must obtain an Administrative Services Credential (ASC), which requires either
    - possessing at least a master's degree,
    - have spent two years or more in a full-time, K-12 school-based position, and
    - have earned a passing score on the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA).
    - OR possess a bachelor's degree and (2) have completed a state-approved program in K-12 Leadership/Administration.

I utilized a customized interview protocol focused on perceptions of gender and race-related to high expectations, instructional practices, and community relationships. Immediately after each interview a reflective memo was recorded. Upon developing categories for each code throughout several interviews, themes were evident. To discern these themes, the conceptual framework and the overarching theory of CRF were included in the thought process. Software leveraging computer-based qualitative data analysis, CAQDAS was used in order to detect the frequency of the use of particular words and phrases and the degree of interrelationship between the variables (Saldana, 2009a). Each phrase was counted one time per statement to avoid any single participant's statement dominating the code.

As of summer 2020, the study was unable to obtain saturation due to a low response rate due to difficulties associated with COVID-19, including but not limited to staff transitions and an inability to schedule participation during the social distancing period. The study requested the ability to extend participation invitations through a professional network associated with the George Washington University to school principals and teachers individually. The study also asked the ability to implement chain-referral or snowball sampling based on nominations from current participants.

The primary IRB application did not specify that educators could not be referred to participate by other educators. The current study governs interactions with the initial school systems Human Resources department, explicitly about requesting teachers' and administrators' contact information through this school system's central office. Through a professional network, the researcher had access to many administrators and teachers, which yielded participants with experience supporting educational outcomes for African American girls that would not be captured in the records of a school system or educational agency. Extending the invitation for participation on an individual basis did not require a revision to the application. However, the email consent required for participation required removing a singular reference to a participant's employment.

The MOA and IRB application did not specify that participants could not be referred from current study participants through chain-referral or snowballing. Instead, the IRB required a protocol to receive contact information if the school system provided the participant's email address. Therefore, a new or separate notification for any participant was not required at that time. Participants who wished to participate in the study previously responded to the researcher via email. The researcher asked participants

who completed an interview if they had additional recommendations for colleagues who may have insight into educational support for African American middle school girls.

Before the interviews took place, the researcher provided each participant with an informed consent form after participating. Introductions and an explanation of the purpose of the interview were clarified before the interview began. That included articulating the participants' right to decline participation, followed by a review of the interview structure, and presenting the participants with a copy of the proposed questions.

Potential school sites and interview locations also had pseudonyms to protect participants further. Before the interviews took place, the researcher provided each participant with an informed consent form after participating. Introductions and an explanation of the purpose of the interview were clarified before the interview began. This included articulating the participants' right to decline participation, followed by a review of the interview structure, and presenting the participants with a copy of the proposed questions.

Expanded Study Participants Design. During the 2020 school year, a worldwide pandemic occurred, which caused drastic changes to the study structure. As of Fall 2020, the study was unable to obtain saturation due to a low response rate due to staff transitions and an inability to schedule participation during the social distancing period. The researcher requested the ability to extend participation invitations through a professional network to school principals and teachers individually. The researcher also asked the ability to implement chain-referral or snowball sampling based on nominations from previous participants.

Administrators from districts added during the studies expansion did not have documented requirements to hold their role, however, all completed a post-secondary degree in education as well as training to specifically support African American girls. The current consent used for interviewees from the original school system applied to any referred participants.

Interview Questions

Concerning the interview protocol for this analysis, the questions were developed to ascertain what supports are consciously incorporated into a public-school system's curriculum for African American female students in middle school. The gathering data methods were based on the semi-structured interview protocols of Crotty (1998), which stated distinct approaches relate to an expected outcome. Interview questions were crafted based on relevance to critical components associated with creating an academic culture that became apparent during the literature review. The themes guiding the design of these questions divide into the following categories:

A. instructional practice

B. high expectations

C. community relationships

It was essential to maintain confidentiality during the interview by assigning a pseudonym for each participant. Potential school sites and interview locations also had aliases to protect participants further. Before the interviews took place, each participant was provided with an informed consent form after participating. Introductions and an explanation of the purpose of the interview were clarified before the interview began. This included articulating the participants' right to decline participation, followed by a

review of the interview structure and presenting the participants with a copy of the proposed questions.

Timeline

This study focused on creating an academic environment for African American female students; therefore, school leaders' thought-process captured the 2019-2020 school year. See Appendix C for table one showing additional details regarding a timeline for IRB approval from The George Washington University, as well as the original school district.

Sample Size

According to Creswell (2007), the sample size needed to ensure saturation may vary; however, the estimated targeted sample/participation range was up to twenty-five administrators and teachers. If an insufficient number of participants were available, the researcher planned to use systematic sampling, selecting every 3rd administrator or teacher on an alphabetized list to create a smaller, non-biased sample group.

Data collection and storage procedures

The code for this study was necessary to organize the interviews of the participants for subsequent analysis. Upon analysis by the researcher, it was vital to connect the interviewees' names with their school site to draw any correlation between the effectiveness of school-based programming and the participants' responses. The code was kept secure using a password protected excel document and was kept separate from other study data.

Per the expressed written wishes of the initial school system, the school system from which many participants in this study are employed, due to the Covid-19 social

distancing requirements, the researcher requested to interview participants by phone. The interviews with principals, assistant principals, and teachers were no longer feasible in-person due to school systems closing its buildings starting on April 27, 2020 and continuing until Winter of 2020. Additionally, libraries closed simultaneously and continued to implement social distancing requirements that would prevent the researcher from conducting a private interview with the participants. The researcher believed that given these unprecedented circumstances, it was best to follow the World Health Organization and Center for Disease Control's guidance and practice social distancing for upcoming interviews and the duration of this study. The unknown nature and evolving impact of COVID-19 on the participant's health or those they come in contact with requires an abundance of caution.

The researcher requested to use the conferencing tool recommended by the school system, Free Conference Call. The school systems research office indicated that the recording feature could obtain audio recordings of the participant's answers. After reviewing the MOA associated with this study and IRB application, the term in-person interview was not found. The application indicated only that the interview was to be recorded and that the researcher was to petition to use a school space or another location, which could be by phone per the participant's request or the school systems directive. Since the study did not specify the communication method, only that a recording of the interview was to take place, a modification was not warranted at that time.

The MOA and IRB application did not specify in-person interviews; instead, it allowed for the participant's location to be selected. Therefore, a separate notification was

not required at that time. Participants who wished to participate in the study previously responded to the researcher via email.

Materials

Data, including audio recordings of interviews and typed transcripts of interviews, was stored in digital form in a password-protected computer file. Any printed transcripts or documents with identifying information will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Any identifying information of participants, sites, and school districts in the dissertation will be changed to pseudonyms. Identifying information linking aliases to participants will be stored in a password-protected excel file. All audio recordings, keys to codes, and any other data with personal identifying information will be destroyed two years after completing the study.

Data Analysis

Data collection began during the 2020 school year, in the Spring, and concluded in the Fall of 2020. This allowed for reflection on the first few months of instruction while the participants could remember the planning efforts from the beginning of the year. According to Creswell (2005), this realignment based on additional information was beneficial as a "constant comparative generates and connects categories by comparing incidents in the data to other incidents, incidents to categories, and categories to other categories" (p. 406).

I utilized a customized interview protocol focused on perceptions of gender and race-related to education, instructional practices, community support, and professional development. The interviews used and analyzed open coding on two levels. Strauss and Corbin (1990) described open coding as "The process of breaking down, examining,

comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (p. 61). The interview focused on the perspective of school administrators or classroom teachers.

In Vivo Coding

Saldaña stated that there "Is no 'best' way to code" as well as using the "right tool for the right job" (Saldaña, 2016b, p. 2). For this study, In Vivo Coding was used to identify words or short phrases based on the interviewee's own words. According to Saldaña (2016b), "the application of two or more different codes to a single qualitative datum, or the overlapped occurrence of two or more codes applied to sequential units of qualitative data" (p. 80). In vivo, coding was best suited for this study because it "prioritize[d] and honor[ed] the participant's voice," (Saldaña, 2016b, p. 91). This technique assisted with the inclusion of colloquial or indigenous cultural terms. The participants' voice and terms used may be unique to any other area of the United States so careful analysis of the participants' words was essential.

Coding Steps

After each interview, a reflective memo was immediately recorded. Upon developing categories for each code throughout several interviews, themes emerged. To discern these themes, the conceptual framework and the overarching theory of CRF were included in the analysis and thought processes. The CAQDAS computer-based qualitative data analysis software was used to calculate the number of times a particular word or phrase appeared in the data corpus and displayed selected facets after coding, such as possible interrelationships (Saldaña, 2016a).

This transcription occurred in a private setting, with all files secured digitally through password protection. The software used is a CAQDAS document tagging tool for

qualitative data analysis. The first cycle of in vivo coding extracted the codes from the data verbatim. This process acted as a barrier from the researcher distorting the participant's perspective. This also allowed groups of similar geographic and ethnic origin to articulate their thoughts through common words or phrases that the researchers may not know and therefore missed using other analysis methods. The transcripts were coded and labeled by relevant words, phrases, sentences, and sections. Using the CAQDAS tool created a hierarchy of tags for each transcript. Then, the researcher coded the interview primarily based on the contents related to crucial theoretical or conceptual frameworks and peer-reviewed articles of significance. The significant codes are derived from the repetition of a phrase or concepts by the interviewees. The CAQDAS computer-based qualitative data analysis software was used to calculate the number of times a particular word or phrase appeared in the data corpus and displayed selected facets after coding, such as possible interrelationships (Saldaña, 2016a).

The researcher reviewed the codebook, which indicated the frequency each word was used. The most frequently used terms include culture, reflect/represent/identity, and academics. Codes that were initially expected to be prevalent, similar to current research, such as STEAM/STEM, were not as prevalent. From this, the researcher was able to determine the context of the usage, and upon developing categories for each code, the three most pervasive themes became evident.

To discern these themes, the conceptual framework and the overarching theory of CRF were included in the analysis and thought processes. Those themes are instructional practice, high expectations, and community practices. The following initial codes or synonyms were evident more than 20 times.

Table 1

Initial Codes

Framework	Code	Frequency
CRF	Culturally relevant	24
	Culture	42
	Reflect/represent/identity	46
	Gender	
Instructional Practices	Academics	42
	Data	29
	Instruction	32
High Expectations	Expectations	24
Community Relationships	Advisory	25
	Community	37
	Leadership	21
	Opportunity	22
	Relationship	39

Data, including audio recordings for all participants, were interviewed independently of their school district and deleted after transcription occurred. For participants who interviewed based on information obtained from their school system, all recordings were secured digitally and deleted after two years per an MOA agreement. Identifying information linking pseudonyms to participants was stored in a password-protected excel file. Any identifying details relating pseudonyms to participants was held in a password-protected excel file, provided by the participant's school district or independently compiled by the research for interviewees contacted through snowballing and referrals. Only the researcher can see this information. This information will also be destroyed two years after the completion of the study. Per the MOA for interviewees participating through their school district, the district may request a copy of the interview transcripts and recordings for presentation purposes.

Validity

To ensure validity in the study, the researcher used Creswell's (2014) guidance for creating a subjectivity statement. This statement allowed me to identify biases and simultaneously establish credibility and reflexivity. This statement allowed the reader a lens into the connection to the support of young African American female students as an African American woman who may have many similar experiences to the students discussed during the interviews.

To establish the tenet of credibility in trustworthiness, member checking was used. After reviewing transcripts with redacted identifying information, the same conclusion regarding the primary themes and codes was reached.

Internal validity or credibility

To build up the internal validity of the study, the researcher utilized triangulation, which called for multiple methods and sources of data collection to confirm the findings (Creswell, 2014; Glesne, 2011; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009a).The researcher conducted interviews with administrators and teachers and accessed publicly available PARCC data about student performance. This metric helped ensure that administrators and teachers' student population-referenced were high performing before examining their instructional mechanism as best practices. The researcher provided "adequate engagement in data collection" (Merriam, 2009b, p. 219) by interviewing participants until saturation or redundancy was achieved (Creswell, 2014; Glesne, 2011; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009a).

Reliability. The researcher kept records regarding the process of data collection and any potentially pivotal changes in the study. This study also tracked how categories are identified per Merriam's (2009a) guidance. The researcher requested a peer review of the data collection and coding (Creswell, 2014; Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009a).

External Validity. Using detailed descriptions, the researcher established something like external validity in a quantitative analysis that helped create validity and transferability in the conclusions. While the sample is small, the researcher employed the maximum variation in sampling to allow for "the possibility of a greater range of application" of the research (Merriam, 2009b, p. 227).

Methodological Challenges

Several methodological issues considered to be problematic during the interviewing process include recruitment difficulties, confidentiality concerns, and accuracy of the transcription. Discovering administrators and teachers with in-depth

knowledge and relationship to supporting African American female students can prove challenging for several reasons. The first is a lack of research regarding what is best for African American female students, as it pertains to a culture of achievement, so training based on current best practices, and research rarely exists (Ricks, 2014c). The second concern regarding confidentiality connects to a potential lack of honesty when conducting an interview. As the research related to the interviewees is one of district employee to a school staff member, this can create a conflict of interest directly related to positionality. Ravitch and Carl (2016) describes positionality as "the researcher's role and social location/identity in relationship to the context and setting of the research." The personnel interviewed are directly connected and evaluated by their ability to create an environment best for African American female students. Therefore, the researcher assumed it was unlikely that these individuals would report any areas in which their work did not support young African American women while being interviewed. However, the researcher was pleasantly surprised with the honest critique each participant offered of their school or school systems efforts and their attempts to support African American middle school girls. The researcher refined the language used to present each question in advance of the interview to focus on educational practices questions, rather than a judgment of the school staff's ability to implement their curriculum may mitigate this challenge.

An additional limitation exists in defining classification as an African American girl. To mitigate this potentially inconsistent association of subgroups, several ethnic groups are excluded from this study. The excluded subgroups include young women who identified solely as Latina, Native American, Alaskan, Native Hawaiian, Middle Eastern,

North African, and Pacific Islander. For this study, teachers of students identified as multiracial considered African American provided one of the racial identities of African descent. This definition is consistent with the U.S. Census Bureau (2018), which classifies those considered to be African American or Black as "a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa" (para. 1). The structural process the researcher utilized to guide the coding of qualitative data resulting from an interview based on the 2016 work of Ravitch and Carl.

Statement of Subjectivity

As an educator in a large urban school district, I became acutely aware of a lack of programming focused on supporting African American female students' academic growth. It is of great personal concern to see many African American female students not afforded the same caliber of education I received after my family relocated to a suburban community with a high performing school system. For example, I received the opportunity to attend a highly regarded technology magnet STEM program, which is, unfortunately, not available in all communities. Given my experiences as an African American woman who attended a public middle school, it was difficult to see similarities between the experiences described by these educators, who operate in an urban environment. Therefore, it was important to include extensive trustworthiness safeguards. The initial assumption as to the cause of this inadequate programming leading African American female students performing well below their White female counterparts was attributed to a lack of funding within local public-school systems to tailor instruction-based on gender and race. Previous research has attributed deficits in the mastery of curricular concepts for African American women to the school environment and

sociological challenges, such as macro and micro-aggressions and an oppressive societal hierarchy. However, a compelling gap exists in the research identifying the academic best-practices for African American female students. This gap allows for the proposed study as well as subsequent research.

Trustworthiness Techniques

To establish trustworthiness, each participant's experience, reflections, and interpretation needed to be accurately recorded and interpreted. The inner-city schools may lack racial diversity; however, a wide range of socioeconomic, religious, and cultural differences may exist amongst the student population being discussed. Therefore, it was essential to be aware of any bias or potentially condescending language in the interview questions.

Human Ethics

To ensure all administrators, staff, and students' privacy is maintained throughout this process, the study was structured to ensure all interviews were recorded with the recordings subsequently destroyed. However, following the MOA, 'upon the termination of the MOA or two (2) years after the publication of reports related to the Project, whichever occurs first, Researcher will destroy all data file s and hard copy records created according to the MOA and purge any copies of such data from all computer systems, unless requested otherwise by the school district.'

Additionally, the MOA about interviewees whose contact information was provided by their school district stated, 'the researcher will provide the district with one electronic and at least one (1) paper copy of the final versions of all reports and other documents associated with the Project. The district reserves the right to use the

information in the research report and research findings for educational programming or services, planning, solicitation of grants, staff development, and any other purposes to improve instruction or services to students. Upon request, the researcher will provide the district with one (1) electronic copy and at least one (1) paper copy of the data files, codebooks and the computer code/instrument used to create data analysis files and perform analyses for the Project ("Data Analysis Files"), but only to the extent the researcher can provide the Data Analysis Files without breaching data confidentiality obligations it owes to other individuals or organizations contributing data included in such Data Analysis Files.'

To maintain confidentiality, the school districts were referred to as urban schools in the United States. Further protections included little details regarding the funding and structure of the female empowerment program. While this may pose a challenge for the reader, the details of each unique initiative undertaken by each school or school district must not be divulged as it would allow for the original school or district to be identified.

Chapter 4: Findings

Overview

This study's objective was to identify and research best practices incorporated by administrators and teachers to create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school. I will briefly introduce the interview structure. This chapter will then briefly orient the reader to the participants by providing an overview of each school's environment and each participant's background. Next, the findings will be reviewed in a thematic organization. Finally, I will share themes organized by the research question. Findings will also be broken down into themes.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with administrators and teachers to understand how schools build a culture that positively impacts African American female students. A qualitative study allowed the participants to express their true state of mind and their lived experiences and enabled me to hear authentic voices and opinions. Based on this study's purpose, the following research question directed data collection and analysis: how do administrators and teachers create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school?

This study's conceptual framework encompasses the concepts of critical race feminism, pedagogical practices, high expectations, and community relationships. The findings from the data analysis included the following:

1. The importance of relationship building.
2. Gender-based affinity spaces were central to the structure of the participants' schools.
3. Expectations of building student accountability was essential to participants.

4. Exposure and representation of African American females in careers were commonly used practices that participants deemed to be effective.

Findings from this research study included the structures and strategies teachers and administrators used to encourage academic growth for students. The structures the participants altered in their school setting to create a culture of achievement included socio-emotional supports, gender-specific systems, and overall school-based educational policies. The voices of teachers and administrators have been woven throughout each section.

Interview Structure

This section will explain the logistics and timeline of the interview process and then discuss the macro-environment, including the school district and regions in which each participant operated. Teachers' and administrators' perceptions will be woven throughout. I engaged participants in a series of nine semi-structured interview questions, which differed slightly depending on their roles. Current or previous middle school principals and instructional supervisors received questions designed for administrators.

Teachers received similar questions structured to classroom teachers. The questions were structured to prompt the interviewee to reflect on their own experiences, as well as how their leadership and/or instructional practices could have been influenced by analyzing students' and changing their rules to alter the outcomes for their African American female students. The questions posed are in Appendix A (administrative-facing questions) and Appendix B (teacher-facing questions).

Participant Summary and Profiles

The recruiting process began with five middle schools from a medium-size

urban district on the East coast. Seventy-four percent of students are economically disadvantaged, 15% of students are classified as English language learners, and 15% receive special education. As of the school year 2017-2018, the school district served 48,144 students. The study was extended to include administrative roles in medium-sized districts in the southeastern portion and northeastern portion of the United States. As of the 2019-2020 school year, the southeastern school district in which two participants served offered 156 charter schools, and the northeastern district in which two participants served supported 198 schools and centers.

The participants from the northeastern school system served in an environment with diverse demographics. Approximately 37.8% are Caucasian, 26.8% are Latinx, 19.5% are Asian, 9.8% are Black, 5.7% are two or more races, 0.3% are Indigenous People, and 0.1% are Native Hawaiian. Roughly 92% of students graduate high school in four years, and over 92% expect to pursue post-secondary education. This affluent school district only has one middle school receiving Title I structure and support. As of 2019-2020, of the 49,000 students in the region, 98% attend a charter school of the southeastern school district. Eighty-two percent of students are economically disadvantaged, and ninety-one percent of students identify as students of color. In 2018, 78% of students graduated from high school, compared to 54% in 2004.

The commonalities for all participants included the following:

1. Age range was from 30 to 60 years of age;
2. Employed in medium-sized urban school districts for more than two-years within schools enrolling more than 200 students;
3. Identified as minority Americans.

The makeup of the participants' group included eleven females and two males. Nine of the participants, who served as school and district administrators were female; only one administrator identified as a male. Two of the three teachers identified as female, with one teacher identified as male. Three of the participants served as principals, four served as assistant principals, three are instructional coaches at a school or district level, and three participants are classroom teachers.

Ten participants were employed or referenced their employment from a sixth through eighth-grade middle school campus. Only one administrator specialized in non-content-based support, while all others supported the core content areas, often equally, within their roles. At least ten participants were recruited to ensure saturation.

Because this study focused on administrators and teachers supporting students who identify as African American females, no efforts were made to recruit adult participants of a specific race, age, or any other social identity. All participants self-identified as Black or of African descent, except two participants who identified as Latinx or multiracial. The interview portion of this study occurred during the spring, summer, and fall of 2020. Significant delays and modifications occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A time-sensitive memorandum of understanding allowed me to contact the original interviewees within the existing school system of focus. To achieve saturation of at least 10 participants, a modification allowing previous participants to recommend potential subjects was set in place. An additional modification was implemented to enable external referrals.

The majority of the participants chose to reflect on their experience with in-person learning. At the time of the interviews, all participants interacted with students

or staff in a virtual setting due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The majority of participants verbally indicated that they felt comfortable with all the questions posed, with only two participants indicating that the reflection on previous roles or childhood experiences was slightly uncomfortable.

Sidonia. Sidonia was an African American female principal with over ten years of administration experience, serving in a medium-size urban school district. Her current school was a Title 1, sixth through eighth-grade campus serving 98% African American students. The school led by this administrator recently increased its state ratings from a two out of five to three out of five. Sidonia has been the administrator of the school site referenced during the interview for six years. Her time at the helm of this school includes the years prior to and during the school increased state ratings.

This participant had an evident vision and views regarding what she found to be most effective for African American girls' academic development. Specifically, this administrator clearly articulated her observations of challenges facing her community and what it would take to readjust any undesirable intellectual habits her students had absorbed. This administrator focused on the importance of academic experiences separated by gender and student accountability.

Lucille. Lucille was a first-year principal of a middle school serving sixth through eighth-grade students. Although this administrator had served in several leadership roles before, this was her first year leading a middle school. The school serves a 99% African American student population. This school could best be described as a school in turnaround status. This African American female principal has over five years of administrative experience, serving in a medium-size urban school district. During her

first year, this school leader focused on building strong social-emotional supports for all students.

Mary. Mary is an African American female assistant principal, serving in a medium-size urban school district. The school Mary serves has been open for less than ten years, serving students in sixth through eighth-grade. The school's student demographics consist of 86% African American, 13% Latinx, and <1% Asian, Indigenous People, and Caucasian, non-Hispanic students. This administrator focused on exposure, social-emotional support, and parental expectations cultivating a student's drive to succeed.

Reggie. Reggie is an African American male assistant principal with over two years of administrative experience, serving in a medium-size urban school district. This administrator recently transitioned from the sixth through eighth-grade campus discussed during the interview. The school's student population consists of 98% Black/African American, 1% Hispanic/Latinx, and <1% multiracial in a school recently restructured. During his interview, Reggie, a former middle school vice principal, expressed a passion for the school. He also lamented what he believed to be the unfortunate effect of the school's current state which included a reallocation of staff and district-mandated instructional changes.

Alice. Alice is an African American female assistant principal with over five years of administrative experience, serving in a medium-size urban school district. Her vantage point of the school system was unique, as a lifelong resident and former student of the school system she now serves. This administrator has chosen to work in the areas of her district with the greatest need. This assistant principal's school supports 95%

Black/African American, 4% Hispanic/Latinx, and <1% Multiracial students. Alice made a conscious choice to place selected students in an all-female cohort.

Patricia. Patricia is an African American female principal with over five years of administration experience, serving in a medium-size urban school district. Supporting grades seventh through eighth in an alternative learning setting, this principal creates a positive academic environment for students unable to thrive in their previous traditional middle school setting. By incorporating restorative justice principles and intensive staff training, Patricia attempts to redefine students' attitudes towards academics. At the time of the interview, Patricia's school served a majority African American female population. However, due to the nature of the alternative school setting Patricia serves, the demographics of the student population varies throughout the school year.

Rebecca. Rebecca serves as an African American female assistant principal with over five years of administration experience, serving in a medium-size urban school district. This sixth through eighth-grade middle school supports 86% Black/African American, <1% Asian, 13% Hispanic/Latinx, <1% Native American/Indigenous People, and <1% White non-Hispanic students. Rebecca's primary focus was managing mathematics instruction for her school and was particularly focused on data-driven instruction. Specifically, she examined previous students' outcomes to backward map the needs of current African American female students to ensure they were equally represented in academic environments and social activities in high school.

Alaina. Alaina is an African American female district advisor with over two years of administration experience, serving in a medium-size urban school district. The school district of 188,000 students in grades prekindergarten through twelfth grade. The student

community is comprised of 37.8% Caucasian, 26.8% Hispanic, 19.5% Asian, 9.8% Black, 5.7% are two or more races, 0.3% Indigenous Peoples, and 0.1% are Native Hawaiian. This administrator spoke of the effective use of data to target support for minority groups who may be historically underrepresented in advance academic classes, college, career outcomes. By utilizing her counties data metrics, Alaina supported schools in crafting plans to support minority groups. She noted success in schools that used their data to implement specific strategies for struggling students.

Alisha. Alisha identifies as a Caucasian, Latinx, and Indigenous People/Native American female district advisor serving in a medium-size urban school district. Of the 49,000 students, 91% identify as a person of color. At the time of this interview, the school system served over eighty charter school campuses. This administrator discussed her belief in the importance of building a community in which all students felt welcomed and believed they had the skills to master any academic concept. By focusing on the whole child, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status, this administrator implied all students could be successful.

Bianca. Bianca, an African American female district coach, serves a medium-size urban school district. The district supports forty-nine thousand students, with 91% identifying as a person of color. This administrator was adamant that minority students benefited from restorative justice practices. She believed that by facilitating an environment that empowered the student to resolve their own social challenges, the student would be able to focus on academic or scholarly pursuits.

Karla. Karla identifies as a Latinx female teacher serving in a medium-size urban school district, whose primary duties include Spanish language instruction. This sixth

through eighth-grade middle school campus, served over 400 students. The school's student demographics include 98% Black/African American, <1% Asian, 1% Hispanic/Latinx, <1% Indigenous People, and <1% Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. This teacher highlighted a belief in the importance of self-esteem, specifically, the cultivation of positive self-talk. She believed that the optimistic internal voice of the student could override any negative societal messaging.

Rikki. Rikki is an African American female teacher serving in a medium-size urban school district. This teacher serves primarily as a mathematics instructor. The school serves a 99% African American student population in turnaround status. This sixth through eighth-grade campus serves over 200 students. This mathematics teacher supported the use of student incentives to encourage increased interest in academics. She believed that offering students a chance to amplify their voice, including teaching math to other students would give them the self-confidence to invest in understanding essential math skills. Coupling the incentives with increased student autonomy and amplifying student voice allowed this teacher to be successful in supporting her student's mastery of advanced math concepts.

Lewis. Lewis is an African American male teacher serving a sixth through eighth-grade campus in a medium-size urban school district. This teacher serves primarily as a mathematics instructor in a school serving over 500 students. Lewis supported adjusting curricula to support a more Afrocentric approach. He believed students who saw a positive representation of themselves were more likely to invest in the content and thus achieve mastery of mathematical concepts at a higher rate. He also supported the amplification of student voice.

Table two below provides a concise overview of each participant's role and environment.

Table 2

Demographics of Participants

Type of Role	Pseudonym	Role Type	School Type	Race	Sex	Position	Area
Administrator	Sidonia	Administrator	S	B	F	Principal	All
Administrator	Lucille	Administrator	S	B	F	Principal	All
Administrator	Mary	Administrator	S	B	F	Assistant Principal	All
Administrator	Reggie	Administrator	S	B	M	Assistant Principal	All
Administrator	Alice	Administrator	S	B	F	Assistant Principal	All
Administrator	Patricia	Administrator	A	B	F	Principal	All
Administrator	Rebecca	Administrator	S	B	F	Assistant Principal	Math
Instructional Supervisor	Alaina	Instructional Supervisor	M	B	F	Instructional Supervisor	School improvement
Instructional Supervisor	Alisha	Instructional Supervisor	M	C, L, I	F	Instructional Supervisor	School improvement
Instructional Supervisor	Bianca	Instructional Supervisor	M	B	F	Instructional Supervisor	Literacy
Teacher	Karla	Teacher	S	B	F	Teacher	Spanish
Teacher	Rikki	Teacher	S	L	F	Teacher	Math
Teacher	Lewis	Teacher	S	B	M	Teacher	Math

Note. In the school type column, S stands for standard sixth through eighth-grade middle school campuses, M stands for multiple sites, and A stands for alternative campuses. In the race column, L indicates Latinx and B stands for Black, C stands for Caucasian, and

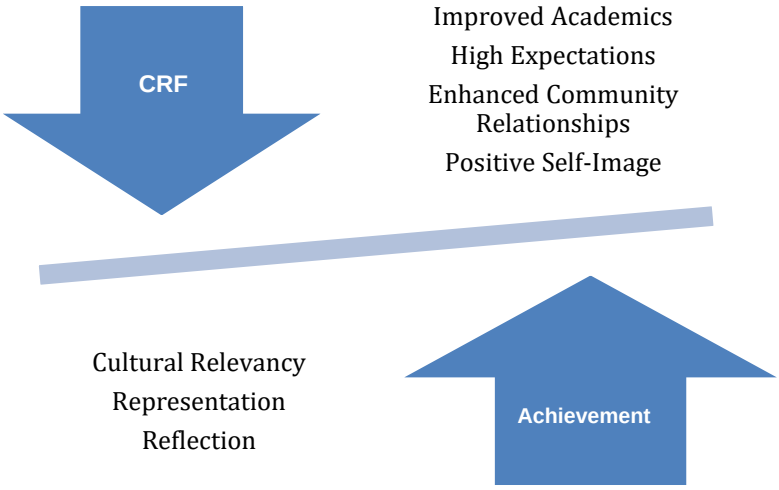
I stands for Indigenous Peoples/Native American. No participants' ethnicity was of Asian descent. [2]

Research Question

The four findings are organized by research question and by the themes of CRF, community relationships, high expectations, and pedagogical practices. The themes centered around the importance of building relationships, effectiveness of gender-based affinity groups, expectations of building student accountability, and exposure to representation of African American females in careers. Table two shows the demographics of the teachers and administrators who participated in the study.

Figure 2. Research Question

RQ: How do administrators and teachers create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school?



[2] Source redacted to avoid identification of district. Information retrieved from profile on district website.

Emergent Terms

To disaggregate the terms that would be used to derive the four findings, commonalties between the participants experience and language used to describe their practices were analyzed. Administrators, coaches, and teachers discussed the typical structures that existed within their schools that contributed to a culture of achievement for African American female students. Gender-based advisories was the most commonly referenced strategic change implemented by school leaders or recognized as effective by teachers. The advisory block separated by gender that administrators and teachers described was conscientiously implemented and not required by a district mandate. An example of other intentional structures commonly referenced during the interviews included restorative justice circles and peer lunch groups. Participants also highlighted the importance of representing women of color, specifically African American women throughout the curriculum. Administrators and teachers made efforts to represent students' shared experiences and validate students' inclusion in professional spheres by consistently displaying successful African American females in various fields. Finally, participants discussed strategies to build students self-efficacy, intrapersonal motivation, and hold students accountable to their high expectations.

In addition to the primary themes, several subthemes were observed as listed in the table below.[3]

[3] To avoid a single participant's voice dominating the code derived, each phrase was counted at a frequency of one notation per statement.

Figure 3. Conceptual framework, Themes, and Subthemes

Conceptual Framework	Themes	Subthemes
CRF	Relationship building	Relationship building in advisory model
CRF	Gender-based affinity spaces	Content of advisory model Restorative justice
Pedagogical Practices	Representation	Career representation Student-led learning Single-gender instruction

Findings

The themes of critical race feminism, pedagogical practices, high expectations, and community relationships were evident and allowed for primary themes to be easily discovered. This section will review the cross-cutting themes across participants and strategies that were employed by administrators and teachers to create a culture of achievement for African American middle school girls. The rest of this chapter explores these themes and is organized by the guiding research question for this study.

Critical Race Feminism Findings

Critical race feminism is the overarching theory connecting the components of the conceptual framework for this study. The research question for this study focused on how administrators and teachers create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school. The first distinct theme emerged by analyzing the interviewees references to gender-based affinity spaces, which participants indicated was central to the

participant's school structure. In this study, I define critical race feminism as pursuing an understanding of society and its relation to intersections of race, gender, class, and other forms of social striations through the counter telling of stories while legitimizing women's voices of color, based on Dr. Ladson-Billings 2016 work. Several administrators, including one lead principal, reported responsibility for creating a gender-based advisory as a space to facilitate conversations around race, gender, and female development.

The pursuit of equity through critical race feminism which seeks to comprehend how society organizes around social hierarchies, specifically race and gender was echoed in the intentional construction of academic and social spaces of the middle school sites the participants served. One finding that seemed to be echoed by several administrators was the importance placed on hiring practices that encouraged the representation of the community, specifically the hiring of African American women. Several administrators articulated a belief that conversations regarding race and gender might benefit from the insight of an older individual who has faced this intersectionality bias. Although Alisha, an instructional supervisor, did not suggest that conversations regarding race should only be discussed between those of similar racial groups, she noted the importance of representation in staff hiring practices. When reflecting on her school's hiring practices and what made students successful, Alisha stated the importance of "having teachers that look like them who have similar backgrounds that they feel connected to and comfortable with. Our staff were majority, people of color. But that didn't necessarily mean that they were Black women. So, I think [it was important] making sure that we have that type of diversity through representation there."

In the same way, Patricia also discussed the importance of representation to model healthy, meaningful, professional relationships, which she found to be delivered more effectively by women of a similar racial background. When Patricia began her tenure as principal of an alternative learning facility, she inherited a building with approximately eighty percent of the staff members of a different racial heritage than the students. Patricia described complacency in expectations at the school and the staff's internalization of low expectations for the students. To rectify this, the administrator set high expectations for achievement, and any staff member who could not adjust chose to leave the school. Patricia believed that the change in expectation made a significant difference in the students' trajectory, but it was the delivery of expectations from women of color, in her opinion, that ultimately changed the school culture and eventually helped to improve the site's academic outcomes. Patricia described the change in adult staffing stating, "I changed that entire culture but the only way I could do that was to change the representation of the building." Interestingly, the staff turnover precipitated the desired academic change, "So every time they left, I was able to bring someone in that looks like the population of students that we were servicing. And my biggest hire that I believe that paid out in dividends was a black woman school counselor while the rest of the clinical staff were white women. So, I needed her because I needed my black girls [to see someone] that they could relate to." Patricia also discussed intersectionality and its impact on mentorship—specifically, the need to connect with other African American women who may have successfully navigated similar biases. Patricia described the unique connection that could be built between an elder female and a mentee of the same race stating, "Making sure that you have someone that can talk to you that has broken

glass ceilings the way you want to, or has gone through what you are about to come up again[st] that is relationship building." Although data could not be shared because the administrator did not have access to the data at the time of the interview nor did she have permission to share student level data; anecdotally, Patricia found her students to be successful at her school because of the strong bonds facilitated between her teachers and students. When describing the need for this survey and detailed information on the students background and the student's needs, Patricia stated, "it is very difficult for young Black girls who are in our situation at an alternative setting to then come in and connect with non-women of color." After an interest survey, this small staff created a customized education pathway for students that encouraged discussions about race and gender throughout the school day until students returned to their previous school. Patricia described representation as a pathway to building healthy self-concepts.

Mary, a middle school vice principal, emphasized that these young women may need to work twice as hard as their Caucasian counterparts to obtain similar goals. Although Mary's school offered a gender-based advisory, as an administrator, Mary found time to communicate the potentially detrimental impacts of societal stigmas through informal conversations with African American female students throughout the day. Mary described the reason for this concept stating, "you're competing with stigmas that you're an angry Black woman before you even opened your mouth. You [are] already, stereotype[d] as an angry Black woman. So, you have to prove yourself a whole lot more and work a lot harder."

Regarding intentional discussion of topics related to critical race feminism; in conclusion, several participants intimated that conversations specifically connected to

race and gender, particularly those affecting African American women, are best delivered to students by older African American women. All participants indicated that they felt that occasionally their African American female students would face setbacks simply based on the color of their skin and their gender. All participants seemed to express a desire to prepare young women for this perceived reality.

Upon reviewing the most evident themes from the findings in this study, it became clear that two subthemes existed relating to critical race feminism. Those subthemes were, the importance of relationship building in an advisory model and the importance of delivering content related to life skills and career development which also took place in the advisory block for most participants.

Relationship building in the advisory model. Navigating interactions while balancing the response to multiple biases could be difficult for young women who have not had experience or a model addressing such complex social challenges. To address this challenge, all staff members of African descent offered their own experiences to model unwritten rules of engaging and mitigating the bias of intersectionality. Assistant Principal Rebecca provided a role model to her students through her own presence and those of her staff members. When describing their impact, she described an environment where African American female students observed adults of a similar background navigating challenges in a professional manner. Rebecca described what she believed to be the vantage point of her students stating, “you can't shut down, even though you want to, you can give them the presence of the angry black woman, you have to figure out how to navigate these spaces.” Equally adamant, Lucille echoed the sentiment of the importance of being a role model for students, “I've kind of embedded myself in the

school culture, especially when it comes to young ladies… just a physical role model. I try to carry myself in a certain way and demonstrate emotional competency with the students. So even when they're irate and they're upset and they're cursing and using all kinds of foul language towards me, I try to remain emotionally content so they can see that there's a different way to handle and carry yourself." Lucille suggested that modeling appropriate reactions to conflict was one way to build an effective school culture that would translate to improved academic outcomes. Rebecca, an assistant principal discussed how gender-based advisories are used not only as affinity groups but also as a small group instructional tool. This administrator observed increased student focus when reteaching academic concepts in the small group, gender-based environment. When describing the advisory model, Rebecca stated, "we do gender-based advisory…that does allow those advisors to have those conversations with those, females…that one-to-one or small group instruction. And we talk about things that are relevant to girls and their experiences."

Some principals suggested that these sensitive conversations would be challenging to facilitate during the day, without dedicating the advisory block to conversations relating to intersectionality and social emotional challenges. Without a designated space to facilitate these 'tough' conversations, Assistant Principal Mary made it apparent that it would be challenging for a strong bond between staff and students to be built. Another administrator, Sidonia, a veteran middle school principal noticed that an academic tone often needed to be reset at the end of every weekend, stating, "sometimes a lot of the work we have to do is every Monday, we have to reprogram them with our expectations. And because when they go home on the weekend or they go

home for long breaks, they're back to situations that may not be affirming for them, but keeping them as much as possible in an environment that is affirming them."

Participants also noted barriers in connecting with students due to time constraints were attributed to the curricular requirements and the sense of privacy that was not present in a general classroom setting. Some of the conversations alluded to focuses on systemic racism, internal and external to the Black community.

In summary, the majority of principles indicated a preference for a gender based advisory. Most principals seem to believe this is an ideal space to build relationships with students unencumbered by inhibited behaviors due to the presence of the opposite sex.

Content in the advisory model. Many participants indicated that the advisory block supported far more than relationships. In most cases, participants also used this time to teach content related to life skills. Karla, a teacher, also highlighted the importance of mitigating the negative impacts of existing in a society where navigating was required from such a young age. This teacher was uniquely positioned as a Spanish teacher to identify multiple cultures in the academic space. To support her students of African descent, this teacher would incorporate images of Black women of all skin tones to showcase women's beauty and success in various professional spheres. Karla described her process of selecting images to share with students being mindful of "the children can be represented by [women of color] who are considered beautiful, who are considered powerful, who I consider successful and having those, positive images projected to them and talk to them. So that way they're like I see someone who is similar to me and they were successful. They are considered beautiful. They are considered educated." As so

many other participants had before her, this teacher described restoring student's inherent self-worth. Mary also attempted to lessen societal stigmas that would hinder a young African American woman from being elevated without performing at an exceptional level by encouraging students' self-esteem. Mary described her goal for her students to not only be surrounded by images of successful African American women, but also for her students to internalize those images and become self-sufficient and proud. Mary stated, "knowing their self-worth and who they are and setting goals and aspirations for life [is important]. If you decide not to go to college, go to a trade school, go to the military, but have something where you can take care and support yourself."

Based on Dr. Ladson-Billings 2016 work, six of the thirteen interviewees, implemented a defined time during the school day with intentionality to facilitate conversation and life skill development related to principles of critical race feminism, specifically principles of intersectionality. Although participants did not indicate this was the only space during which this type of conversation could occur, several principals offered this space as the primary time designed to facilitate CRF conversations. Alisha, a district leader and former middle school administrator expressed the importance of safe spaces and relationships for conversations. Alisha described the kind of culture a welcoming and supportive space could build, "they felt really empowered, they felt really comfortable in being themselves and I think [that] really played into our decision to make sure schools are safe and comfortable because we really wanted them to celebrate who they were." Karla also described one of her most effective classroom adjustments as making her classroom and her time a place where students felt comfortable sharing concerns, "I just want to create that space where

I don't know every specific thing that my own students are dealing with, but that they feel safe, that they can come to me."

Mary, a middle school vice principal, touted the importance of a gender-based advisory. This space was previously in place when the administrator began her role and her perspective demonstrated the importance of safe spaces and relationships for conversations. Mary referred to the daily morning advisory as creating space to, "…talk about different topics with the girls, different aspects, issues that they may be facing." She was also able to use the advisory to recommend discussions, noting, "I talk to the advisors and say, 'Hey, can you have this conversation, um, with your girls?'" Similarly, Sidonia, a veteran lead principal of a 6th-8th grade campus, noted these spaces cultivate cultural awareness, strengthen community bonds, and encourage accountability. She said,

> Our advisories are gender-based and they are taught by that gender so every advisory in the school has either two males or two females and so the advisory the kids stay with the same advisory the whole time they were there. And so that helps build a relationship not only with the adult but with those same kids.

Sidonia believed gender-based advisories have a positive outcome because of the conversations compared to similar conversations seen in mixed-gender settings. Sidonia described these conversations as successful because of the settings unique ability to increase student comfort levels and "help build a relationship not only with the adult but with those same kids." By ensuring the advisory had only female students and staff, Sidonia created a space unencumbered by self-consciousness. She referred to the advisory time akin to "a tightknit environment of being able to be vulnerable, be able to be reflective and then those relationships begin to bond." Sidonia discussed the importance of a safe space designed to allow students to learn from each other and

expose their honest feelings. She juxtaposed this experience to those of her mixed-gender spaces which were described as constrained by caution and inhibited conversations in the presence of the opposite sex. At the time of this interview, this school leader had implemented gender-based advisories for two years. The designated time for advisory for several participants appeared to be a portion of the day that reinforced cultural and peer bonds between students and staff. Participants noted that a comfort level existed between students and staff members identifying with the same gender. It is important to note that no participant referred to how students' genders were identified for classroom assignment, beyond specifying that the gender the child indicated matched their identity.

Assistant principal Mary also alluded to an increased comfort level with difficult conversations by increasing this conversation's frequency in the advisory class. Although each class time seemed to differ, all participants implied that the 'advisory block' was a full, scheduled class. Mary seemed to equate this regular meeting frequency with a strong connection with the student and time for the adult facilitator to impart lessons that many students may be resistant to receiving from unfamiliar adults. Specifically, the administrator alluded to advice regarding race relations and in some cases, offering an alternative maternal figure. According to participants, the presence of a female figure, potentially of a similar racial background allows students to be more comfortable having difficult conversations, especially for topics around relationships and physiological changes. Mary, a sixth through eighth-grade campus assistant principal noted the importance of student comfort in like gender environments stating, "we bring in some culturally relevant pieces through advisory [that] are gender-based.

They're able to talk about different topics with the girls, different aspects, different issues that they may be facing."

In the alternative education setting, Patricia, a middle school principal, believed in the centrality of mentorship bonds with women of similar backgrounds. Although Patricia was careful to note the value in mentorship from non-African Americans, she described the unique insight provided by another African American female "if we have a mentor that is a White woman, although that mentor has probably had a lot of insight and they can explain to us the route [to success] and teach us things, they're not a representation [of African Americans]. We know that we're going to have other battles to fight." Specifically, the impact of having a mentor of the same race could help to provide tailored advice for the mentee to mitigate additional challenges that exist because of their race.

In review, although no participants indicated through omission or explicit statements that they received any guidance on the content that should be informing their advisory model, all participants seem to use this time to impart life lessons. Several participants indicated that this was a time in which they develop their students' self-esteem and worked to reverse any negative self-images that they may have adopted through societies portrayal of African American women. The advisory block seems to represent a safe space in which the adult facilitators developed bonds with their students and facilitated peer to peer bonding. This also seemed to be a time when some administrators attempted to develop a sense of cultural pride in their students.

Restorative Justice. Critical race theory provides a means to offer a counter telling of stories while legitimizing the voices of people of color. When students are

devalued by peers, staff members, or actions, several administrators described a restorative justice approach to help reintegrate the student. Bianca, a district coach, believes students, “just need the opportunity to express their power. And I think that's what restorative justice does. It restores your confidence and your ability to believe that you can solve your own problem.” Restorative justice allows students to share their experiences, converse about the harm done, and agree on what the wrongdoer can do to mend the damage. Bianca explicitly referenced the power of restorative justice, which has, in recent years, become a highly recommended support for African American young men. Bianca clearly believed that it was of benefit to her students to be a facilitator of conversations using the restorative justice model stating, “I think when the teachers steps back and acts like a facilitator instead of the person in power, it becomes a totally different environment in which a Black girl can thrive.”

The process of restorative justice initially requires modeling and adult facilitation. However, Bianca noted the importance of allowing students the agency to work through conflicts and restore their position in the classroom's social fabric. Central to Bianca’s practice, as a coach and as a teacher, was restorative justice circles. She believed her role was not the knowledge constructor, but a knowledge facilitator. Bianca stated, “I think that’s a part of what restorative justice does for kids. Giving them, the tools that they're going to need to self-manage and also self-regulate and be able to deal with situations.”

Although these instances of critical race feminism and intersectionality concepts instruction occurred mostly in the designated time for advisory, no interviewee indicated that these conversations did not exist outside of the advisory experience. All

interviewees did say that intersectionality was addressed as a positive change in the school experience. This positive change was visible in the students' work products, testing, and the general school climate.

Overall, it seems all participants implied that students may be coming to the academic space with negative preconceived notions connected to their own racial group. All participants seem to take responsibility for restoring or renewing the sense of self-worth and limitless possibilities for students regardless of their race, gender or any other grouping society may place upon them.

Pedagogical Practices Findings

Identifying effective pedagogical practices was one of the primary components of this study's conceptual framework. The research question discusses the culture of achievement, including meeting academic growth standards for students. The theme that emerged through the data analysis was exposure and representation of African American females in careers is a commonly used practice that participants deemed to be effective. For this study, pedagogical practices described any learning system to assist students in gaining knowledge. All of the participants suggested that building student interest lies at the intersection of representation and providing information regarding career pathways. Sidonia, a veteran lead principal of a sixth through eighth-grade campus, suggests the opportunity gap can be reduced when students are aware of opportunities they may not have been traditionally guided toward pursuing. She envisioned success by highlighting specialists in careers historically underrepresented by women of color stating, "they will be taught by people who were experts in the field… putting in front of kids on a regular basis, Black women, that are experts that are doing the work [of] people who've come

through similar situations as them." When discussing the environment, she would like to create for her scholars, the importance of students seeing adults with similar gender and racial characteristics in various jobs was of the greatest importance.

Participants indicated, there must be student interest along with times and spaces to covey expectations and including student's voices. Lewis, a middle school teacher, suggested that expectations, specifically in supporting inquiry through culturally relevant lessons and representation, can help reinvigorate student interest. One example of interest building Lewis used was student choice which he described as giving students 'autonomy.' Lewis stated, "sometimes students will choose to work individually, work in a peer [groups]. I think that's very important because, that alone could be a barrier."

Rikki, a classroom-based mathematics teacher, also spoke of augmenting some of the provided curriculum and its prompts to match scenarios students were familiar with. Rikki took a constructivist approach, refraining from the 'sage on the stage' model of instruction. Rikki spoke of the process of learning she seeks to facilitate, "I try to put them into the process of telling me what you learned by looking for this. How did you start looking for it? Or how did you start answering this question?"

It is interesting to note that all participants found representation of African American women who may not be historically represented in certain fields to be a key component of the educational experience. However, none of the participants indicated a gender-specific strategy for content delivery. Unlike much of the current research suggested for African American young men which implies this subgroup of boys benefits from content delivery strategies such as increased movement opportunities in the

classroom, no such strategy or counter-strategy was offered by the interviewees for African American young women.

Career Representation. Several administrators and teachers discussed the importance of equitable, if not equal representation for African American female students in high schools and post-secondary studies. Rebecca described the importance of providing useful and actionable data, not just for the administrative team's knowledge but also for the entire academic staff. This administration indicated that tracking student outcomes based on equity was a powerful tool. This team made student placement recommendations to ensure an equal number of students could apply for high schools with stringent entry requirements or were on track to demonstrate proficiency on standardized testing. When describing the process her team used to analyze data, she stated her team "analyze that data…by gender because I always want to know whose excelling in math. Is it the girls? Is it the boys? And then when we look at that hard data, coming up with reteach plans and small group instruction is very specific to the females and to the males who feel like the males want to move more [in math]. They want to be more hands-on and different things like that." It is interesting to note that although Rebecca could identify movement as a strategy to make the classroom environment more palatable for young men, she could not identify any strategies specifically used beyond representation and mentoring strategies to support female students.

Creating an academic environment leading to a culture of achievement for some students meant some administrators required reviewing where the current pathways are leading their students. Rebecca introduced the concept of examining data for equity practices at the school level and tracking these practices' outcomes. Rebecca described

data review at her site as, “looking at the data that way [by gender] and providing more opportunities. I even look at the ratio of boys and girls in the advanced level cohort. You always seek to make sure that we are pulling in as many girls as possible.” Specifically, monitoring the likelihood of students' participation in schools and programs is perceived as academically challenging compared to other ethnic groups' peers.

To briefly paraphrase the findings related to the importance participants placed on representation of African American or women of color in careers, it seems many of the interviewees went out of their way to map the trajectory of the girls based on previous students. Once the administrators and district leads discovered inequities, they attempted to encourage their current students to pursue the academic path that they found lack female representation. It is important to note that all the participants who mentioned this type of planning indicated the importance of the child’s choice ultimately governing the path that they pursued.

Student Accountability. Perhaps one of the most challenging teaching components to master is delivering content and the refining of pedagogical practices. With all subjects, it may be tempting for the teacher to act as a 'sage on the stage' or format the application problems in a manner that inevitably leads a student to a specific answer. Instead of providing the student with the answer, Rikki, a middle school teacher, saw increased understanding when allowing students to discover knowledge with guidance from her lessons. She believed in the importance of not over-scaffolding supports for students stating that she find students demonstrate the greatest understanding when students, “tell me how you did that and then validate those things that they did or use a question to redirect them in the right place.” Alice, an assistant principal, found a

way to boost student investment in academic outcomes by utilizing student-led conferences. Alice stated, “we also have student led conferences. And so, the student led conferences push and encouraging students to take ownership for their own learning.” Administrators seemed divergent on the individuals who should be held accountable for student success. Some administrators like Patricia, believe in consequences for students and staff, with the onus for academic progress ultimately falling on the staff. Patricia stated, “Because they know, I need it [results] and I will hold them accountable.” Sidonia emphasized the ability for students to act as responsible partners for each other, stating that her African American students were observed to increase their “bond [and] those girls begin to hold each other accountable.”

When allowing students to create their knowledge, two of the three teachers, both specializing in mathematics instruction, found increased retention of the subject matter by the students as seen in the student's work products. Lewis and Rikki, both teachers of middle school mathematics, discussed changing the format or delivery of instruction to make the student the driver of their education. Lewis highlighted differentiation as a way to increase student responsibility stating, “one thing I see working for students is [the] choice [of] having the opportunity to express themselves academically in multiple ways, which kind of leads to that differentiation piece. We're just not all about what I'm doing as the teacher.” Some of the differentiation strategies Lewis offered included restructuring of student grouping, “taking a large group and breaking into small groups….giving the kids an opportunity to express themselves and also take assessments and a variety of formats.” Rikki ensured students are accountable by asking students to verify the accuracy of their information. Rikki stated, “I'm big on making them do the

research. I don't ask everything, come to me with some information so I can expound upon it or we can look together, but you have to be able to tell me I checked this and this in all the right places."

Along with amplifying the student's voice in the school's procedures, Lucille was also aware of the need for students to have reflection spaces. According to Lucille, the reflection space was designed as "an opportunity for students that may have gotten a little bit frustrated in class." She postulated that allowing space for reflection reduced feelings of exacerbation. She described what she believed should occur in the reflection space as "[going' into the reflection space, to calm down, to do some breathing exercises, and then go through an exercise that we get from our school partners." Aggravated students can lead to behavioral issues. Many participants indicated students might not have a positive model to reference as they address their frustrations.

Modeling reflective thought practices was something most participants indicated they facilitated through conversations with the students or modeling reflection. The presence of a caring adult in the home or the community is not available to every child. Therefore, a model of appropriately addressing challenges is not always present outside of the school staff community. Mary, an African American female assistant principal, serving in a medium-size urban school district, noted the importance of acknowledging the unique circumstances each child may face and meet those challenges with a personal connection. Mary described her efforts to cultivate relationship with students stating, "[I] build relationships with the girls and they know that they can come to me or our social worker, any female in the building for support and especially that, um, socioemotional support that they may need some of them." Mary discussed the possibility the student

may lack community role models, parental presence, or even a stable residence. All factors Mary believed could inhibit a student's ability to adjust to integrate into their community.

Considering the aforementioned observations, many participants seemed to indicate the importance of student ownership and investment in instruction. While many believe this responsibility was shared with the teacher who must provide a safe, reflective space and a well-structured lesson, the responsibility for success and academic outcomes was most frequently articulated as belonging to the student.

Single-gender instruction. Content instruction separated by genders was not a structure presented by most participants which is likely due to issues of legality in creating such a space. However, for the participant who delivered life skills content in a gender-based advisory, or in the rare case structured a gender-specific cohort, they believed they found success due to the separation of genders. Alice, a middle school vice principal, made a conscious choice to place selected students in an all-female, gender-based academic cohort. This assistant principal indicated that the process of selecting these students was based on administrative preference or student choice. Finding time to help students plan their career path and identify their strengths and weaknesses with a trusting adult facilitated increased work ethic among students. The creation of this cohort was due to her belief that the distraction of the opposite sex could greatly influence academic outcomes. After implementing a gender-based cohort, she observed increased focus and positive peer interactions compared to students of a similar age, race, and grade amongst the small cohort of students in gender-specific classes. Alice described the inception of her schools all-female cohort stating, "I decided to start three years

ago…because I wanted to see if it [all female classes] made a difference in terms of test scores if students were in gender-specific classes. And so, we created one section of males and one section of females." Although Alice could not share the data that would indicate this growth; she spoke anecdotally of the growth seen in reading metrics using her district's provided standardized testing measures. According to this administrator, although both groups improved, the gains made by these students exceeded those in mixed-gender groupings. It is important to note that the administrator could not provide statistical evidence to the researcher to support this claim. Alice attributed the success of the all-female grouping to a reduction in a perceived unwillingness to take risks in front of the opposite sex through separate gender-based classes. Alice stated, "we are able to see that the young women are a lot more willing to take academic risks when they're in the classroom [without male students]. And we're able to see that by the way that they engage in discussions with each other, we're also able to see it in their writing." The administrators noted a stronger camaraderie amongst girls in single-gender classes that was not recognized with the same potency as in mixed-gender classes. Alice noted, "we're also able to see that they really, really stick together in terms of the relationship that they have built with each other, from being in that class. And so, they're protective of each other."

Based on the interviewee's observations, it may be concluded that single-gender grouping can help reduce distractions caused by posturing by students for the opposite gender. It can also be surmised that this reduction in focus on the opposite gender allows for increased bonds between other female students due to the increased frequency of interaction.

High Expectations Findings

Determining the impact of high expectations was one of the key components of this study's conceptual framework. The research question discusses the school's culture of achievement, including building student's accountability central to participants. The theme that emerged through the data analysis was that all interviewees expected that students would be prepared for the career or college of their choice. However, all the interviewees indicated that they believed that college was not a requirement for success, even if most highly recommended the college experience. For this study, high expectations were defined as quantifiable or defined hopes for academic achievement and behavior that generate and strengthens a culture of achievement and ensures students are ready for post-secondary college and careers.

Sidonia, a middle school principal placed such importance on high expectations, that she stated one of the benefits of a college education is learning to meet those expectations. Sidonia described what she believed the college experience to be by stating, "you are the person that's responsible for how well you do, you're not with mom, dad, or grandma. You're responsible for making sure your work gets in, no one is going to hold you accountable [but you]." Not all expectations are held solely by the student. In fact, many principals discussed the importance of choosing staff that had high expectations for students or selecting different staff members to guide their scholars. Patricia, a principal of an alternative middle school escribed this transition at her school stating, "I just changed the expectation and I raised the bar and they were not with it. And they thought that I was not going to waiver in my pursuits and they got out."

Facilitating conversations around expectations without pre-scripted curricular guides can be a time-consuming process. None of the interviewees indicated that they had any curricular support or guidance from their district to facilitate these conversations. Some participants did not indicate direct instruction to facilitate conversations was provided, while others did not mention this support during the course of the interviews. Rikki, a middle school teacher, expressed the critical nature of setting high expectations, particularly in disciplines with a lack of African American and female representation, such as mathematics. Rikki's goal was, "when you leave this class, you need to know how to do this. So, they know that's what she wants me to do. I may not be able to do it, but at least I know where I'm supposed to go." However, she was concerned regarding the time it takes to create instructional models that held high expectations for students. Regarding the time constraints and the ability to prioritize discussions of high expectations, Rikki lamented, "would be [nice] having more time outside of the class time, outside of instruction, time for girls to build quality girl relationships, and learn how to communicate and understand one another and how, how they're different and unique, but yet can still function in the same realm." Like other participants, the additional duties of advisor, coach, confidant, instructor, and so much more that educators face, limited the time to hold these critical conversations.

Developing a student's internal motivation was a key concern for all participants. Rikki, a middle school teacher, also spoke of building relationships and self-efficacy through incentives. Specifically, this teacher hosts graduation parties for many of her former female pupils and displays pictures of these parties in her classroom. These

incentives, she believes, gives the students something to look forward to, building motivation.

Participants suggested that without developing intrinsic motivation, a culture of achievement could not be sustained. Lewis encouraged student self-efficacy by allowing students to construct knowledge using any format that worked best for them—reducing the prescriptive nature of mathematics, where possible, inspiring creativity and innovative scholars. Lewis described his process to increase self-efficacy stating, “I think that's something that helps to at least lay a groundwork and foundation for self-efficacy in the classroom…giving them choice…how they represent their work.”

In some instances, the administrators and teachers reported concerns regarding their colleagues’ views on several of their student's ability to achieve academic success. Rebecca, a middle school vice principal, challenged the preconceived notions of students and staff to restore community bonds and increase the likelihood of success for African American female students. Rebecca spoke of a time when she challenged a receptive staff member's biases, spurred change for the students, and enhanced the teacher's abilities as an instructor. Rebecca stated that a math teacher presented with a “presumption that the girls had an attitude, or they didn't respond to her favorably.” Rather than confront the staff member regarding her perceived bias, Rebecca employed a strategy of “tracking her [the teachers] data to show her how she would purposely not call on them [African American girls]. So, I would get out a piece of paper and literally show her which table she went to and which kids raised their hands and she ignored them.” Rebecca shared the aforementioned story that showcased the importance of examining one's own biases while providing instruction to students. Occasionally,

experiences or stereotypes with a particular racial group or gender can cause educators to withdraw from students. Projecting previously conceived notions of 'black behavior' is an unfortunate challenge that several administrators and teachers cited having to address. Once Rebecca gathered data to verify that a bias existed, Rebecca offered a conversation. Rebecca described this interaction stating, “I think the part of our coaching met with Khadejah was I had her identify her exact bias. I said, so let's just have a real conversation. I closed my computer. I was like, what is your bias with black girls? Let's just start with them first. And what came out of that conversation was Khadejah had negative interactions personally with black women and it led to a confrontation and Khadejah did not want to relive that experience again.”[4] Projection of an adult’s past traumas onto students, particularly those based on antagonizing behaviors, can be lessened by showcasing the student's humanity. Although Rebecca did not indicate that she had any specific training outside her collegial pursuits to help address this situation, the administrator opted for a courageous conversation. In Rebecca’s case, to repair the student to teacher relations, she intentionally set up a non-academic discussion allowing the teacher to see the students in a non-threatening nature. Rebecca described her successful strategy to disrupt the teachers bias and heal the student to teacher relations stating, “we did a small lunch group. And I told her, you're going to have to learn to build a relationship with them outside of the classroom so that you can see that they're not out to get you, their goal is not to confront you or be confrontational.”

Rebecca’s experience represents the ability of one school staff member to

[4] Fictitious name used for subject of anecdotal narrative

intervene in the biases of another school-based staff member and preserve the ability for student to obtain access to instruction. At a macro-level, however, such as a district administrator, it may be difficult for a district to identify problematic mindsets at the same level as the previously referenced administrator. Alaina, a district administrator described this difficulty stating, “I think we have to look at the data that we currently have, our county is data rich. However, the data that we have does not do a good job pulling out the needs of Black females as a group.” However, to address biases where possible, Alaina, a district administrator, discussed the importance of using data to qualify any potential intersectionality biases and then taking that data and creating actionable school improvement plans. Aliana described her school system as having the data to identify large-scale trends but noted the struggles of creating a plan to address institutional biases. Alaina saw academic improvement amongst students when schools analyzed their data by “be[ing] more targeted around our [use of data].”

Several administrators discussed the use of data and its ability to highlight academic and cultural issues rooted in stereotypes. While data analysis can assist school systems and school leaders in creating academic empowerment programs, the data is only valuable, in Alaina’s opinion, if the goals address the problem highlighted by the data. When describing some of her school’s current plans versus the targeted strategies currently offered, Aliana believes targeted strategies would be most effective in supporting African American girls. Alaina spoke of plans that look at student outcomes and backward map systemic changes to increase post-secondary success. Alaina described the type of school plans that she has seen generate success, “our schools make very large general sweeping plans that target everyone, instead of being specific to

targeting a particular group, if we want to make inroads then we have to show that in our school improvement plan, goals and actions." Alaina discussed analyzing data trends and even backwards mapping to increase the representation of African American students. Alaina described this process at her site, "we notice that Black females are not taking advanced biology or any advanced sciences, or they're not taking, you know, IB English for their last two years of high school [and the girls are] not represented in that way [class]." Alaina questioned, "what goals are we actually writing and what actions are we doing to support that?" Alaina believed planning based on equity at the administrative level would produce 'micro approaches' specifically supporting classroom instruction.

In some cases, participants highlighted an effort for district and school staff to overcompensate in their attempts to mitigate bias preventing students from equal representation in historically male fields or degrees with limited minority inclusion. Mary, an African American female assistant principal, was one of the first interviewees to note that not all educators define success as college students. Mary shared "success doesn't have to be them just going to college. It could be them going to a trade school or technical school." Similar to Mary, many other participants also viewed post-secondary skill obtainment as not only as an important component to a student's life-satisfaction, but also a vital component to survival. Mary contextualized the hardships that could be endured without a college degree or an employable skill because "as a Black female, you have to work so much harder because you're not respected." Mary insisted that African American girls need to learn to want self-sufficiency. Mary lamented school districts' tendencies only to emphasize a college to a career path, characterizing a monolithic

approach to success as ‘unfortunate.’ Mary contextualized the potential impact of an overemphasis on college stating “a lot of schools and districts don't put emphasis on a trade school, they just put emphasis on college, is not for everyone. And so, I would say that we don't do enough to expose girls to different options.”

Certain teachers and administrators highlighted the use of strategies to create a sense of community and belonging as a means to mitigate internal and external bias. During his interview, Reggie, a former middle school vice principal, expressed the school community's needs and highlighted the importance of creating a space where students felt a sense of belonging. Reggie reported, “I think because they had teachers who looked like them, they connected with them and they felt more comfortable with them. I think that at the administrative level, I think there are lower expectations, because students don't meet those expectations.” The importance of belonging was evident to develop positive self-esteem concepts related to critical race feminism and intersectionality. Although some participants highlighted the impact of socioeconomic factors, Reggie believed that this is not an impetus to lower expectations. Reggie explained, “because some African American students don't meet those expectations and because they don't have that parental support but I think that we have to continue to hold those expectations high.” However, according to some participants, belonging seems to be the precursor for some students accepting the high expectations staff members held for them.

For some interviewees, it was important to increase the feeling of belonging and elevate student voice so the child could help build an academic space free of biases and assumptions regarding their capabilities. Alice, a middle school vice principal, attempted to mitigate any adverse community effects by allowing students to display pride in their

academic success through student-led conferences. By explaining positive or negative academic trends, Alice facilitated an environment, “pushing and encouraging students to take ownership for their own learning. It encourages them to be able to advocate for their grades in addition to be able to justify and explain to their parents of why they have earned a particular grade based on the work that they have done.” For this administrator and several others who cited fewer formal means of integrating students' opinions into their classroom environment, encouraging advocacy, self-reflection, and justification of their work was an expectation essential to future college or career success. Alice believed incorporating time for reflection was a high-leverage strategy that “encourage[d] students to be able to engage in dialogue with their teachers, and encourage them to be able to advocate for themselves because those are skills that they are definitely going to need as they move up their trajectory in school.”

In summary, having high expectations for student performance and social outcomes seemed to be paramount for many participants. Although some principals articulated these high expectations should be articulated by the adults as well. The majority of participants discussed the students adopting high expectations for themselves.

Community Relationships

Defining effective community relationships was one of the main components of this study’s conceptual framework. The research question discusses the school's culture, which is likely to be influenced by internal and external factors to the school community. The subtheme of community relationships that emerged during discussing of high expectations through the data analysis was that all interviewees placed a high value on connection building. Specifically, importance was placed on the student or facilitating

relations building processes with their staff. For this study, community relationships were defined as the school site's engagement with external stakeholders about a specific ethnic or cultural group. In this case, this definition refers to the ethnic and cultural group of African American middle school girls.

The internal and external school community can impact males and females differently. Unlike many other participants serving in a principal role, Lucille, a veteran leader, but a first-year middle school principal did not delineate male and female students' relationship structures. Instead, Lucille directed her school to focus on building strong social-emotional supports for all students her strategy to ensure connected students was “to make sure that every student in the building has someone they're connected to, I think [this] has had a better impact on the student culture, rather than just focusing on the subject for boys.”

Lucille was careful to note that her initial focus was to ensure all students had a safe, well structured, academic setting. Specifically, Lucille offered student leadership groups for both genders. Although this school also offered gender-based, grade-level advisories, the school emphasized structures that benefited all students and student expression, regardless of gender. When describing her approach, Lucille stated, “It was a universal approach, [to have the] student leadership group help us to, start to craft the student handbook and the policies and procedures for students the next school year, which I think will lend to efficacy.” All students, regardless of race or gender were encouraged to participate in the crafting of policies and systems that governed the school.

Lucille also noted the value of implementing high-quality ‘Tier One’ instruction for all students before focusing on education designed for a specific subgroup. When

describing the instructional model, she wished to create for all students, Lucille said, “We want a solid tier one, instructional and social-emotional support model that is able to cater to individualized needs. And then from there, we can start once that's underway and we know every child has something [then] we can start thinking about boy groups and girl groups, but we needed that strong foundation first.” Although she expressed that she would eventually like to tailor and refine internal and external community support based on the needs of each gender, her primary focus was quality instruction and general community relations. No participants implied that all learners' basic school structures could be forgone or given less attention to focus on gender-specific support throughout all the interviews.

Not unlike Lucille, Alisha, a district administrator discussed, the importance of creating an experience for the whole child that pushed students to feel secure in their environment and challenge stereotypical norms. Alisha described a desire to “make sure that kids are having and particularly girls are having an incredible thoughtful educational experience. So that they are able to feel comfortable in school.” Both administrators implied that a focus on the student as a learner first, rather than their gender being the primary driver for success.

Several administrators and teachers echoed the need to be mindful of the larger community and individual circumstances. Reggie, a former middle school vice principal, repeated the need to look beyond students' monolithic views and focus on the individual, precisely the family's socioeconomic status. Reggie articulated the difference between schools stating the importance of, “being able to acknowledge that those resources are different from school to school, also being able to acknowledge that, when it comes to the

social-economic status of students that their families have different resources." Similar to Mary, Reggie stressed that not all family's makeups are similar or offer the same types of support. Reggie described some of the family structures he encountered stating, "some of the students are coming from a one-parent family home. Some aren't, some are from two, some are coming from living with, a relative, who may be older, and not be able to participate in school events, with the students."

The presence of caring adults, who mirrored the student's physical appearance and career aspirations, was a key lever for this participant's success. Mary also alluded to the importance of representation, relationships, and mutual investment in the student's outcomes. Mary stated, "I think our girls just need exposure and having those positive role models, someone that they can look up to." For example, this administrator's mother provided a woman of color who achieved post-secondary success and was invested in her daughter performing the same. Mary highlighted the importance of this relationship stating, "I had my mother who was my first inspiration, college-educated woman, role model. But I also had my teachers and I built relationships with them."

Patricia, a principal from an alternative middle school setting, sought to identify any external barrier a student may face. Using an entry survey, this administrator removed any potential impediments a student may face. Patricia described the survey by sharing, "we assess every single one of our students with a variety of questions that focus on social, emotional needs, also on their background, their relationships, this huge questionnaire. We then take that data in groups based on their needs. So, we run homogeneous groups and heterogeneous groups." The administrator believed that

layering this customized support into a smaller scale, would produce tremendous academic success in terms of a student's adoption of academically appropriate behaviors.

Many participants indicated that a significant aspect of community support was exposing them to social and academic situations they may not typically encounter. Alisha discussed the importance of creating educational opportunities for middle school students that empower all students to make positive choices once their compulsory education is complete. Alisha described the intended outcome for her students as “making sure our girls had choices for themselves because the opportunities that were afforded for them in school… wanting to set our kids up, and our girls up with the ability to say, “I had this really great educational experience” in middle school and high school and so now I know that I have choices for myself and I can make the best choices for me moving forward.”

Creating alliances within the community that truly reflect the culture and environment of the students in a positive academic posture seemed to be of importance to several administrators. Authenticity of relations, not only with students but also with stakeholders was articulated by several interviewees a key component of a successful school environment. Alisha, a former school leader of a turnaround school highlighted the importance of community partnerships, “I really believe that like authentic community engagement and having families really involved in schooling and kids schools, really creates an environment, like I said where people are comfortable, included, welcomed and that only helps strengthen the school.” Alisha discussed the importance of creating educational opportunities for middle school students that empower all students to make positive choices once their compulsory education is complete.

Karla, a middle school teacher, highlighted a belief in the importance of self-esteem, specifically, the cultivation of positive self-talk. Like other teachers and participants serving as an instructional supervisor of multiple sites, this teacher spoke of bonding through the presentation of incentives. Karla modeled some of the messaging she believes to be important for her female students to hear such as, “I am beautiful. I am successful. I am smart because society will obviously bring down a lot of people in general, especially African American females.”

In closing, several participants noted the importance of a well-established tier 1 foundation. This benefited all students regardless of race, gender, social economic status, or other societal factors. Many participants highlighted the importance of focusing on the whole child, regardless of intersectionality. To model appropriate practices in the community, many administrators and teachers offered themselves as a model for students. Some administrators modeled professional language as being reflective.

Several participants noted that there are socioeconomic and family structural challenges that may impact some student’s ability to learn. However, none of the participants described these challenges as an insurmountable barrier to success. Several participants describe the system of building students’ self-esteem and positive images as a way to mitigate any negative influences that the community or society may have imparted on the students.

Summary

There has been a scarcity of examining young African American girls' instructive encounters in the U.S. K–12 education system, outside of research regarding behavior and socioemotional concerns. Albeit both Black male and female students experience

occasional setbacks to learning, most scholarly discussion has singularly centered around Black young men and men's predicament. In 2013, Crenshaw, Bush-Baskette, Nanda, Ocen, and Young reported that girls of African descent revealed that black girls rarely received preemptive access to supporting academic, social, and emotional structures.

The data gained from these discussions helped determine the decisions that led to the initial crafting of an environment to support African American girls academically. Based on the voices of the participants, I uncovered four major findings: (1) relationship building between students and teachers was an essential component of building a positive culture for African American female students;
(2) gender-based affinity space was central to the structure of the participant's schools;
(3) expectations of building student's accountability were central to participants; and
(4) exposure and representation of African American females in careers was a commonly used practice that participants deemed sufficient.

While many participants discussed setting high expectations for students, very few discussed these expectations in terms of high-stakes testing. Instead, the participants focused on guiding students to set career goals, contributing to their overall life satisfaction and happiness.

Conclusion

This chapter described this qualitative study's findings on strategies to create a culture of achievement for African American middle school girls. Results were broken down by theme into sections on critical race feminism, pedagogical practices, high expectations, and community relationships. Three teachers and ten administrators from nine districts in six states were heard in these findings.

Administrators and teachers played a large role in developing academic spaces for African American middle school girls. Students' support seems to be introspectively based on the staff's attitudes towards student expectations and intentional relationship-building. Many of the participants seemed to indicate that their tone was welcoming to encourage their students to strive for academic excellence. This, in turn, encourages students to meet the expectations set. Participants indicated staff expectations were critical to their students' intellectual development. Most participants stated the girls constructed their self-efficacy and self-image through gender-based affinity spaces and exposure to African descent persons excelling in all underrepresented fields. Discussions regarding the findings, potential implications, limitations, and recommendations will be presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Interpretations, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This study aimed to explore how administrators and teachers create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school. In recent years, the growing academic disparity between African American female students, particularly those in middle school and their Caucasian peers, has gained school leaders and educators' attention. Over several years, national assessment data highlights the achievement gap between races and gender (NCES, 2017). However, paucity in the research persists regarding the academic strategies that can support these girls (Epstein, 1998; Evans-Winters, 2011; Jha & Kelleher, 2006; Lingard et al., 2002). While past studies provided valuable insight into the significance of exploring the intersection of race and gender for African American girls in science, the literature lacks information regarding how a culture of achievement can be built-in all academic subjects (Hanson, 2007, 2009). This study addresses the lack of understanding of the strategies administrators and teachers used to mitigate challenges beyond behavioral and environmental concerns to ensure academic growth for this subset of students.

According to Jacobson et al. (2001) the achievement gap may yet be an early indicator of disparities between Black and Whites. Crenshaw et al. (2015) noted that 37% of African American females did not earn a high school diploma, and fewer than one-third enrolled in college. Addressing this achievement gap is critical to the economic and social well-being of the United States of America. For many decades, additional research determined why an information and performance gap existed, particularly between African American students and their Caucasian peers. Scott-Jones and Clark (1986)

research discussed this gap by highlighting the academic disadvantage and the lack of disaggregation of data by intersectionality and marginalized status.

Introduction

In this study, I employed basic interpretive qualitative methods (Merriam, 2009a; Saldaña, 2016a). I conducted semi-structured interviews of teachers and administrators to learn their perceptions of best practices to create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school. I analyzed the data for themes, including subthemes related to the structure of the academic environment and the surrounding communities. This study's conceptual framework centers around Critical Race Feminism, also known as (CRF), which is a derivative of Critical Race Theory (CRT). This is a vital tool for analyzing a population as the author posits that race is an essential measure of status in the United States (Hughes, 1945). The research question that provided direction for this study was how administrators and teachers create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school?

In this chapter, I will briefly return to the findings from chapter four. Then, I will link the present literature to the data from this study. This will be accomplished by discussing the four key findings: (1) relationship building between students and teachers was vital in building a positive culture for African American female students; (2) gender-based affinity space was central to the structure of the participant's schools; (3) expectations of building student accountability were central to participants; and (4) exposure and representation of African American females in careers were frequently employed practices that participants deemed effective. I will discuss recommendations

for teachers, administrators, school leaders, district leaders, and concepts for future research. Finally, I will conclude by reviewing my original assumptions and goals for this study.

Interpretation

This section will offer a cumulative interpretation of the participant's findings regarding critical race feminism, pedagogical practices, high expectations, and community relationships. Administrators and teachers explained their process of supporting African American middle school girls by recalling their school's policies, logistics, philosophies, metaphors, and emotions from specific events. Within the quotes from each administrator and teacher, this section will discuss findings related to the themes derived. This section examines the study's findings within the literature, conceptual framework, and the study's limitations.

Several administrators highlighted the challenges of perceived bias within the compulsory education setting. These administrators allayed the impact of these biases by holding courageous conversations with the staff member displaying preconceptions. Fine (1989) postulated that educators and other school-based staff could silence students in the minority by merely arranging the curriculum, policies, and daily activities of academics to benefit the majority.

Administrators and teachers universally concurred regarding two findings. The first being that the importance of building relationships between students and staff could not be understated. The second conclusion universally expressed was the importance of high expectations, although some variation was articulated regarding who is primarily responsible for upholding high standards, the student or the school

staff. The majority of participants referenced gender-specific affinity spaces or an effort to portray women of color in underrepresented fields. Seven out of thirteen participants referenced the importance of the affinity spaces created within an advisory. Within schools, advisory often serves as a space for developing cultural, peer, individual connections, self-identification, and esteem.

Findings highlighting the importance of relationship building and incorporating or respecting the community could apply to all settings, regardless of race or gender. The outcomes related to student accountability were a pedagogical practice that could be applied to all students. However, the findings related to pedagogical practices related to single-gender instruction and career representation, while potentially impacting the larger school community, were more specific to male or female scholars. The findings related to supporting students with intersectionality concepts seemed specifically designed to improve outcomes for African American girls.

Several key themes and subthemes emerged from the findings. Teachers and administrators perceived relationship capital with students as a significant component of building welcoming school culture and addressing intersectionality biases. Some administrators specifically touted the importance of gender-based affinity groups. Teachers tended to motivate students' accountability first through incentives, which they believed led to increased internal motivation. Whereas many administrators believed student accountability is built through positive role models and intrinsic motivation. All school-based staff members also indicated the importance of highlighting African American women through mentorship or visual representation in the academic space.

Teachers and administrators mainly fell into one of two categories in their responses as to what creates a culture of achievement: those associated single-gender space with increased academic outcomes and those who focused exclusively on academic practices supporting all children, regardless of intersectionality. Additionally, participants serving in a district administrator's role universally seemed to focus on a review of student data to create environments conducive to academic success.

Culture of Achievement

This study's search for a 'culture of achievement' resulted in questions designed to illicit responses from participants regarding the steps they take to ensure academic success for African American middle school girls. According to Young (2019), there is an urgent need for researchers and classroom teachers to examine the "appropriate discourses, conceptual frameworks, and theoretical frameworks for researching and improving the educational experiences, achievement, and outcomes for Black women and girls." Before this study, the research highlighted critical race theory, critical race feminism, and culturally responsive pedagogy, as well as gender-specific learning strategies, curricular styles, and community supports that may improve academic outcomes for African American female students (Berry, 2010; Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015; Erickson & Phillips, 2012; Lac, 2017; Tsui, 2007).

Critical Race Feminism Interpretation

The literature focused on critical race feminism as it relates to educational practices that have emerged over the past twenty years draws on feminism to differentiate the experiences of females or males of color, which also makes CRF a

feminist intervention within critical race theory (Few, 2007). However, critical race feminism pursues an understanding how culture organizes based on intersections of race, gender, class, and other social hierarchies. In this study, CRF manifested as the participants discussion of societal impacts related to issues of intersectionality such as gender and race.

Relationship building in the advisory model. The primary finding that emerged related to this critical race feminism theme was gender-based affinity spaces were central to the participant's schools' structure. The principals in this study all reported that the most likely space for culturally relevant topics to be intentionally discussed came in their advisory courses, many of which were gender-based. Many administrators, similar to Mary, recounted how the advisory block, specifically a gender-specific advisory block, served as a safe space to discuss biases related to intersectionality stating the staff and students "…talk[ed] about different topics with the girls, different aspects, [and] issues that they may be facing." The central importance of an affinity space was similar across most participants. Most administrators touted the benefits of gender-based advisories as an essential time for relationship building between students and teachers was a vital component of building a positive culture for African American female students.

Related to intersectionality issues, the teachers all reported a desire to incorporate images of women of color to promote student interest. Administrators often echoed a similar sentiment; however, they often approached the desire to increase representation from the lens of curricular additions and mentorship. When describing the selection of images of content that favorably highlighted those of African descent, teachers like Karla and administrators described an environment where "the children

can be represented by [women of color] who are considered beautiful, who are considered powerful, whom I consider successful and having those, positive images projected to them and talk to them." For administrators like Sidonia, a veteran middle school principal, the hiring process afforded the option to include African American female lecturers specializing in underrepresented disciplines. It is interesting to note that although most of the participant's schools are required to have an advisory, participants indicated that the choice to separate advisories by gender was an administrative or individual school choice. This choice seemed to highlight further the value participants seemed to find in spaces to discuss social concerns.

Contemporary research is beginning to show the decline in relationships between adults and students is an indicator of decreased scholarly engagement and confidence (Midgley et al., 1989; Midgley et al., 1989; Ryan et al., 1994). All participants indicated that they sought to build individual relationships with specific students or ensured that each child had one adult with a close bond at their school site. Research suggests that close adult to child relationships can increased confidence, engagement, or accomplishment. Conversely, these relationships can also lead to unhappiness, nervousness, delinquency, and substance use (Murray, 2009; Reddy et al., 2003; Sinclair et al., 1998; Wolley & Bowen, 2007).

Content in the advisory model. United States law has been explicitly clear regarding the practice of segregation in schools and all students' inherent equal rights that contributed to the 1972 Title IX of the Education Amendments (Tyack & Hansot, 1992). It is always important to note that counter research such as Halpern et al. (2011) believes that the facility in the stereotypes perpetuated by touting the benefits of single-gender

instruction detracts from issues known to inhibit student progress. For example, fiscal resources, teacher quality and relationships with the student, and communication with stakeholders.

Teachers and administrators believed that without a strong bond between staff and students, critical issues related to race, gender, and expectations could not be facilitated. Having these conversations in a space where all parties did not feel comfortable would diminish the school's culture and focus on academics. Both teachers and administrators at the school level discussed their efforts to demarcate times and set conditions, including gender-based advisories, to allow for conversations related to race and societal constructs that may impact the students' academic progress. Assistant Principal Rebecca discussed how the advisory block could be used to facilitate small group and like skill discussions stating, "we do gender-based advisory…that does allow those advisors to have those conversations with females…that one-to-one or small group instruction." For administrators who noted the importance of an advisory course, the lead or the head principals noted that they elected to separate the student's advisory by gender. Many of the principals indicated that they chose to separate students by gender to ensure female students had a space that they could discuss and react to topics uninhibited by the impression this may give students of the opposite gender.

Nevertheless, Sadker and Sadker (1994) postulated that a "powerful hidden curriculum" instigated and perpetuated educational opportunities for female students (Sadker & Sadker, 1994, p. 9). This study revealed this small subset of administrators, but also teachers found a single-sex classroom space to be beneficial for students socially and academically. Gurian et al. (2009) suggested that teaching through primarily verbal

interactions would be the most easily accessible for female students based on the heavily contested premise that female students have more effective verbal skills than males. None of the participants indicated the presence of activities outside courageous conversations related to issues of gender a race in advisory sessions. However, participants did not indicate that conversations around gender, race, or intersectionality could not occur in the content-based classroom setting.

Restorative Justice. Several administrators described a restorative justice approach to help reintegrate the student if students felt devalued by peers, staff members, or actions. Although participants did not consistently use the term 'restorative justice, several administrators like Bianca, a district coach, believe students "just need the opportunity to express their power. And I think that's what restorative justice does. It restores your confidence and your ability to believe that you can solve your own problem." Howard Zehr, who is considered to be one of the seminal theorists of restorative justice, in his 2002 work stated, "society must have a system to sort out the "truth" as best it can when people deny responsibility…we must have a process that gives attention to those societal needs and obligations that go beyond the ones held by the immediate stakeholders." Many principals, district administrators, and teachers indicated that through conversations, they supported restoring the student's voice, not just the adult, in redefining the esteem of an African American young woman in American society.

Pedagogical Practices Interpretation

The theme that emerged through the data analysis was exposure and representation of African American females in careers is a commonly used practice that participants deemed to be effective. For this study, pedagogical practices described any

learning system to assist students in gaining knowledge. All participants suggested that building student interest lies at the intersection of representation and providing information regarding career pathways. It is important to note that no participant explicitly referenced an instructional strategy; rather, teachers and administrators universally referenced pedological practices and growth mindsets. It is not clear if twelve of the participants were simply unable to recall any specific instructional strategies, which is a type of learning technique a teacher uses to help students learn or gain a better understanding of the course material. It is also not clear if the participants would have benefited from a list of instructional strategies to assist them in recalling verbiage to describe the instructional strategies they used or if this type of teaching was not of significance. However, it was evident that participants could easily recall pedagogical practices they used to facilitate access to information through culture connection and creating cultural value in building on and continuing learning.

Career Representation. The primary findings that emerged related to this theme was exposure and representation of African American females in careers was a commonly used practice that participants deemed to be effective. Fleming (2000) suggests that our education systems can unintentionally pass down harmful stereotypes via their curriculum and textbooks. The frequency and length to which each participant spoke of positive representation and its ability to alter a student's academic trajectory would allow the belief that this is one of the few consistently implemented strategies used across participating schools sites referenced in this study. School leaders like Assistant Principal Rebecca reiterated the type of outcome monitoring that seemed to occur, stating she was “looking at the data that way [by gender] and providing more opportunities.” All

participants spoke of the harmful effect of either external societal stereotypes or internal biases held by staff members. Each participant highlighted positive representations of the students as the method to combat this negative impact.

All the participants indicated that they saw increased student engagement and more substantial academic gains when connected to a staff member of color or persons of color represented in the curriculum. Markus and Nurius (1986) discussed access to representation to help students define their ideal selves and goals (p. 954). This study's findings suggested that students' validation of credibility to address race and gender issues could convey through a female staff member or staff member of color leading the conversation. Additionally, making an effort to incorporate cultural representations also increased student engagement.

Student Accountability. Accountability discussion primarily focused on student accountability for understanding their course content, and for some principal's responsibility was focused on teachers and students. For administrators, the teacher is accountable for connecting with the students, having high expectations for the students, and examining their own biases. Weber et al. (2011) suggested that organizational foundations and teacher actions influence students' views about the content, which can impact students' learning results. Many educators and teachers like Lewis discussed efforts within their sphere of influence to elevate students investment as a means to encourage accountability, stating, “one thing I see working for students is [the] choice [of] having the opportunity to express themselves academically in multiple ways, which kind of leads to that differentiation piece.” The connection between student investment and the accountability for academic growth seemed inseparable for many participants.

Single-gender instruction. Supporting African American female students with navigating and managing emotions was referenced in 7 of the 13 interviews. Research regarding the impact of emotion for female students versus males is contentious and often contradictory. Some research suggests that the amygdala and hippocampus structures may play a role in how emotions could be processed differently by males and females. The imaging research of Frings et al. (2006) uncovered that when requested to recall something, females will, in general, utilize the left half of the memory part of the mind (the hippocampus) with verbal systems while men will in general, utilize the right side of that equivalent structure alongside visual methodologies. It is unclear whether administrators and school systems had the latitude to incorporate single-gender instruction in educational spaces paid for through public funding. Legislation such as the 1972 Title IX of the Education Amendments restricts segregation by gender to ensure equality. However, it is important to note that many in this small sample size of administrators believed the single-gender advisory space had merit in its ability to create comfort with difficult conversations. Assistant Principal Alice was able to offer a clear anecdotal comparison of single-gender versus mixed-gender instructional spaces. In her all-female cohort, Alice stated, "we are able to see that the young women are a lot more willing to take academic risks when they're in the classroom [without male students]. And we're able to see that by the way that they engage in discussions with each other, we're also able to see it in their writing." In this rare example, Alice noted what some participants believed was possible in a single-gender environment, that distractions and inhibitions could be mitigated in this space.

High Expectations Interpretation

The primary finding that emerged related to this theme was the expectations of building students. High expectations of building students' self-efficacy were a central theme to participants. Durden et al. (2016) posit that African American educators may have an increased higher expectation for students of the same race. Some research suggests that Black students often have higher self-esteem than Caucasian peers (Constantine et al., 2002; Hatcher, 2007; Martinez & Dukes, 1991; Parham & Helms, 1985a; Rosenberg, 1989; Turnage, 2004). Wentzel (1997) suggested that students setting expectations and objectives will doubtlessly add to their academic skills to the degree that they coordinate the homeroom's persuasive and social destinations.

Administrators had the capacity to encourage teachers through their expectations for their staff to conduct gender-based advisories and hold high expectations for students in all academic spaces. All school-based participants articulated that they held strong beliefs about negative stereotypes, perpetuating the implied limitations. However, several teachers and administrators, like Reggie, an assistant principal, described the struggle for educators in all roles to hold high expectations regardless of community impacts. Reggie described these efforts stating, “because some African American students don't meet those expectations and because they don't have that parental support but I think that we have to continue to hold those expectations high.” No teachers or administrators expressed a feeling of disempowerment as they all articulated at least one space they believed could serve as a safe space to discuss issues of intersectionality.

The American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (1998) research echoes what was discussed by this participant in its finding that sometimes

Black female students can have a lower rate of interaction with the instructor than their Caucasian counterparts, despite seeking contact at a higher rate.

Community Relationship Interpretation

The primary finding that emerged related to this theme was the importance of relationship-building—imploring the strategy of intentional exposure and representation of African American females in careers commonly used practices that participants deemed to be effective. Research conducted by Evans-Winters and Bethune's (2014) implied that African American females' fortitude and self-respect through the child's family, school, and the larger community. Ogbu and Simons (1998) defined four areas that impact the scholar's pursuits of Black students:

1. The comparison between Black and White schools

2. Black students and family's attitudes towards academics African Americans' beliefs about the benefits of receiving an education

3. Black faith in the school system African Americans' feelings of trust toward the educational systems

4. Perceived value and 'buy in' to the curriculum from the community

Culturally responsive teaching allows the student's heritage to be incorporated and respected within the knowledge building and continuation process (Gay, 2010). Several participants described incorporating culturally responsive pedagogical practices or looking to infuse such practices in the future. Culturally relevant academic practices may also help mitigate some of the behavior and school climate concerns

referenced by several participants and reiterated throughout the research (Parsons, 2017). Culturally relevant practices allow the teacher to view a student's behavior through the lens of the child's culture (Vincent et al., 2011). School culture was evident in the discussions when teachers and administrators used language of ‘support, comfort, and community.’ For example, Alisha, a charter school administrator, described the importance of embracing and respecting the community stating she would “make sure that kids are having and particularly girls are having an incredible thoughtful educational experience. So that they are able to feel comfortable in school.”

Reconstructed Conceptual Framework

Although my initial assumptions regarding what may be relevant to the conceptual framework related to a culture of achievement for African American middle school girls was accurate, adjustments were beneficial. Critical race feminism and addressing intersectionality biases remained the overarching concept guiding concept that influenced many of the participants responses. Similarly, high expectations and community relationships remained a key component to building an academic environment that facilitated growth and success for this subgroup of girls.

However, the previous framework did not account for the subthemes identified, nor did it account for the participants' identification of pedagogical practices rather than specific instructional strategies. Figure four, depicted below, encompasses the subthemes identified through the interview process while honoring the centrality of critical race feminism and its components.

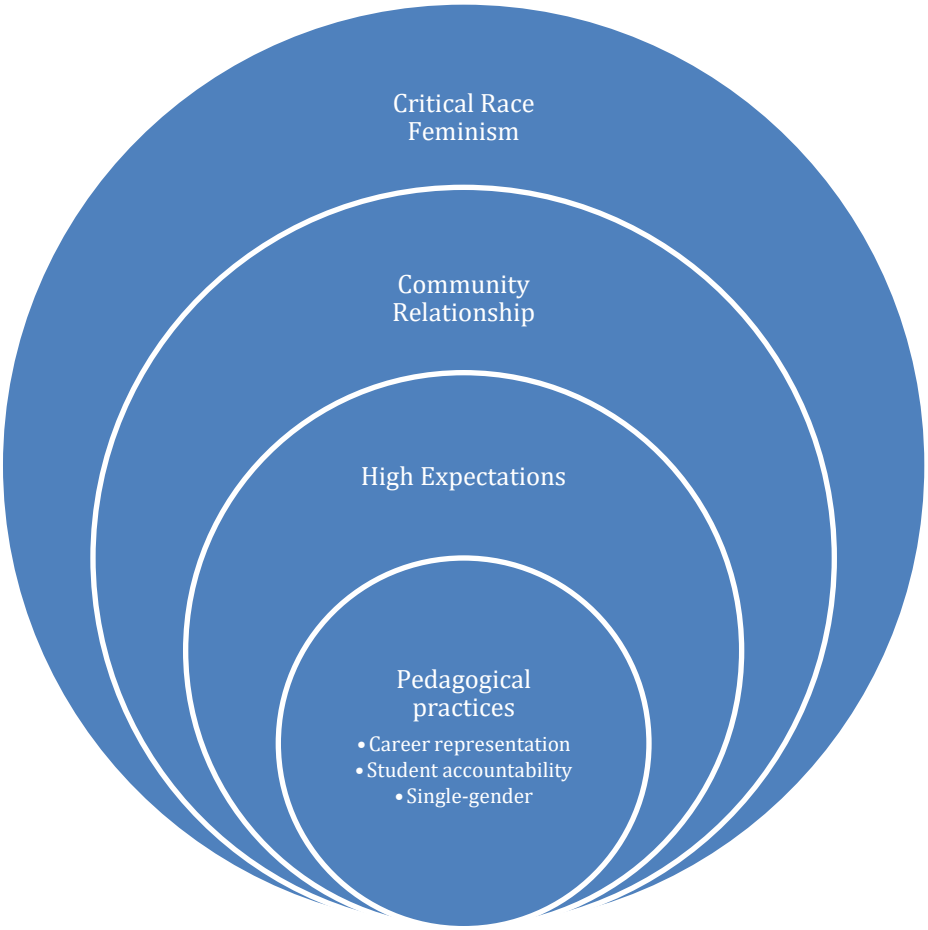


Figure 4. Revised frameworks: This figure illustrates the revised conceptual framework. After completing a data analysis and writing up my findings, I reworked my original framework to incorporate the subthemes identified through the interview process. This framework is also structured to highlight the frequency and importance participants placed on certain themes. It may benefit the reader to note, that this conceptual framework should not be viewed as a structural framework, and is not intended to capture the totality of best practices for African-American middle school girls. The framework focuses on the liberating component of education, highlighted by the participants that transcends skill-based instruction.

Recommendations

This study expanded the literature on how administrators and teachers create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school. Recommendations are provided in this section for district leaders, teachers, and scholars. Further studies could clarify or deepen the understanding of how students believe positively or negatively impacting culture affects academic outcomes. Additionally, the research would benefit from a long-term study of the girls from middle school through college and career to determine if the strategies and policies implemented to support academic success were effective. This study is limited in its scope and sample size. Given the small-scale study, it is essential to note that these findings will not represent all middle schools' needs serving African American female students. While schools' strategies may be similar, each child is unique, and the structures they respond best to should always be of the highest importance. Thomas et al. (2007) echoed the possibility that the whole child is complex, each with different identities. However, future research could examine a national populous or recruit more diverse participants. Quantitative studies on the impact of specific strategies used to create a culture of achievement for African American female students would also expand and enhance the body of literature.

District Leaders. District leaders could support schools by creating options and resources to support gender-based advisories. It is not ethical or legal under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 or U.S. Code Title 42, Chapter 21 - Civil Rights, to require students to have separate education settings. However, offering students and families this option may prove beneficial for a distracted or uncomfortable student around students of the opposite gender. This study found that several administrators found value

in creating gender-based affinity spaces because this allowed students to have potentially uncomfortable conversations with adults and peers of the same sex. Neild (2009) suggested that young people begin a physical and social maturation process, which is most significant as they move from elementary to middle school. The author attributed this to increased responsibility, as well as neurological changes due to puberty.

Same-sex gender-advisories built a bond between students and strengthened the connection between female students. For the students identifying as African American, the participants seemed to articulate that this helped their scholars bridge the gap between the intersectionality biases they likely have faced or will face.

School districts should research the common issues facing African American female students and develop an advisory curriculum to facilitate the conversations and activities that will help build the life skills needed for these students to navigate adulthood. Given the importance all participants placed on representation, districts should be mindful to include examples of African American girls or women who successfully navigated the challenges or topics of discussion when designing the curriculum mentioned above. Research suggests that numerous homeroom educators will, in general, build up their plans and instructional strategies dependent on their own social experience as an individual (Robert, 2003). Accordingly, because it does not mirror their social experience, African American students can struggle to figure out the instructor's guidance (Rychly & Graves, 2012; Schmeichel, 2012).

School districts may also benefit from ensuring that students who do opt to participate in a gender-based advisory have the option to do so with staff members of the same gender, where possible. This creates an additional layer of representation for the

students to hear from the staff member leading the conversation and how these topics may have impacted them. Creating guidelines for a gender-based advisory led by a female staff member also promotes a localized perspective to topics. For example, the biases faced by a female in one part of the country, state, county, or neighborhood may not be the same. A staff member of the same gender, teaching in the same region, may speak to these local differences. Because of their proximity, the staff member may also suggest localized resources that may not be available nationwide. According to an academic review conducted by Aronson & Laughter (2020), current research suggests "that the more informed K-12 teachers were, the more likely they were to advocate for gender/sexuality-equitable environments and pursue a social justice approach to combating oppressive structures." As teacher preparation programs consider intersectionality concepts, all stakeholders must be informed of the issues impacting L.G.B.T.Q.I.A.+ students.

Creating such an option would require significant logistical efforts on the part of any school district. Pertaining to having the student placed in a gender-based environment versus the student's preference, unfortunately, there is no way to separate the child's wishes from the parents request with accuracy. Moreover, deeper consideration must be given to the potential precedent set by allowing gender-based grouping, as this could lead to grouping based on race, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, and other groups who may face an intersectionality bias.

However, the participants who used this structure noted a positive impact on the student's ability to create positive socioemotional spaces. In the rare case where this gender-based instruction extended to content classes, the administrator noticed a greater

level of focus, comradery, and eventually academic growth compared to students in mixed-gender classes.

If a district opts to allow and perhaps facilitate gender-based advisories, districts should also implement professional development for all school-based leaders race, gender, and intersectionality. Based on the themes found in this study, it may also be beneficial for school leaders to receive training in instructional practices, high expectations, and community relationships about female students, particularly those who identify as a student of color. In her description of intersectionality, Dr. Crenshaw (1989) suggested:

> "… this focus on otherwise-privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon. (p.57)"

An extension of this study conducted by each school district may include determining what African American female students who have graduated from schools with a specific focus on supporting this subgroup believe to be essential factors in their academic success. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) detailed how a negative academic precedent can lead to adverse outcomes, stating "One major reason Black students do poorly in schools is… partly because White Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge Black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement, and partly because Black Americans subsequently began to define academic success as White people's prerogative (p. 177)."

Teachers. This study, all three classroom-based teachers highlighted the importance of encouraging self-efficacy in their students. For two of the three teachers, this came in the form of both tangible rewards and encouragement. Research suggests

that educators who are invested in their students' success and seek ways to spur their students' drive can positively correlate to their academic outcomes (Booker, 2007; Cokley et al., 2011; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Strayhorn, 2010). Wentzel (1997) discovered that a critical relationship existed between apparent educator mindful and school having a place, which prompted an expansion in scholarly commitment and exertion by the student. Wentzel (1997) stated, "teacher support was the only source of support contributing significantly to student interest or engagement in class."

The theme of representation remained prevalent in each of the thirteen interviews. Similar research such as Harrison et al. (2017) suggests that retell African American girls' story in middle school, race and gender must be considered. Grantham and Ford (1998) expressed that African American students may decide to underachieve in school since they accept separation and bigotry will keep them from acquiring their objectives. Ogbu and Simons (1998) postulated that this absence of trust comes from African American students' battle with accepting the instructive framework has legitimacy in their lives due to what they have gained from the individuals from their networks. By providing examples of African Americans success in various fields, all three educators believed that the students would be inspired to adopt or retain a positive attitude towards their current educational system.

This study was enhanced by the participation of two teachers, specifically focused on mathematics. These educators made an effort to create culturally relevant lessons by restructuring problems related to their current environment or the student's heritage. The educators implied that this made the content more engaging by presenting relevant information that could help the students in their daily lives or build cultural pride.

Research suggests science, technology, engineering, and mathematics have seen a decline in interest, and their impressions seem to be shaped by a students' past experiences, cultural values, and social interactions (Rodríguez Amaya et al., 2018).

Based on previous research, instructional specialists have consistently called attention to a critical disparity between the traditional instructional techniques in many U.S science classes and the social experience of minority students, especially African Americans (Banks, 2004; Henfield & Washington, 2012; Robert, 2003). A study conducted by Fisher (2016) connoted that family participation in the child's academic pursuits can be an essential component of success for every student.

These findings echoed recent research, suggesting a feeling of belongingness is necessary for a successful school setting (Gay, 2010; Hastie et al., 2006). Moreover, students must feel that they are people. Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel, and Rowley et al., 2008; Wallace, Ye, and Chhuon, (2012) theorized that students do not feel invited without the respect individuals from the more prominent school culture.

Academic Researchers. Ogbu and Simons (1998) proposed that the conditions African Americans experience in their networks affect their activities and practices in school, clarifying why some prevail while others do not. Ogbu's 2004 work also suggested that diminished academic outcomes can be attributed to collaborative practices that are not conducive to academic success. Therefore, the academic community can conduct studies regarding reported improved academic gains for specific subgroups as measured by formative and summative assessments compared to their peers of a differing group. Specifically, sites reporting academic improvements for African American females and males in single-gender academic settings. In addition to analyzing testing

outcomes, the research could benefit from studies reviewing academic strategies based on male and female brain science and after a period of classroom implementation, determining the efficacy of different presentation of instructional materials for male and female students. Rebecca, an assistant principal, stated that she could not name a specific practice used solely for her African American girls. Instead Rebecca implied that the maternal connection needed to support African American girls was typically present in female teachers and could be developed in male teachers. Rebecca stated, "for the male teachers, it was always more of making sure that they could feel that connection with them [African American girls] and assume that fatherly role, because women are just natural mother-like figures. You never really have to coach the female teachers to be motherly or to be caring." It is unclear if additional prompts regarding available instructional practices or additional time to answer would have helped the participants recall strategies focused on African American girls. Many participants seemed to refer to their own experiences with intersectionality, which they believed to be of value in their efforts to inform the girls of potential biases they may face and provide a personal model to navigate these challenges.

Conclusion

This qualitative study's results focusing on how administrators and teachers create a culture of achievement for African American female students in middle school are multifaceted and varied. This study is one of very few on the process of creating a positive environment, outside of solely mitigating student behaviors, socioemotional, or environmental challenges. Teachers' and administrators' voices illuminate the quantitative research on best practices for students, particularly African American

middle school girls, with many findings supporting those in the existing literature body (Midgley et al., 1989; Midgley et al., 1989; Ryan et al., 1994).

Most administrators described how they intentionally created instructional spaces to support open dialog related to race and gender. The administrators believed that a supportive and open cultural dialog mitigated behavior challenges and increased students' propensity for focus, thereby increasing academic achievement as measured by a student work product and standardized testing metrics—their philosophies for creating discussion spaces mirrored the tenants of critical race feminism. Critical race feminism, otherwise known as CRF, holds that racism is a fundamental part of U.S. society and that people of color have a 'distinctive voice' when it comes to describing their experiences of their oppression. Administrators intentionally designed conversation outlets facilitated by women of color to "raising their "awareness of oppression they face based simultaneously on their race/ethnicity and gender" (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016, p. 99).

Teachers described facilitating a culture of positive representation, high expectations, and building motivation for internal validation. It is important to note that while the teachers referenced advisory classes as one option to hold conversations about race, gender, and expectations, most interviewees also indicated that their students' support took place throughout the school day. The participants also indicated that their efforts to incorporate representations of people of color was the intention, not necessarily built into the provided curriculum, and was invaluable to students' perceived interest and motivation.

It is of interest that no administrator or teacher named a specific instructional

strategy that they used explicitly with African American female students. However, research sites biological differences regarding male and female learning styles (Smith, 1990; Kush & Watkins, 1996; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004). During the interviews, surprisingly, none of those strategies were explicitly mentioned. Although some participants were reflective of gender-based teaching styles, no explicit examples could be provided. Future research may benefit from a larger-scale study that explicitly defines what research states are the differences between the male and female brain and sees if any participants use strategies to address those differences. It may also be essential to inquire if the school district supports gender-based instructional strategies or is not sanctioned since it could be perceived as a discriminatory practice. In addition, qualitative expansions to this study might include tracking the responses of students taught within the study sites or by participating teachers. This would allow the researcher to determine if the strategies presumed to be effective by the school staff were echoed by the students. It may benefit the research by monitoring changes in the educator's and students' responses regarding the effective components of a culture of achievement over several years. It also may be important for the reader to note, that many of the participants may have used personalized terms such as 'mothering' when describing an attempt to ensure a sense of belongingness for students. Additional quantitative data points may benefit future studies such as an examination of students' grades, advanced coursework placement and outcomes, and access to local standardized testing data. Although comparing academic achievement with standardized testing can be of benefit, it is important to note that this is not, and should not be the only means to measure achievement. Standardized testing should also not be

used as the sole means to legitimize academic practices.

While all students need to have academic spaces in which they feel a sense of belonging, it is the researcher's opinion that the implementation of single-gender advisories should be introduced with caution. Particularly, for practitioners serving in racially and gender diverse settings. While many of the participants in this study masterfully structured their culture of achievement to allow for gender-based affinity spaces, it is important to note that the majority of these participants operated in racially homogenous environments. Schools with racially diverse environments may consider implementing similar programs outside of the academic day to ensure students are not inadvertently segregated. School systems may also benefit from offering guidance regarding the types of affinity groupings that may benefit from spaces to discuss issues of intersectionality. The societal striations for affinity groupings are boundless, and each potential group merits leadership by staff that has been trained to address current and potential issues, based on research. Prior to attempting programming focusing on intersectionality, it is important for the educators to consider their own experiences, and reexamine any deficit mindsets held or previous traumas that may influence their delivery or the selection of the content covered. As districts, principals, and teachers consider how to best support African American middle school girls, it may be helpful to consider how best to respect the lived experiences of the girls and value the voice of their community. The students may respond more favorably to the guidance given if they perceive their community had input into the school's culture.

One unexpected finding from this study was the biases some administrators noted staff members might hold and how that could impact students. Although the staff

members successfully mitigated this challenge, it is unclear if these biases would have been successfully addressed under different leadership. Carey, Yee, and DeMatthews (2018) reviewed Pre-K-12 policies and found two key recommendations that align with the outcomes of this study. These recommendations included developing a critical consciousness level that is well-developed and learning how framing privilege and penalties influenced teachers' own lived experiences. It is not sufficient to require teachers who identify themselves as teachers to understand themselves, but also how [their defined privileges] may be interpreted in the minds of marginalized students within a cross-cultural, cross-racial, and cross-class context. This raises the question if bias training should be required for all staff members working with students regardless of race, class, or gender. Also, it may be in the best interest of students that additional professional development is given to all administrators to facilitate a courageous conversation and what steps to take if a staff member's biases have harmed past or present students.

I described several possible research plans that would extend and enrich the findings of this study. This research could improve by conducting this research with a larger sample size, tracking student outcomes, and explicitly determining if teachers use any gender-based research strategies. The findings could enable curriculum designers, school districts, and teachers to make small changes to the programming offered to African American female students in middle school, resulting in increased student proficiency.

When I began this study, I assumed that a culture of achievement was created by (1) implementing gender-specific teaching strategies, similar to the strategies given

for African American males in elementary schools, and (2) high expectations and funding resources would be the primary driver of innovating programming to support African American female students in middle schools. I believed the findings would demonstrate that a large infusion of financial resources was needed to create a culture of achievement that could mitigate challenges and encourage academic growth. Some assumptions were correct, while others were not. Specifically, the importance of high expectations was evident. However, it seems that most of the changes participants found to be most effective were centered around creating safe spaces rather than building a separate system of structures. The study also found that while consistency exists for most sites regarding the types of supports schools choose to implement, the implementation at each site varied considerably.

This study brought administrator and teacher voices to light on an understudied achievement component for African American middle school girls and may contribute to creating and improving a culture of achievement for these students. As long as the achievement gap between African American and other racial groups exist, this topic should remain a necessary research focal point until all students have access to equal opportunity.

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Appendix A

Administrator Interview Question Protocol For IRB

Interview Site:

Interview Date:

Interviewee and Position:

I want to talk to your own educational experiences as well as your experiences as an educator of African American middle school girls. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions. I want to remind you that everything you say will be confidential, and no identifying information will be used in publications or presentations on this study. Do I have your permission to record and stop recording as necessary?

1. Tell me about your own school experiences as a child? What is school like for you now as an adult?
2. Tell me about your school's efforts to support African American female students?
3. What does success look like from your point of view for these girls in high school and beyond?
4. Tell me about what you're doing to support girls?
5. Tell me how you believe a culture should be built that encourages the use of best practices and strategies that support African American female students?
6. Tell me about what school is like for African American girls in your classroom(s)? What do you see working? What are the challenges?

7. Cultural relevance requires teaching in a cross-cultural or multicultural setting and enabling each student to relate course content to his or her ethnic context. Do you use culturally relevant literature in your school or classroom? If so, how?

8. What practices do you find to encourage self-efficacy in African American female students?

9. Can you tell me about the students you or your staff worked with who responded 'well' to instruction in your opinion? What do you think made the difference for her?

This concludes the questions I have prepared for our interview, but if you would like to share any further information that you feel will add value to this study and did not have the opportunity to share yet, please feel free to do so.

Appendix B

Teacher Interview Question Protocol For IRB

Interview Site:

Interview Date:

Interviewee and Position:

I want to talk to your own educational experiences, as well as your experiences as an educator of African American middle school girls. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions. I want to remind you that everything you say will be confidential, and no identifying information will be used in publications or presentations on this study. Do I have your permission to record and stop recording as necessary?

1. Tell me about your own school experiences as a child? What is school like for you now as an adult?
2. Tell me about your school's efforts to support African American female students?
3. What does success look like from your point of view for these girls in high school and beyond?
4. Tell me about what you're doing to support girls?
5. Tell me how you believe a culture should be built that encourages the use of best practices and strategies that support African American female students?
6. Tell me about what school is like for African American girls in your classroom(s)? What do you see working? What are the challenges?

7. Cultural relevance requires teaching in a cross-cultural or multicultural setting and enabling each student to relate course content to his or her ethnic context. Do you use culturally relevant literature in your school or classroom? If so, how?

8. What practices do you find to encourage self-efficacy in African American female students?

9. Can you tell me about a student you worked with who responded 'well' to instruction in your opinion? What do you think made the difference for her?

This concludes the questions I have prepared for our interview, but if you would like to share any further information that you feel will add value to this study and did not have the opportunity to share yet, please feel free to do so.

Appendix C

Table 3

Suggested timeline of the proposed study

Date Range	Task	Approximate Length of Time.
Spring 2019	Complete IRB approval process for the George Washington University IRB Complete IRB approval process for the primary school systems research office with a proposal to obtain IRB approval	Six months
Summer Fall 2020	Interview of administrators and staff	Focused interviews (30-45 minutes)
Winter 2020	Submission of updated chapters 1-5	Coding, updating of previous chapter, and

		addition of chapters 4-5
Spring 2021	Dissertation defense	

Appendix D

Reflective memo 1: I felt that the interviewee was very honest about their vision of what best practices are and had a wealth of experience to describe how they came to their personal conclusions. I was a bit nervous. As a researcher, it is a challenge to be responsive to the participant and not the difference between when a pause is simply the participant processing the question, versus when clarification is needed. I attribute this to the inability to see the participants' body language.

Reflective memo 2: I believe the participant was forthcoming with responses and was willing to share personal experiences and information. I am beginning to see the benefits of the reflective personal question to start the study. For future interviews I will be sure to define the focus on African American girls in multiple questions as needed.

Reflective memo 3: I was so impressed by the emotional and detailed responses this participant gave.

Reflective memo 4: I found this interview to be very insightful and the first departure from the previous responses highlighting the individuality of the child rather than gender-based programming.

Reflective memo 5: I felt like this interview was really honest and personal. Particularly about the challenges as well as the proposed solutions.

Reflective memo 6: This is the first interview that made clear statements about academic results for African American girls in separate academic classes. Really interesting. I hope they get some concrete data on the girls academic progress compared to their peers.

Reflective memo 7: Very reflective. Given that the participant is also seeking a degree requiring research, I wonder how that informed the presentation of answers.

Reflective memo 8: Interesting interview. Made me question the amount of oversight in the education system and how ‘restrictions and rules’ can limit creativity. I noticed I am getting better at phrasing and clarifying as I go along. I will refrain from asking too many clarifying questions too early in the process. Administrator recently transferred school.

Reflective memo 9: If I had to do this interview again, I would give any participant who is more than a year removed from the role more time to reflect and answer the questions. This is difficult to do via phone without video since the benefit of body-language based social cues are not present.

Reflective memo 10: This was a great interview to hear from an administrator who served multiple sites.

Reflective memo 11: I felt that the participant had solid convictions and was very committed to keeping her staff onboard.

Reflective memo 12: Participant seemed very invested in student’s happiness and not accepting stereotypes.

Reflective memo 13: You could tell this participant is really invested. Her heart is truly in this work.