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This dissertation, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the College of Graduate and Professional Studies of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

## **Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**



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Dr. Joey Cope, Dean of the  
College of Graduate and  
Professional Studies

Date: November 12, 2020

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Abilene Christian University  
School of Educational Leadership

A Qualitative Study on Elementary School Principals' Perspectives on How Leadership Practices  
Influence the Academic Achievement of African American Male Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Jamel Dennard Kimbro

December 2020

## **Dedication**

This study is dedicated to every young African American male across the world who is striving to achieve academic and social greatness despite the challenges they may be facing.

Please know that you have value and that you can achieve whatever your heart desires if you are willing to work hard and believe in yourself.

## Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for blessing me with the grace to complete this process. Next, I would like to thank my father and mother, Darrell and Sherry Kimbro. Thanks for being the best parents a son could ask for; your support and words of encouragement throughout this process have made this journey a lot easier. Next, I would like to thank my brother, sister, and their families, Darrell Jr. and Nicole, for their support and unconditional love.

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### **Abstract**

School leaders are responsible for implementing effective strategies that improve African American male students' academic and social performance. Hence, this study focused on the elementary African American male population and the influence school principals' leadership practices have on African American male students' academic achievement. This qualitative case study examined the perceived impact of 10 elementary school principals' leadership practices on African American male students in the Southeastern United States. This study identified several key leadership practices and strategies that school leaders implemented towards African American male students to improve their ability to meet academic and behavioral expectations.

*Keywords:* academic achievement, academic performance, African American male students, school principal, leadership practices

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The academic performance of African American students, in general, has been well documented and researched over the past 50 years to identify ways to improve all African American students' educational outcomes. The Coleman Report (1966) was one of the first studies to identify the "achievement gap" between African American students and White students. In 1983, the report "A Nation at Risk" gave further credence to the notion that there were significant deficiencies in the American educational system, which contributed to the poor academic performance of many African American students (Denning, 1983). "A Nation at Risk" indicated that standardized testing practices, teaching practices, and the nation's inability to adequately prepare all students for postsecondary opportunities were severely impaired (Denning, 1983). Moreover, the Coleman Report (1966) also indicated that African American students continued to perform at disproportionately lower levels than their White counterparts. The onset of these reports led researchers to identify several factors that contributed to African American students' adverse academic performance over time. Some of the factors identified by researchers included inequalities in learning opportunities, limited access to proper resources, and poor schooling experiences for many African American students in comparison to White students (Goings et al., 2018). Unfortunately, little has changed since Coleman's (1966) study and the "Nation at Risk" (Denning, 1983) report. African American students continue to perform at significantly lower academic rates than White students, and the achievement gap continues to grow between these two populations (Miller & Meyers, 2015).

Noguera (2003a) postulated that the educational outcomes of African American students often reflect broader patterns of inequality. Davis (2017) echoed a similar sentiment, asserting that African American students often have more adverse schooling experiences because systems

in America's culture do not aim to create equal learning opportunities for students of color. Research supports the notion that African American students regularly attend schools that have fewer resources, are led by ineffective leaders, and have higher numbers of less qualified teachers (Bottiani et al., 2016; Noguera, 2009). These factors create undesirable learning environments for many African American students, which continue to negatively impact African American students' educational outcomes, especially African American male students (Dancy, 2014).

Brown et al. (2013) asserted that public educational settings continue to reproduce inequalities for African American boys because their failure to institutionalize support for African American boys persists. Graves and Aston (2017) asserted that African American male students comprise eight percent of the nation's public school population but account for 19% of the students who are expelled from school without any educational services. Goings et al. (2018) indicated that the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates among Black boys are often influenced by negative perceptions held by school leaders and teachers before African American male students enter the school system. These negative perceptions result in harsher disciplinary actions and lower academic expectations of African American boys (Graves & Aston, 2017). However, research supports the idea that effective school leadership can alter the negative academic trajectory of African American male students—namely, when appropriate culturally responsive leadership practices are implemented by school leaders (Wright, 2018).

Therefore, this study centered on examining the role that school principals' perceived leadership behaviors play in the academic performance of African American male students. In the sections that follow, I briefly discuss background information related to African American male students' academic performance and school leadership. Next, I highlight the problem of

practice addressed by this study. I conclude this chapter with a discussion related to the purpose of this study.

## **Background**

Unfortunately, depictions as early as the 1900s (with films such as *Birth of a Nation*, which depicts African American men as being barbaric and disruptive) still impede on young African American boys' overall progress today. African American boys are often associated with stereotypes that include being violent and destructive (Staats, 2016). According to Wright (2018), the negative perceptions associated with African American boys in the American education system persist, and many African American boys are described as low achieving and experience frequent exclusionary practices. As a result of these negative perceptions, many African American boys receive more suspensions and expulsions than their counterparts for minor infractions (Graves et al., 2017). African American men make up six percent of the United States' population but account for 25% of the United States prison population (Bottiani et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2013; Dancy, 2014). While many reforms have been initiated over the years to address the disparities related to social and educational advancement among African American boys and their peers in other demographics, little progress has been made (Davis, 2017; Noguera, 2003a).

The disparities in academic achievement between African American boys and their White male counterparts are alarming. African American boys' academic performance lags far behind White male students in every core subject area (Brown, 2015). Despite many reforms aimed at increasing African American male students' academic achievement, boys in this demographic continue to perform at disproportionately lower educational levels than White male students (Quinn & Cooc, 2015). The persistence of this unfortunate trend demonstrates the lack of

attention given to this phenomenon at the state and federal levels (Davis, 2017; Kunjufu, 1985; Noguera, 2009).

The failure of educational leaders at the national, state, and local levels to provide adequate support to African American male students may have a more significant impact than many may realize (Brown, 2015). The continued academic and social failure of African American students will harm the entire fabric of the American culture. Policymakers, civic leaders, and educational leaders must take more deliberate steps to improve the educational outcomes of African American boys by creating equitable learning environments for African American boys. All of society will benefit from the increased academic performance of African American boys. School leaders who lead African American male students are often ill-equipped to understand the academic and social needs of these male students (Staats, 2016). Furthermore, the high suspension and expulsion rates among African American boys have resulted in the school-to-prison pipeline for many African American males; one in three African American male students are expected to go to prison at some point in their life (Dancy, 2014). There must be links between culture, race, and learning so that the academic and social needs of African American boys can be better understood by society and so that positive outcomes can be promoted for African American male students (Davis et al., 2019).

### **School Leadership and African American Male Students**

The enhanced academic performance among African American boys requires school leaders to enact appropriate cultural responses that address the educational and social needs of African American students (Christle et al., 2005; Miller & Martin, 2014). In schools where African American boys perform well, school leaders often develop programs that offer

mentorship to African American male students, providing them with male role models and closely monitoring their academic progress (Fuller et al., 2017).

Noguera (2009) asserted that African American boys need to have a sense of belonging in order to excel in their academics. African American boys generally come from families that value relationships; hence, similar interactions between educators and Black male students may improve their academic performance (White, 2009). However, these culturally responsive practices and strategies only work if school leaders are aware of them and are capable of implementing them (Miller & Martin, 2014). Statistics suggest that only two percent of all educators in America are African American (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This data indicates that most Black male students receive their education in schools where most of their teachers and educational leaders come from different racial and cultural backgrounds (Schott Foundation, 2015).

School and community leaders must develop the capacity to enact proper cultural responses, such as forming mentoring or peer groups to enhance African American boys' academic progress (Williams, 2018). African American boys must be led by principals who can enact essential cultural responses that are needed to support Black male students; Black male students also need effective school leaders in general (Fuller et al., 2017; Thompson & Davis, 2013). The research suggests that schools will not accomplish high student academic achievement in the absence of effective school leadership (Leithwood & Levin, 2010).

According to White (2009), African American boys' academic success depends on effective school leaders who can build educators' capacity to implement effective instructional strategies that will advance the academic performance of Black male students. Noguera (2009) postulated that a Black male is more likely to be classified as being a "problem child" or



mentally retarded because of many educators' preconceived biases (p. 18). Principals significantly influence teachers' perceptions of students, the learning capabilities of students, and the quality of instruction students receive while attending school (Bottiani et al., 2016). African American male students need principals who are influential instructional leaders and who can advocate for African American boys to ensure they are not overrepresented in special education programs or over-identified as disruptive students who are incapable of learning.

### **Statement of Problem**

Research suggests that America's public schools fail African American male boys in their quest to achieve the same academic success as their male counterparts in other demographics (Brown et al., 2013; Graves et al., 2017). Despite the implementation of reform programs aimed at helping African American boys excel, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), there is still an unmet academic and social need among male students in this demographic (Brown, 2015; Davis et al., 2019). The prolonged academic and social failure of African American boys has been labeled as a "national emergency" (Brown, 2015). Hence, the Department of Education has taken intentional steps to address this concern by shifting a greater focus on school leaders and the critical role they play in closing the achievement gap for subgroups like African American boys. With the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, school districts are focusing on the actions of school leaders that improve academic outcomes for low-performing subgroups, such as Black male students (Saultz et al., 2017).

School leaders have a responsibility to implement effective strategies that improve the academic and social performance of African American male students (Ladson-Billings, 2011). However, few school leaders have demonstrated an ability to implement culturally responsive

leadership practices that result in positive learning outcomes for African American boys (Goings et al., 2018; Johnson, 2015). This problem of practice among school leaders has contributed to a significant number of African American boys experiencing academic failure (Wright, 2018). Effective school leadership plays the most significant role in creating a school culture that promotes high academic performance for all students (Urlick, 2016).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary school principals' perceptions of their leadership practices on the academic achievement of elementary African American male students. This study centered on elementary African American male students because research suggests that they have a higher chance of avoiding academic and social failure when interventions are implemented during their primary grade school years (Noguera, 2009; Wright, 2018). Hence, more action is needed to identify methods for school leaders and educators who serve African American male students to provide support during the elementary years and to promote their future educational outcomes. I used a qualitative case study approach to perform this study. Yin (2003) indicated that a case study approach should be used when the study centers on asking "how" and "why" questions. Case study research should also be considered when the behavior of the research participants cannot be altered.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do elementary school principals perceive their leadership practices to influence the academic achievement of elementary African American male students?

RQ2: What strategies do elementary school principals implement to foster the academic performance of African American male students?

## Definition of Key Terms

**Achievement gap.** Refers to any significant and persistent disparity in academic performance or educational attainment between different groups of students, such as White students and minorities (Noguera, 2008).

**African American male / Black male.** Any boy or man who is born in America or who have received legal citizenship in America whose total or partial ancestry originates from sub-Saharan Africa. African American men and boys may also be referred to as Black boys and men in this study. Hence, the two names may be used interchangeably throughout the study (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

**Critical race theory (CRT).** This is a framework that suggests that infrastructures embedded in American culture have impeded on the academic progress of minority students by creating inequitable learning experiences that are often influenced by these students' skin color. Critical race theory in education was developed by Ladson-Billings and Tate in 1995 (Ladson-Billings, 2011).

**Elementary school principal.** Any person who leads a Pre-K through sixth-grade school. This person is the head school leader and works directly at the school level. This title does not include assistant principals, school counselors, or central office staff. Throughout this study, principals may be referred to as school leaders. Hence, the two names may be used interchangeably (PGCPS, 2020).

**White.** This term refers to any person born in the United States who is not Black, Asian, or Hispanic according to the United States Census Bureau. This term is used interchangeably with "majority" (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

## Summary

Existing research overwhelmingly suggests that institutional structures in American society have placed African American male students at a disadvantage concerning their ability to achieve academic and social success. Chapter 1 of this study highlights some of the negative infrastructures that have adversely impacted African American male students' educational outcomes over the past few decades. Chapter 1 of this study also centers on exploring the significant role race has played in the negative schooling experiences of many African American boys. Nonetheless, the research does offer hope by highlighting that a school leader's ability to implement culturally relevant practices may greatly benefit African American male students' future educational outcomes. The research also indicates that African American boys' ability to achieve at high levels is highly contingent upon their educational experiences. Thus, more research is warranted to explore how school leaders can lead their staff and communities to ensure African American male students have positive educational experiences.

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

In Chapter 2 of this study, I expand on the past and current educational outcomes of African American boys by exploring variables associated with school leadership practices and past and present national school reform initiatives impact on African American boys. This review of literature sought to explore in greater detail the social infrastructures that exist in American culture and in the American educational system, both of which impact African American male students' academic achievement.

### **Critical Race Theory-Conceptual Framework**

This study was guided by the conceptual framework of critical race theory (CRT). In education, CRT asserts that race continues to be a significant factor in influencing the schooling experiences of African American students in comparison to their peers who come from other racial backgrounds (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical race theorists contend that racism exists in every facet of American culture and has become a standardized societal structure that manifests itself as a hegemonic racial entity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Ladson-Billings (2005) postulated that "racism is not a series of isolated acts but is endemic in American life, deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and psychologically." These concepts provide a gateway to expand research related to the CRT framework to the lived experiences of school leaders and to the potential impact of race on those leaders' approaches to leadership and interactions with students.

### **Socio-Economic Factors and African American Male Students**

The primary goal of education in American schools is to provide students with equitable learning opportunities that allow them to obtain the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that are needed for them to participate fully and thrive in a diverse democratic society (Noguera, 2003a).

Nevertheless, many students of color who receive their education in American schools are often taught in school settings that are ill-equipped to meet their academic and social needs (Dancy, 2014; Ellis et al., 2018; Noguera, 2003a). As a result, many students of color exit school lacking some skills and knowledge that are needed to succeed in American society (Dancy, 2014). The notion of race influencing a student's educational experiences is not a new phenomenon; indeed, the topic of race and its impact on students' educational outcomes have been well documented over the past 50 years (Davis, 2017), such as the Coleman Report in 1966, as indicated in the introduction of this study. Moreover, when gender is considered, the academic performance rates are even more disparate, as African American boys are consistently ranked at the bottom in all core subject areas (Dancy, 2014; Fergus et al., 2014; Noguera, 2009).

Many researchers argue that African American boys' current and past academic performance is connected to deficit thinking that generalizes African American boys as individuals who come from impoverished single-family households and are viewed as inherently inferior to other individuals who do not face the same circumstances (Davis, 2017; Harper & Davis, 2012). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), 65% of all African American children live in single-parent households. Current and past statistics by the U.S. Census Bureau and other researchers depict African American children's lives outside of school as harsh and negative, pointing to those conditions as a contributing factor to their low academic performance. Thus, many researchers contend that African American students' current plight has little to do with their schooling experiences, and this narrative has been dominant for many years. For example, Coleman's (1966) report asserted that African students' poor academic performance had little to do with factors experienced at the school level and instead was a result of socioeconomic factors that had little to do with African American students' school experiences.

Over 40 years after Coleman's (1966) study, Fan (2012) postulated that African American students' adverse academic performance was mainly caused by factors relating social and family background challenges and that more emphasis should be placed on improving African American students' lives outside of school to improve their academic performance. Like Fan's claim, Lam (2014) asserted that African American boys' poor academic performance was a result of socioeconomic factors that were mainly experienced outside of school. While socioeconomic factors do greatly influence African American children's' academic outcomes, especially African American male students, they alone are not solely responsible for African American male students' adverse academic performance (Little, 2017; Noguera, 2009; White, 2009).

The idea of socioeconomic factors being the sole factor for African American boys' adverse academic and social performance has harmful implications (Little, 2017). The idea often results in the belief that African American boys' family background and family economic standing is the primary reason for their current state; however, other factors have a far more significant impact on African American boys' ability to achieve academically (Wright, 2018). Little (2017) postulated that much of the literature that focuses on African American boys' academic achievement had centered a significant amount of attention on socioeconomic factors and the role they have played in the dismal performance of African American boys; however, she highlighted that schooling experiences and deficit thinking associated with African American boys have had a much more crucial impact on African American males' academic performance over time.

According to Davis (2017), deficit thinking associated with Black boys (which he describes as harmful, stereotypical, and prejudicial beliefs about African American boys that

result in discriminatory practices and actions) has created inequitable learning opportunities for many African American boys. Deficit thinking exacerbates many school leaders and teachers' negative perceptions of African American boys and influences both school leaders and teachers to enact reforms that lead to poor educational experiences for African American boys (Davis, 2017). Essien (2017) asserted that African American male students must be led and taught by school leaders and teachers who demonstrate a strong belief in their ability to achieve despite their current or past circumstances and who understand the social infrastructures that must be dismantled to ensure African American boys' academic success. Therefore, this study seeks to examine how elementary school principals believe their perceived leadership practices impact the academic achievement of African American boys. Miller and Martin (2014) asserted that principals' leadership behaviors often have an indirect effect on students' academic outcomes because they do not interact with the students they lead in the same manner as teachers who often have direct contact with the students they teach daily.

Henceforth, this study does not identify a plethora of leadership strategies that school principals enact with African American boys directly on a daily basis. Instead, this study explores how school principals demonstrate leadership behaviors that influence both the communities and the practitioners they lead to enact instructional practices and programs and to create school cultures that help to dismantle infrastructures that impede on the educational and social advancement of African American boys in elementary grades. In the sections that follow, I delve into the literature on African American boys' past and current academic performance as well as factors that have affected their performance, including teacher practices, school leadership practices, socioeconomic factors, and educational reform initiatives. I begin this



review of the literature by exploring African American male students' past and current academic performance.

### **African American Males Students' Academic Achievement**

A significant amount of attention has been placed on African American male students' underachievement (Ellis et al., 2018; Fantuzzo et al., 2012). Research suggests that for many decades there has been a persistent gap between the academic achievement of African American boys and that of students belonging to other racial groups (Ellis et al., 2018; Noguera, 2003b, 2009). Many policymakers, school leaders, and community activists consider the current state of Black boys' academic performance as a national emergency that will lead to disastrous consequences if not addressed and improved (Essien, 2019; Noguera, 2012). Hence, policymakers and school leaders believe drastic measures must be taken to avoid the catastrophic impact that may occur within American society if effective actions are not implemented to improve the current overall academic and social state of African American boys in America (Harper & Davis, 2012).

According to the Schott Foundation (2015), 59% of African American male students graduate from high school on time in comparison to 80% of White male students. According to Noguera (2009), the immense scale of the achievement gap between African American boys and their male peers with other racial backgrounds has led researchers and policymakers concerned with this phenomenon to suggest several social and environmental factors that have led to the adverse academic standing of African American boys in the United States educational system. For example, in a study performed by Corprew and Cunningham (2012), the researchers found that the lack of school support from those who worked with African American male students led to their disengagement and failure in school. According to a study conducted by Dancy (2014),

two of the most critical factors that led to the disproportionality between the academic achievement rates of African American boys and their male peers in other demographics was the high rate at which African American male students are tracked into special education and the inequitable learning opportunities experienced by many African American male students. Ellis et al. (2018) postulated that many administrators and teachers often identify African American male students as being disengaged as it relates to instruction and academics; as a result of these assumptions, less emphasis is placed on ensuring these students perform at high levels.

Research suggests that school leaders and teachers' practices associated with low expectations for African American boys help create negative schooling experiences for these boys (Staats, 2016). Davis (2017) asserted that African American male students often attend schools that fail to support their intellectual, social, gender, and cognitive development; for these reasons, many African American boys attending school in America are at a higher risk of experiencing negative consequences as they matriculate through primary and secondary school. In contrast, Hallinger (2015) conducted a study that examined positive aspects that led to high academic achievement among African American boys in New York City. The study indicated that setting high expectations for African American boys and providing African American boys with access to Advanced Placement courses helped African American boys achieve at higher rates than previously.

The critical insight brought forth by these studies has shed light on the adverse impact of negative schooling experiences on African American male students' educational matriculation in America. The findings offered by these scholars also provide further credence to support the notion that many African American boys are forced to endure educational environments created by school leaders and teachers that perpetuate the stereotype that suggest they are intellectually

inadequate and that associate their behavior with actions that will become problematic in the classroom (Brown et al., 2013). According to Little and Tolbert (2018), African American male students from elementary school to college have to contend with deficit narratives and historical racist and sexist stereotypes that depict them as students who are disruptive, undisciplined, unintelligent, and challenging to teach all in a place that should be a safe haven for them to learn and develop their full potential to thrive and attain the skills needed to become successful in society. Studies have indicated that damaging perceptions often negatively impact African American boys' self-efficacy, self-esteem, and overall ability to achieve academically and that such perceptions contribute to higher dropout rates, expulsions, and suspensions among African American male students (Brown et al., 2013; Little, 2017).

Wright (2018) asserted that teachers and school leaders' negative perceptions of African American boys often lead many young African American boys to develop Fourth-Grade Failure Syndrome (FGFS). FGFS is a phenomenon proposed by Kunjufu (1985), and it suggests that African American boys begin to disconnect from a school academically between the second and fifth grade as a result of negative interactions between African American boys and their teachers as well as a lack of cultural awareness demonstrated by school staff toward African American boys (Maddox, 2013). FGFS is argued to be the root cause of many educational disparities between African American male students and their male peers in other demographics (Maddox, 2013). Research performed by Wright (2018) and Kunjufu (1985) indicates the need for more research on practices that propel African American boys forward during their early years, as many African American male students begin to experience academic failure after the second grade. There is a gap in the literature that focuses on the schooling experiences of African

American boys during their primary grade years and how to best lead and teach African American boys during their primary years of school (Davis, 2017).

The sparsity of the literature on the experiences and outcomes of African American boys during their early grades reveals that an essential component is missing regarding possible actions that can be implemented to help African American boys achieve success during their primary grade years, which may translate into academic and social success during their secondary and postsecondary years (Little, 2017). While this study does not focus directly on FGFS, it does examine the role school principals play in developing school climates that foster and promote high academic achievement for African American boys during their elementary years. Such climates could prevent these boys from experiencing FGFS, which is critical to closing the achievement gap between African American boys and their male peers from non-White Latino populations. Indeed, the research indicates that more steps must be taken by school leaders and teachers to prevent African American male students from disengaging from school during their elementary years. Effective school leadership practices by school principals aimed at supporting African American boys and those who support them may serve as a critical component in ensuring the academic success of African Americans in their elementary years and during their secondary and postsecondary school years.

### **School Leadership and African American Male Students**

Research suggests that principals who are aware of the social and cultural constraints that impede on African American male students' academic progress are more likely to set high academic expectations for Black boys and build trusting relationships with them, which helps to change their view of school and promotes their academic well-being (Acton, 2018; White, 2009). Enhanced academic performance among Black male students requires school leaders to possess

the ability to enact appropriate cultural responses that address the educational and social needs of Black boys. In schools where Black male students perform well, school leaders often develop programs that provide mentorship to African American male students by providing them with male role models in addition to closely monitoring their academic progress (Greer et al., 2018). Noguera (2009) asserted that African American boys need to have a sense of belonging to excel in their academics (p. 30). African American boys generally come from families that value relationships; hence, similar interactions between educators and African American male students may improve their academic performance (White, 2009). However, these culturally responsive practices and strategies only work if school leaders are aware of them and implement them.

Research suggests that only two percent of all educators in America are African American (Schott Foundation, 2015). This data indicates that many African American boys receive their education in schools where many of their teachers and educational leaders come from different racial and cultural backgrounds (Noguera, 2003a). School systems must develop the capability to prepare all school principals and leaders to implement proper cultural responses, such as forming mentoring or peer groups to enhance African American boys' academic progress (White, 2009). This study is not aimed at providing school systems with a list of leadership behaviors that should be implemented by school principals who lead African American boys in elementary school. However this research study does aim to ignite conversations between those school principals and their district leaders, who can influence school principals to reflect on their practice and how it is hindering or helping the advancement of African American boys' academic performance.

Leithwood and Levin (2010) asserted that no school accomplishes high student academic achievement in the absence of effective school leadership. According to White (2009), African

American boys' academic success depends highly on effective school leaders—namely, those who can build educators' capacity to implement effective instructional strategies that help advance the academic performance of African American boys. Bush-Daniels (2008) postulated that African American boys are more likely to be classified as being a problem child or mentally retarded because of many educators' preconceived biases. Principals significantly influence teachers' perceptions of students, the learning capabilities of students, and the quality of instruction students receive while attending school (Bottiani et al., 2016). African American male students need principals who are strong instructional leaders and who can advocate for them to ensure that are not overrepresented in special education programs or over-identified as disruptive students who cannot be taught (Essien, 2017; Fuller et al., 2017; Noguera, 2009). While there are many areas that school leaders and civic leaders can focus on to enhance African American male students' future academic performance, a focus on effective school leadership practices aimed at supporting African American boys may have a significant impact on improving African American boys' academic performance. School principals have the second most significant impact on student learning outcomes; only teachers have a more significant effect (Leithwood & Levin, 2010). School principals' ability to implement effective school leadership practices that are sensitive to the social and academic needs of African American boys may be the catalyst needed to propel African American boys into academic success and to dismantle some of the social infrastructures that have impeded on young African American boys' success. Hence, more research that examines the link between African American boys' educational outcomes and school leadership is essential to African American boys' future educational progress.

## **Practitioners' Impact on African American Male Students**

In this section, the literature related to the impact of teachers' perceptions of African American male students is reviewed and discussed. According to Washington (2010), society's negative view of African American boys has severely impacted their ability to engage in equitable learning opportunities. For instance, Kenyatta (2012) examined the effect of teachers' perceptions on African American male students' academic performance. The study specifically explored how teachers' perceptions influenced their instructional practices and decision-making in the classroom. The study revealed that teachers' perceptions of African American boys significantly affected their motivation and belief that school was a place where they belong. The study also found that African American boys in classrooms where teachers had positive perceptions of them, and high academic expectations developed stronger critical thinking skills and performed at higher academic levels.

Urlick and Bowers (2014) conducted a study that explored the impact of principals' perceptions of school climate on student academic achievement in high schools. The researchers used longitudinal data from a 2002 study that examined the effect of school leadership and student perceptions of the school environment. Urlick and Bowers (2014) found that school principals' leadership practices affected the level at which students performed and achieved. While this study was not isolated to African American boys, it did provide insight that school principals' leadership practices impact the rate at which students achieve. Therefore, it can be asserted that school principals' perceived leadership practices can and do impact subgroups, such as African American boys, who have a long history of academic failure in the American school system; hence, more research is needed to gain more perspective on the link between these two variables.

In a study performed by Washington (2010), the researcher investigated the instrumental role that professional school counselors play in advancing the academic, social, and psychological well-being of African American boys and the way counselors perceived they provided support to African American boys. Washington (2010) examined past literature related to the topic and arrived at the following conclusions: First, those leading and working with African American boys, such as professional school counselors, must demonstrate a strong belief in African American boys' ability to perform at a high academic level. Washington (2010) postulated that school counselors must become champions and exhibit advocacy for African American boys and these behaviors must be rooted in a sound rationale that demonstrates the relationship between advocacy and enhanced academic performance among African American male students. Next, the study indicated administrative support played an essential role in a school counselor's ability to effectively lead and support African American boys. Washington (2010) highlighted that support demonstrated by the school principals toward school counselors can send a strong message that a school is invested in ensuring African American male students achieve the desired educational outcomes. Last, the study asserted that "school principals are the ones that make executive decisions about a school (e.g., how resources are allocated, classroom space, and finances) their support can translate into valuable assets that could assist school counselors and those working with African-American boys by empowering their collaboration efforts."

The literature indicates that several studies have been performed to explore the impact of practitioners' perceived practices on the academic and social well-being of African American boys (Harper & Davis, 2012). However, minimal literature related to African American boys centers on the critical role school principals play in helping to close the achievement gap



between African American boys and their male peers in other demographics, especially during their younger years. Thus, more research is needed on African American boys and school leadership to help school leaders, teachers, and all those who support African American boys to improve their educational outcomes. While Washington's (2010) research did not center on school principals and the role their leadership practices play in advancing African American male students' learning outcomes, the study did indicate the vital role of effective school leadership practices in creating robust school and community partnerships. Such partnerships may help mitigate the academic disparities that exist between African American male students and their White male counterparts.

### **Creating a Sense of Belonging for Black Male Students**

Recent data suggests that African American boys are currently in a dismal state: They lead the nation in homicides, criminal convictions, and high-school dropout rates (Fergus et al., 2014). Many argue that Black boys' perilous state is a result of societal systems and structures that have created marginalized realities for African American boys (Dancy, 2014). For example, the early 1900s film *Birth of a Nation* depicted Black men as being barbaric and disruptive, and such depictions still impede on young Black boys' progress today. African American boys are still associated with stereotypes that include being violent and destructive (Staats, 2016). As a result, African American men make up 6% of the U.S. population but account for 25% of the U.S. prison system population (Dancy, 2014). While many reforms have been initiated over the years to address the disparities related to social and educational advancement among Black boys and their peers in other demographics, little headway has been made (Noguera, 2012). However, research supports the claim that high-quality educational experiences that help Black boys

develop a sense of belonging can reduce the disparities among Black boys students and their counterparts in other demographics (Quinn & Cooc, 2015).

According to Johnson (2015), African American boys desire to have a sense of belonging and to achieve at higher academic levels when they are taught by teachers and school leaders who create school environments that make African American male students feel like school is a place where they belong. To support this claim, Johnson (2015) performed an ethnographic study that explored educators' ability to enact constructs associated with critical place pedagogy. Critical place pedagogy centers on the idea of school staff creating caring communities that foster students' academic progress by enacting intentional social and cultural behaviors that encourage students to see school as a positive place (Johnson, 2015). Johnson (2015) found that when school staff is committed to creating a positive school environment for African American boys—providing Black male youth with a school mentor, posting positive images of Black boys, and creating a sense of community for boys in the demographic—it drastically reduces the negative behaviors associated with African American boys.

Furthermore, creating a sense of belonging for African American boys changed African American boys' negative perception of school and promoted their academic attainment (Dancy, 2014; Johnson, 2015). Similar to Johnson, Dancy (2014) asserted that Black boys' perception of school in America will remain negative unless intentional steps are taken by school leaders and policymakers to dismantle the negative institutional structures that paint Black boys as being unteachable and rude, hence leading many African American boys to believe school is not a place where they belong. Research supports the argument that educational leaders and community leaders must consider how they can support their staff and community in creating schools that promote a sense of belonging for African American male youth; such belonging

would likely improve their ability to achieve academic success in the future. African American male students' educational success depends heavily on the feeling that they belong in the schools they attend (Dancy, 2014). School leaders' leadership practices play a critical role in creating school environments that make African American boys feel that a school is a place where they belong and can excel in their academic endeavors.

### **Mentor and Leadership Development for African American Male Youth**

In addition to African American boys students needing a sense of belonging to succeed in their academic endeavors, they also need more opportunities to develop their ability to lead and make better life choices; research supports the idea that African American boys benefit from these experiences. Fuller et al. (2017) asserted that the leadership development of African American boys during their primary and secondary school years played a significant role in African American male students taking on leadership roles during their postsecondary years, which increased their ability to succeed in life. Fuller et al. (2017) conducted a study that explored how high schools developed African American male students who were athletes to take on leadership roles. To gain a deeper understanding of how to best develop African American boys' leadership capacity during their grade school years, the researchers implored a phenomenological approach whereby participants participated in semistructured interviews to describe and discuss their experiences with leadership development before their postsecondary experiences. The research of Fuller et al. (2017) indicated that African American boys' involvement in extracurricular activities, such as student government and faith-based organizations, played a critical role in their leadership development. The study also found African American boys who participated in groups that developed their leadership skills had

more success demonstrating leadership capabilities during their high school and postsecondary years (Fuller et al., 2017).

Brown et al. (2013) extended the argument for African American boys needing more opportunities for mentorship and leadership development; they postulated that many African American boys lack support from their communities and schools, which should teach them that educational attainment can significantly alter their path in life no matter what community they come from. Dancy's (2014) research centered on steps that could be implemented to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline that many male students of color have experienced over the past 25 years. Dancy's (2014) research asserted that many African American boys found themselves in prison because they lacked guidance or felt no one thought enough of them to develop their capacity to become a better person; as a result, they to negative outlets and other adverse situations. Rhoden (2017) contended that educators, school leaders, and community members all play a critical role in advancing the academic performance and social well-being of African American boys. This assertion is significant because it shows that African American boys' ability to improve in their academic and social progress is not solely their responsibility; instead, such improvement takes the collective work of their schools, communities, and families, working together to implement actions that will propel them to success.

Past and current research supports the notion that school leaders and policymakers must take specific actions to improve the academic state of African American boys. Some steps school leaders must enact include fostering inclusive school environments that make African American boys feel like school is a place where they belong (Christle et al., 2005; Dancy, 2014). Moreover, individuals who support and teach African American boys must create platforms that allow them

to mentor and develop their academic and social skills; the literature suggests that African American boys will not achieve success without these measures in place (Christle et al., 2005).

### **School Reform Initiatives and African American Male Students**

Many educational reforms have aimed to increase academic performance among African American male students; however, little progress has been demonstrated among boys in this demographic to indicate they are on track to improve their current adverse academic standing (Brown et al., 2013). Gardner et al. (2014) postulated the disparities between African American male students and their male counterparts of other ethnicities have been an issue in America's educational system for decades. Research suggests that programs and policies aimed at reducing the gap between minority boys and their male peers with other racial backgrounds have done little to improve African American boys' current educational outcomes (Brown, 2015). Many initiatives implemented to help Black boys improve in their academic performance have created more challenges for boys in these demographics in their quest to advance in their academic attainment (Brown, 2015).

To extend this thought, Daniel and Walker (2014) examined the disenfranchisement of African American students as a result of implicit biases and policy structures in American society. The authors claimed that while African American students' academic achievements have improved since the 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which integrated schools, opportunity gaps still exist that contribute to the educational underdevelopment of African American students. To gain more insight into this topic, the authors focused their attention on identifying trends that have promoted inequalities for African American students concerning their educational attainment by performing an analytic review of past research related to the topic. The study indicated issues with culturally biased curriculum and testing continue to

perpetuate the adverse academic performance among African American students in the postsegregation era. According to the researchers, many African American students' educational experiences are heavily influenced by their socioeconomic status, which dictates their level of access to quality education. While this study did not focus solely on African American male students, the findings encompass African American boys in the discussion chapter.

Brown et al. (2013) conducted an empirical research study that examined the plight of African American boys' educational progress over the past six decades. To gain more insight on this topic, the author analyzed studies concerning Black boys' educational outcomes and the effects these reforms have had on Black male students' current academic standing. The research concluded that reforms such as Title I and No Child Left Behind adversely impacted African American males' academic progress because they penalized Black male youth by removing funding and resources when Black boys performed well. The research also showed that current reforms continue to preserve segregation and dismantle the hopes of the 1954 ruling by creating inequitable learning scenarios for African American boys. The most efficient way to improve African American boys' educational outcomes is to improve and racially diversify the workforce that leads and teaches African American boys (Brown et al., 2013). The implications of the study suggest that policymakers and educational leaders must identify more ways to provide resources, attract more qualified teachers, and advance the academic achievement of African American boys.

In recent years, school leaders and policymakers have taken more drastic steps to promote the academic and social well-being of students who have demonstrated a need for more intense support as a result of their academic failure over an extended period (Williams, 2018). Current educational reform has also enhanced school leaders and principals' capacity to develop

their staff members' ability to implement culturally responsive practices that promote the academic achievement of marginalized student groups, such as African American male students. According to Miller and Martin (2014), school leaders possess the capacity to significantly alter the current adverse academic standing of African American male students. Policymakers agree with Miller and Martin's (2014) argument, as new policy associated with the Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA), which was signed into law in 2015 by President Obama, places more onus on school principals to implement practices that improve their staff's capability of creating more equitable learning opportunities to promote all marginalized groups, such as African American boys. With that stated, recent research has explored how policy associated with ESSA is influencing school principals' leadership practices to ensure the academic success of all student populations, including African American male students.

### **Critical Race Theory and African American Male Students**

One of the central themes of CRT is that racism exists in education; many scholars over the past 40 years have contended that this notion is present throughout America's educational system. CRT supports the notion that laws and policies in the American educational system contribute to social infrastructures that normalize racism in American society (DeMatthews, 2018). The negative racial constructs associated with African American boys have led to inequalities in their educational experiences, as boys in this demographic often attend schools in communities with fewer resources and are more likely to be suspended, expelled, or placed in special education classes than their White and Asian male counterparts (Noguera, 2008).

CRT provides an avenue for oppressed groups such as African American boys to share their experiences and realities related to their schooling experiences; such sharing is a first step toward improving their educational outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Within the past two

decades, CRT has become a permanent fixture to help researchers understand the educational experiences of underrepresented populations across the educational arena (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). CRT's ability to provide a voice for minority groups such as African American male students is critical to improving the overall American educational system; indeed a complete analysis of the educational system must be completed to fully understand the dynamics that continue to perpetuate negative schooling experiences for minority groups (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

CRT suggests that educators' attitudes often mimic more significant ideologies, which include color blindness, meritocracy, and liberal attitudes that see race as an individualized issue (Matias, 2014). This misunderstanding leads teachers and school leaders to implement practices (whether intentional or unintentional) that lead to inequitable practices that create undesirable learning environments for students who are a part of these underserved student populations (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). CRT indicates that wealth, power, race, and privilege serve as precursors to a person's social experiences (Noguera, 2008). The CRT theoretical framework includes many truths that are experienced by many African American boys in their quest to obtain an equitable and quality education. Many African American boys have limited access to quality learning experiences that place them on par with their White counterparts because of social infrastructures that are a part of America's cultural fabric (DeMatthews, 2018). These infrastructures impede the academic progress of African American male students by creating inequitable learning experiences that are often influenced by these students' skin color. Hence, the CRT framework is referenced throughout this study to articulate the lived experiences of both school leaders and the African American male students they lead in aims of better understanding the critical role race plays in the educational advancement of African American male students.



## Summary

Existing research overwhelmingly suggests that institutional structures in American society have placed African American male students at a disadvantage concerning their ability to achieve academic and social success. The research also supports the notion that past educational reforms aimed at improving African American male students' academic performance have failed boys in this demographic, as demonstrated by their current adverse academic performance and by the social challenges faced by many. With that stated, the research does offer hope by highlighting the ability of school leaders, teachers and staff to engage in productive action, such as creating a sense of belonging for African American boys and implementing culturally responsive pedagogy, both of which show promise in reducing the achievement gap. What the research does not offer in great detail is the impact of school principals' leadership behaviors on African American boys' academic performance during their elementary years, which the research indicates are critical years. For example, during those years, young African American boys develop the critical skills needed to excel in school as well as the disposition that school is a place when they belong, which can translate into motivation and academic success.

Therefore, more research is needed to better understand how school leaders' leadership practices help or harm African American boys' ability to achieve academically during their early years of schooling. Indeed, research suggests that addressing African American boys educational disparities in their younger years may help them achieve success during the secondary and postsecondary years. In the next chapter, I discuss the qualitative method used in this study to gain perspective on the link between elementary school leaders' perceived leadership practices and African American male students' academic outcomes.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This qualitative research study examined elementary school principals' perspectives on how leadership practices influence the academic achievement of elementary African American boys. The fundamental goal of this study was to perform an in-depth analysis of elementary school principals' leadership behaviors—specifically, how they perceived their leadership behaviors to influence the academic performance of the African American male population in the schools they led. A case study approach enabled me to accomplish the goal of this study as the primary objective of case study research is to understand a case or phenomenon from the research participants' perspective (Merriam, 2009; Simons, 2009; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). Hence, a case study approach was used in this study because it allowed me to gain more insight on the identified case by focusing on how the phenomenon was perceived by the participants, who lived in the event and reflected upon it (Merriam, 2009).

This chapter includes the following sections: A review of the purpose of this study, a re-examination of the significance and implications of this study. A rationale that provides insight as to why a case study qualitative approach was best suited to this research study. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion that provides insight into the methods used to collect and analyze data for this study and a discussion that indicates the steps taken to promote credibility and trustworthiness throughout this research process.

#### **Purpose of This Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore how the perceptions of elementary school principals' leadership practices affect African American male students' academic performance in elementary school. Tenets of CRT suggest that school leaders' actions toward students and perceptions of students are significantly influenced by school leaders' own culturally and

linguistically diverse experiences (Aleman, 2007). CRT also serves as a critical tool to challenge institutions in the American educational system, which promotes educational and social processes that further oppress marginalized groups such as African American boys (Aleman, 2007). Maxwell (2005) postulated that “use of theory in qualitative research helps the researcher draw attention to particular events or phenomena and helps illuminate relationships that may otherwise go unnoticed” (p. 227). Hence, tenets of CRT were used to develop questions that allowed the study participants to share their perceptions and stories of how they believed their demonstrated leadership behaviors have impacted their elementary African American male students.

### **Significance of This Study**

Principals have a platform that allows them to lead the cause in addressing and interrupting racial and social injustices that often impact Black boys’ educational outcomes by improving their overall educational experience (Dancy, 2014). Current and past research supports the notion that principals may play a significant role in the academic and social advancement of African American male students (DeMatthews, 2018; White, 2009). This point, highlighted by DeMatthews (2018) and White (2009), helped build my claim for the importance of conducting this research study examining how school leaders’ leadership practices impact the academic and social performance of African American male students. This study was significant in that it explored the link between principals’ leadership behaviors and African American male students’ academic achievement. Davis (2017) asserted that a principal’s ability to implement effective culturally responsive leadership practices plays a significant role in improving African American boys’ academic performance.

### **Possible Implications of This Study**

Researchers have performed many studies over the past 40 years to examine challenges experienced by African American boys in their quest to advance academically and socially (Davis, 2017; Noguera, 2009). However, few studies in the past or present have explored the relationship between African American boys' academic achievement and their school leaders. The lack of literature seeking to uncover the relationship between school principals and African American boys' academic performance further supported the need to perform this research. This study served as a consequential contributor in identifying possible solutions to improving African American boys' educational performance by improving school principals' ability to lead boys more effectively in this demographic.

### **Research Design**

The goal of all qualitative research is to answer the research questions that guide the study (Maxwell, 2005). The research questions that guided this study included the following.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How do elementary school principals perceive their leadership practices to influence the academic achievement of elementary African American male students?

RQ2: What strategies do elementary school principals implement to foster the academic performance of African American male students?

### **Qualitative Research Design**

After a review of many research approaches, I believed that a qualitative method approach was best-suited for this study. According to Koch (1994), qualitative research allows the researcher to ask sufficiently difficult or interesting questions and to observe the research

participants in settings that promote the researcher's ability to dig deeper into the phenomenon being explored.

Hence, I believed a qualitative research approach would be useful in helping me understand the perceptions of elementary school principals regarding their leadership behaviors. A qualitative approach was also useful in understanding how the principals included in this study believed their leadership practices impacted the academic achievement of African American boys. I believed the use of a qualitative method—specifically, a case study approach—would result in a detailed description of leadership practices that help or hinder elementary African American male students' academic performance. Indeed, I expected this approach to result in knowledge that school principals could implement to help them make better decisions regarding the actions and leadership behaviors they enact to increase the academic performance of African American students at the elementary level.

### **Case Study Design**

Case study research is often defined as a qualitative research inquiry that employs a broad scope of methods and interpretative practices, which may include interviews, observations, and analysis of the research participants' words (Merriam, 2009). This approach enables a researcher to understand a phenomenon from the research participants' perspective in an in-depth manner (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Miles and Huberman (1994) asserted that a phenomenon or case could be described as any single entity or unit that is in a bounded system that can clearly be articulated by the researcher, indicating precisely what the researcher is inquiring about. In the case of this study, the bounded system I explored was the impact of elementary school principals' leadership behaviors on the academic achievement of African American male elementary students. White (2009) asserted that African American boys'

academic and social success depends heavily on effective and strong school leadership. Hence, the phenomenon of school leadership and its impact on African American boys' ability to achieve is critical to understand. A better understanding may provide further insight into how school leaders can better support African American boys as they matriculate through school.

Two key points guided this choice of case study methodology: First, the topic being researched has been explored in detail, and second, the central part of the phenomenon is revealed (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). According to Baxter and Jack (2008), both guiding principles of case study research can be achieved when the researcher explores the phenomenon using a variety of data sources. Baxter and Jack (2008) stated that "A use of multiple data sources allows the researcher to examine the phenomenon using a variety of lenses resulting in multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood" (p. 543).

Researchers use varying forms of case studies (Yin, 2003). For this study, I used a multicase qualitative research study approach. Yin (2003) postulated that multicase studies allow the researcher to predict both similar and contrasting results as a result of researching multiple cases related to the topic of study. A multicase study research approach also promotes a researcher's ability to derive more convincing results after the study because the study's findings are derived from multiple research participants (Yin, 2003), hence also promoting the study's credibility (Yin, 2003). Baxter and Jack (2008) postulated that multicase studies allow the researcher to analyze each setting and across settings, resulting in a more detailed description of the phenomenon being explored. Hence, I used a multiple-case study to gain a thorough understanding of the link between school leaders' leadership practices and African American boys' academic performance.

## **Participants and Site**

Purposeful sampling was used to identify the participants for this study. This sampling method allowed me to determine the candidates who were best equipped to answer the study's research questions because of their experience and knowledge of the topic being researched (Maxwell, 2005). Ten elementary school principals participated in this multicase study. All of the principals had a minimum of 3 years of experience leading at a school with a population of at least 50 African American male elementary students. The principals consisted of both men and women. To participate in this study, the school principals must have had a school population that included at least 50 African American male students. In addition, the principals must have led at their school for at least 3 years.

The elementary school principals who were invited to participate in this study came from a wide range of school communities. Hence, at least 30 elementary school principals who led in high-performing schools, low-income communities, and Title I schools were invited to participate in this study. As a result of not limiting the elementary school principals in this study to a specific type of school or community, I was able to study a wide range of school leadership behaviors that school principals implement to promote the academic performance of African American male students in the schools they lead.

This study included elementary school principals from the Southeastern United States, which has many school districts with high populations of African American students, making it a suitable region to perform this study. The social networking platforms of LinkedIn and School Leader Facebook groups were used to identify elementary school principals to participate in this study.

### **Data Collection/Instruments**

I understood the importance of allowing the research participants to share their viewpoints as a result of their lived experiences, including how they perceived the impact of their leadership practices on the academic achievement of their elementary African American male students. Hence, data were collected in an objective way, which allowed me to discover new insight into actions the school leaders were implementing to promote the academic outcomes of African American male students in elementary schools. Objectively collecting data promoted my ability to ascertain how those actions were helping or hindering the academic performance of African American male students. I used interviews and school artifacts, including meeting agendas, program information, and school performance data. The observations were performed via Zoom to protect the research participants' and my wellbeing in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Interview Process**

I conducted semistructured interviews with elementary school principals. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that allowed me to achieve an in-depth understanding of how the elementary school principals perceived their leadership behaviors to influence the academic performance of African American students. The idea of asking open-ended questions was critical to my ability to conduct a successful case study. I understood that as the goal of case study research was to develop new insight on the phenomenon being studied. Thus, research participants were encouraged to share their knowledge and perception of the phenomenon through their experiences (Merriam, 2009). The interviews were recorded to ensure accurate transcription. The interviews were done through the Zoom platform to ensure the safety of all participants' health considering the COVID-19 pandemic.



After I performed the semistructured interviews, I examined artifacts provided by the elementary school principals to provide more insight into the actions the principals implemented to promote the academic achievement of African American male students in their schools. The artifacts included school performance data, meeting agendas related to community meetings, curriculum meetings, and staff meetings. I also reviewed other artifacts shared by the principals related to their daily interactions with staff and students to provide further insight into the school principals' leadership perceptions of the African American male population in their schools and the influence of their leadership practices on these students' academic performance.

### **Interview Questions**

Maxwell (2005) asserted that good questions asked by a researcher are not enough to produce a successful study; however, poorly constructed questions that do not aim to answer the research questions can derail a study. Hence, I took intentional steps to ask open-ended questions that were derived from the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL; Appendix A) and from the tenets of CRT, which suggests institutions in America's culture and fabric heavily influence individuals' actions and perceptions of others based on race (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The interview questions asked in this study were developed to answer the research questions, as that was the goal of this study. I took careful steps to develop questions that allowed the participants to share their voice as it relates to their leadership behaviors and their impact on African American male students' academic performance. Nonetheless, the research participants were not bound to the interview questions during the interview process. Instead, the questions were used as a guide to capture the participants' experiences. Follow-up questions were asked of the participants based on the participants' responses to a given question. The interview questions

and their alignment to the PSEL standards and the study's research questions can be viewed in Appendix B.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), there is no single way to conduct or analyze qualitative research. Hence, the data analysis process in qualitative research is a creative process as opposed to a mechanical one, whereby the researcher makes meaning of the data collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). For this study, I used Creswell's (2009) six-step process of analyzing qualitative data:

Step 1: The researcher organized and prepared the data for analysis (p. 197). During this step, the researcher organized and prepared the data for the data analysis process, reviewing and transcribing the recorded interviews.

Step 2: Review the data (p. 197). During this step, the researcher read the transcripts thoroughly to gain a general sense of the data to begin to develop a general understanding of the ideas expressed and conveyed by the research participants.

Step 3: Begin the coding process (p. 198). During this step, the researcher began the data analysis coding process. The researcher segmented the data into categories by segmenting sentences based on common language noted in the research participants' responses.

Step 4: Use the coding process to create a description of the categories that represent the emerging themes generated by the data analysis process (p. 199). During this step, the researcher identified codes in order to generalize the categories and emerging themes that could be used to provide a general description of the overarching themes identified in the study.

Step 5: Determine how the themes will be represented in a qualitative narrative (p. 200). During this step, the researcher intertwined the themes of the study into a narrative so that the results of the study could be presented logically based on the participants' responses.

Step 6: Interpret the meaning of the data (p. 200). During this phase, the researcher interpreted the meaning of participants' responses in order to accurately articulate the participants' perceptions and stories.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All participants were given a false name to protect their identity. Providing the participants with a pseudo name promoted the research participants' ability to feel safe in sharing their experiences without fear of having their identities revealed. Participants also signed a consent document that indicated the purpose of the study and the goals of the study. The document also explained the methodology of the study and the way data would be collected throughout the study. Last, the participants were informed that their agreement to participate in this study was of their free will and that they could refuse participation in the study at any point during the data collection process. Shenton (2004) highlighted the importance of participants freely participating in qualitative research to ensure those involved are genuinely willing to participate in the study and prepared to offer data freely. Lastly, I received approval to perform this study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure this study was performed in an ethical and just manner and that it was free from any actions that could have harmed the participants (see Appendix C).

### **Trustworthiness**

To increase this study's trustworthiness, I utilized strategies suggested by distinguished qualitative researchers. To minimize concerns with credibility, I used a variety of sources to

triangulate the data collected in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation of data can also help eliminate the researcher's implicit and explicit biases as data are collected using a variety of sources (Shenton, 2004). I used member checking. The research participants were provided a transcript of their interview so that they could check for accuracy and clarity of the information shared during their interview. According to Merriam (2002), member checking increases the credibility of qualitative research by ensuring research participants' responses are captured accurately. Lastly, I used an audit trail Merriam (2002) to describe in detail the data collection process and the analysis process used to derive the findings of this study.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

There were imitations and delimitations for this study. First, I only explored the role elementary school principals play in the academic performance of African American male students. This study was limited to elementary school principals and therefore did not include other school personnel, such as school guidance counselors or teachers. Second the study was only conducted with elementary school principals in the Southeast United States, which was also a delimitation of this study.

### **Researcher Positionality**

I am an African American male and a school administrator. I understand the importance of effective school leadership and the impact it has on students' ability to academically succeed. I also understand the significant role school leaders play in promoting the academic and social well-being of marginalized groups, such as African American male students. I have spent much of my career working with African American and Hispanic-American students. Hence, I have developed a passion for helping and leading students in these two demographics, especially the male populations in these demographics. I work with males of color weekly through a program I

began called Brothers of Leadership and Distinction. It is important for me to share this insight to acknowledge that I brought some explicit and implicit biases with me as I conducted this study by default of my experiences with males of color. However, I took intentional steps to approach this study as objectively as possible to ensure that I could discover new ways of doing and thinking to share ways to increase African American male students academic performance with other school leaders.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I review the purpose, significance, and possible implications of this study. I then discuss how I utilized a case study qualitative research approach. I conclude this chapter by discussing how I met ethical requirements for this study and how I promoted its trustworthiness.

## Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative case study examined how 10 elementary school principals' perceived their leadership practices to impact elementary African American male students' academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to explore what actions each of the principals implemented to promote the academic and social well-being of the African American boys in their schools. The research sought to understand how each school principal leveraged their influence with teachers, the community, and the African American male population in their schools to propel boys in this demographic forward in their ability to achieve expected academic outcomes. My goal was not to identify a plethora of actions that these school leaders were implementing to champion the African American male students' academic success. Instead, I aimed to identify critical leadership behaviors that each school principal demonstrated—namely, those that contributed to better learning outcomes for African American male students in their schools. For this aim to be achieved, this study answered the following questions.

**RQ1.** How do elementary school principals perceive their leadership practices to influence the academic achievement of elementary African American male students? Based on the participants responses the following emerged as recurring themes: (a) promoting professional development of teachers, (b) recognizing African American males' intellectual needs, (c) creating a sense of belonging, (d) understanding African American males' social-emotional needs, (e) addressing deficit thinking, and (f) promoting culturally responsive teaching.

**RQ2.** What strategies do elementary school principals implement to foster the academic performance of African American male students? Based on the participants responses the following emerged as recurring themes: (a) leading with empathy and hope, (b) addressing home life and aggression, (c) diversifying the staff, (d) strengthening community partnerships, (e)

setting high-expectations, (f) mentoring and special programs, and (g) leaning in to experiences and fostering strong relationships.

### **Sample and Population Description**

Ten public school principals participated in this case study. The smaller sample size allowed me to go into depth when examining the school principals' lived experiences (Roberts, 1994). In total, 30 public school principals were invited to participate in the study. All 10 of the principals in this study were leading in a school with a population that had at least 150 African American male elementary students, making each of the participants in this study suitable to help me answer the research questions. The participants in this study all led schools in the Southeast region of the United States—in Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Texas, and the District of Columbia.

The participants ranged in age from early 30s to early 60s. All the principals in this study had worked as school leaders in school communities with high populations of African American male students for at least 10 or more years. The research participants' careers ranged from 15 years to over 25 years. All the research participants, except one, were African American. There were four female participants and six male participants (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Years in Education
Principal– 1	M	Black	20
Principal– 2	F	Black	25
Principal– 3	F	White	22
Principal– 4	M	Black	15
Principal– 5	M	Black	22
Principal– 6	M	Black	15
Principal– 7	F	Black	26
Principal– 8	F	Black	16
Principal– 9	F	Black	18
Principal– 10	M	Black	15

**Description of Participants***Principal 1*

Principal 1 is an African American man. He has been an educator for over 20 years and has held the positions of classroom teacher, coach, and school principal. He currently serves as an elementary school principal in an urban district in Texas. Principal 1 has spent most of his career leading schools in urban communities with high African American and Hispanic populations. He has served on several committees that have worked on developing initiatives to create more equitable learning opportunities for marginalized students and students of color. Principal 1 has also implemented several programs centered on supporting Black male students with having more favorable social and academic outcomes.



***Principal 2***

Principal 2 is an African American woman. She has been in the field of education for 25 years and has held numerous positions. She has a Doctorate in Educational Leadership and has centered much of her attention on improving her leadership practices to attract and retain educators of color. She currently serves as an elementary school principal in an urban district in Maryland. Principal 2, like Principal 1, has spent most of her career leading schools in urban communities with high populations of African American and Hispanic students. Principal 2 has also served on several committees that have worked to develop more equitable learning opportunities for minority students and marginalized groups of students. Principal 2 believes the key to student success is robust partnerships between the school, community, and students' families. Hence, she champions strong partnerships between the school and the community.

***Principal 3***

Principal 3 is a White woman. She has been an educator for 22 years and a school administrator for 15 years. For five of those years she has served as a school principal at the current urban elementary school in Maryland. Principal 3 has spent all her career leading and working in schools in urban communities with high populations of African American and Hispanic students. Principal 3 believes the key to student success is a school leaders' ability to advocate for all students' success regardless of their gender, race, socioeconomic status, or any other identifying characteristic that may alter or influence how an educational practitioner may interact with a child. Principal 3 has led several initiatives within her district related to dismantling implicit biases that impede marginalized students' ability to achieve at the same academic levels as their peers in the majority group.

***Principal 4***

Principal 4 is an African American man. He has been an educator for 15 years. During his 15-year career he has served as a classroom teacher and assistant principal. Principal 4 has spent his entire career leading and serving in low-income school communities with high African populations. He currently serves as an elementary school principal in a diverse school in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. Principal 4 has served in this role for the past 3 years. He has also served on many boards in his school district focused on increasing African American academic achievement outcomes. Principal 4 believes the most significant factor affecting a student's ability to achieve expected learning outcomes is quality instruction and quality teachers.

***Principal 5***

Principal 5 is an African American man. He has been an educator for 22 years, during which he has served as school principal at various levels, including middle school and high school. He currently serves as an elementary school principal in Maryland, where he has been for 3 years. Principal 5 has spent most of his career leading in schools with predominantly African American and Hispanic student populations. He has worked to create more equitable learning opportunities for marginalized groups of students to increase their ability to meet expected learning outcomes by working with external and internal stakeholders to identify ways to support students in these groups in and out of the school. Principal 5 believes the key to high academic achievement for all students is to create learning environments that foster positive relationships between students, teachers, and the community.

***Principal 6***

Principal 6 is an African American man. He has been an educator for 15 years. During his 15-year career he has served in the positions of classroom teacher, instructional lead coach, and assistant principal. He currently serves as an elementary school principal in a diverse school district in Georgia. He has served in this role for 4 years. Principal 6 has spent most of his career leading and working in schools with predominantly African American student populations. Principal 6 has led and championed several initiatives in his school district to increase support and programming to improve African American students' educational outcomes. Principal 6 believes that the key to high academic achievement is implementing robust systems and structures that allow teachers and staff to develop their instructional and professional practice to serve all students' academic and social needs.

***Principal 7***

Principal 7 is an African American woman. She has been an educator for 26 years. Her 26-year career has allowed her to serve in many capacities, including being a classroom teacher, counselor, assistant principal, and principal at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. She prides herself on having experienced a career in education that has allowed her to lead from the elementary level up to the high school level. Principal 7 currently serves as a principal at an elementary school in a diverse urban school district in Maryland. She highlighted that she has worked in school communities during her 26-year career, including low-income and high-income communities. Principal 7 has also worked in school districts composed of large populations of marginalized students and school districts made up of majority student populations. Principal 7 credits her array of experiences in leading in both low-income and high-income communities as the reason why she works so passionately to create equitable learning opportunities for all

students. Principal 7 believes the key to student success is supporting and leading teachers to develop new ways of doing and thinking to promote all scholars' academic success.

### ***Principal 8***

Principal 8 is an African American woman. She has been an educator for 16 years. Over the past 16 years she has served in the position of teacher and assistant principal. She currently serves as an elementary school principal in Maryland. She has served in this role for 7 years. Principal 8 has also spent most of her career leading and working in schools with predominantly African American and Hispanic student populations. Principal 8 believes the most significant factor that impacts students' ability to achieve is effective school leadership that promotes growth mindsets among the teachers and staff.

### ***Principal 9***

Principal 9 is an African American woman. She has been an educational practitioner for 18 years and has held the position of classroom teacher, assistant principal, and school principal. She currently serves as an elementary school principal in an urban district in Maryland. Principal 9 has spent most of her career leading schools in urban communities with high populations of African American students. She believes that effective school leadership is centered on improving teachers' instructional practices to ensure high academic achievement for all students.

### ***Principal 10***

Principal 10 is an African American man. He has been an educator for 15 years. During his 15-year career he has served in the positions of a classroom teacher and assistant principal. Principal 10 has spent his entire career teaching and leading in schools with high populations of African American students. He currently serves as an elementary school principal in an urban school district in Louisiana. Principal 10 has served in this role for 6 years. He believes it is

critical that teachers and staff foster positive relationships with students if they hope to help students meet the expected learning outcomes.

### **Interview Protocol**

All 10 participants participated in confidential, semistructured interviews that contained eight questions. Each question connected to one of the two research questions, attempting to elucidate the experiences and thoughts of the elementary school principals regarding how their leadership behaviors impacted African American male students' academic performance. Each interview was conducted one-on-one with the research participants using the Zoom platform. Once complete, the interview was transcribed using the TranscribeMe transcription service. I reviewed each transcription against its recording. Once revisions were made, each participant had the opportunity to review their transcript and make any necessary revisions to ensure clarity of the information they shared with me. Some research participants also shared artifacts such as meeting agendas and program information that provided insight on the leadership behaviors the principals had implemented to promote the academic performance of African American male students in their schools.

### **Data Analysis and Prevalent Themes**

I used participants' responses to generate coding that identified recurring themes. The participants provided a plethora of information regarding the various questions. However, it is essential to note that not all responses were included in the findings or used to determine recurring themes. Dependent on their personal experiences, each principal openly shared both positive and negative occurrences and ideas connected to the study's overall purpose. Each of the following topics represents a recurring theme and textual evidence to support the findings.

**Themes: Leading With Empathy and Hope**

The principals were asked to describe their experiences working with African American male students. Based on their responses, the themes of hope and empathy emerged. The majority of the principals indicated that their experiences working with African American boys were characterized by daily feeling hopeful for their future and empathetic to their needs. The principals also highlighted the importance of being empathetic to African American males' backgrounds, which sometimes impacts their ability to achieve academic success.

**Principal 1:**

Working with African American boys has been bittersweet; I want to positively impact African American boys, especially since I am an African American male. I had different experiences with the educational system that pushed me always to have that perspective in mind. I wanted to make sure that I kept that in the forefront of my mind that I was responsible for all students' education that I lead and serve, but I've always had a soft spot in my heart for African American boys. However, as I stated, the experience of teaching and leading African American boys has been bittersweet. I have a strong desire to have a positive impact on the African American boys I lead. Nevertheless, I realize that some of the painful experiences I encountered growing up as an African American boy in the public school system still exist today. Those same negative systematic challenges I came into contact as a youngster still impede African American boys' ability to succeed in the present day. The recurring challenges faced by African American boys today make me feel frustrated and bitter and sometimes lead me to believe there is only so much I can do. On the other hand, it is sweet because I know as a school leader who

leads Black boys, I can champion their success by influencing those that teach them to see their lives and presence as something of value and importance.

Principal 2:

My experience has run the gamut. This is my 12th year as principal and my 15th year as a school administrator. What I see are just varying degrees of where our African American boys are based on what is happening in the world. I see our Black boys come in, some very astute depending upon what has been provided for them at home. Some are angry, depending upon what is been provided for them at home or not. I find that African American boys need opportunities to express themselves. I find that the most significant caveat with our Black boys is that they do not know how to express themselves, and they have feelings that they just cannot get out. Like any other child, they want to be loved, they want to be understood, and they want to be heard. So, it is hard because they do not know how to show their feelings. They do not know how to get their point across. So, we must work harder with our Black boys to help them articulate what is on their minds. What they are feeling, what their needs are, and just what their opinions are about what is happening in the world around them.

Principal 3:

As I stated, the last 4 years I have been a principal, but my entire 22 years have been in a diverse school district that has allowed me to be in schools where there is a diverse population of Hispanic and African American students. Some schools that I worked at were primarily African American. So, I think, throughout my tenure, that my experience in working with African American boys has been really varied across the different elementary schools that I have worked in. I have had mostly positive experiences.

Obviously, you encounter challenging students throughout the years, both male and female, but I have had very positive experiences and interactions with the young African American boys and their families. I can get into that in subsequent questions; overall, I would say my experiences have been positive with our young African American boys which I believe is attributed to my desire to understand their different backgrounds, what they bring to the table, and how to support them as the instructional leader in the building.

Principal 4:

I think my experience has been valuable, it is been rewarding for myself, but it is also great for African American boys to see someone like them in this type of position. A lot of times, African American boys—especially in low-income urban areas where they are often looking up to basketball players, rappers, athletes, and so on—it is not every day that they see someone that looks just like them that is in a suit and a tie and doing positive things within the community. So, my experience has been good; not to sound sexist, but there is a different response you get from children of color, especially our boys when they have a leader who looks like them. It has been an interesting experience to see how they respond. They look forward to seeing you; it is just like they want to dap you up and ...They want to ask you about your weekend. They want to talk about their favorite things. Sometimes, I have come to find that not only am I serving in the role of a principal; I am sometimes looked at as a father figure to some of these young African American boys because they do not have fathers. I am sometimes looked at as the uncle in the community, or I could potentially be an older brother even with some of the young African American boys I lead. So, it is been a very interesting experience. If I had to sum



it all up, I would say rewarding just because I get to see the fruits of my labor when I see these young men take the initiative or make an effort to make sure that they're doing what they're supposed to do. They are motivated by seeing an African American male in a leadership role.

Principal 5:

So, my experiences have been mixed. I have had wonderful experiences working with African American boys. As a matter of fact, all my experience in the 11 out of 14 years have been in schools with predominantly high African American student populations. I have found it to be gratifying, and on the other hand, I have also found it to be very challenging. Some of the rewards include the notion that I get to be a role model. As a Black male school principal, students see you in ways that they may not see other men; this is especially true for African American boys; they see you differently. I am huge on presentation and how I present myself toward African American boys and African American people in general. I am very image-conscious because they do not get a chance to see African American men in suits and ties and things like that often, which is critical for our young Black boys.

I also found a few of the challenges in working with African American boys such as the social pressures that come with being a Black male. African American boys have it tough; they are often taught that they must be hard, tough, and good at sports. Those social cues presented to African American boys at young ages make it more burdensome for them to navigate successfully through social dynamics in school. Those social dynamics also make it difficult for many Black boys that I have encountered to learn social skills that are critical to achieving social and academic success, such as managing

their anger, learning how to make friends, identifying ways to resolve conflict, and escaping this notion of what an African American male should be. Working in an elementary school with a large population of African American boys, I witnessed Black boys succumb to societal norms. For example, they may state, “I do not want to be a snitch and tell who drew on the wall in the bathroom.” Just bringing neighborhood and “street rules and justice” into an academic setting are some of the challenges I have experienced firsthand. Another challenge, in many instances, is identifying how to best engage African American males, particularly, in areas of reading and math. Many African American male students enter school at the primary level with deficits in reading and math due to their lack of access to resources before starting elementary school. Those are a few of the challenges; however, I have found it to be incredibly rewarding working with African American boys.

Principal 8:

In my experience as an elementary school principal working with African American boys, I would say my experience has been positive overall. I think that, at times, there have been some challenges. I keep this in mind as my school team reviews data; it is vital for us when we disaggregate the data, and we drill down to the ethnicity, gender, and potential subgroups. What I have found in my experience is at times, there has been an alarming number of African American boys who have fallen in that category of accounting for the most school suspensions and the largest subgroup who is performing below grade level. Those are generally the two areas that stand out the most. I am constantly trying to figure out what are the contributing factors and how do we address them.

Principal 10:

So, as an African American male myself, I think it puts me in a different light or gives me a little bit of edge on other leaders, especially in New Orleans. A lot of the leaders here, unfortunately, do not look like the students that we serve. I can have conversations with kids that look like me and say, “I was you at one point.” Many of the boys in my school receive free and reduced lunch, meaning they often live below the poverty line and live in single-parent households. I grew up in a single-parent family; I get it; my experiences allow me to better relate to their experiences. I can relate to the life that they are leading (and not to over-generalize; that is not everyone’s story). But I think that is something that helps me in my role.

I think the flip side of that is it also can be a difficult thing because for our African American male students, you must prove yourself. They are very relational. And because of their own experiences, whether it be family members or people in their neighborhood, they are going to push the boundaries to see if they can trust you. And so, since you look like someone who is—whether it be a father or an uncle or a brother or someone who may have been there and is no longer—they want to push to see whether or not you are going to be there. And so there are instances where that is the case, and they must figure out what you are about and whether you are really going to be there for them.

### **Themes: Addressing Home Life and Aggression**

The principals were asked to discuss some of the academic and social challenges they had observed related to African American boys. Based on the principals’ responses, home life and aggression emerged as recurring themes. The majority of the principals indicated that African American males are often seen as aggressive and low-performing students who have trouble

communicating their frustrations and needs. As a result, African American students are placed in special education settings at an alarming rate. Many of the principals also highlighted that African American boys' home life and lack of support in and out of school continue to adversely impact their academic and social outcomes.

Principal 1:

I do not want to generalize, but most would agree that historically African American boys come to our schools with challenges. Often, there is deep-rooted trauma, perhaps trauma that the teachers or I do not necessarily identify with or even understand. I have experienced learning gaps among African American boys that can quickly be addressed once you can determine how they learn and what it takes to motivate and engage boys of color. In addition, I see home-life situations that adversely impact African American boys' ability to achieve academically. I also must acknowledge that partnerships between home and school are not as strong as I would like them to be for African American boys; thus, African American boys' educational outcomes are negatively impacted. Those are some of the academic and social challenges that I have experienced in the past for years among Black boys in my school.

Principal 2:

I believe Black boys' academic challenges are predicated on the social challenges they face; I do not think they are mutually exclusive; I think that they are aligned to one another. For example, if you think about the social challenges that many Black boys encounter, such as if they cannot eat, if they do not have a place to live, if they have trouble communicating, it impacts their academics. Those types of challenges influence how they are viewed and how others interact with them. When I think about African

American boys versus boys from other demographics, I have noticed that people are more forgiving of boys from other demographics. I have witnessed this phenomenon in my school as our population is roughly 50% African American students and 50% of Hispanic students. I have seen teachers be a lot more forgiving with brown boys than Black boys when they commit the same infractions. I believe many of the teachers give more forgiveness and grace to those boys with brown skin as opposed to those with Black skin. I also see this unfair treatment among Black boys in the classroom when teachers are instructing. For example, I have experienced a teacher taking a lot more time to ensure brown boys master the instructional content they are teaching compared to when Black boys demonstrate a need for more academic support. They expect the Black boys to know, whereas they often expect brown boys not to know. Hence, teachers and staff spend less time supporting Black boys with developing the academic and social skills they need to succeed academically and socially.

Principal 3:

I think, depending on what school I have worked in, the populations have been different. In my current school, many of the African American male scholars are considered high-need students. Most of them receive free and reduced meals. In previous experiences, I have had African American boys that were from affluent communities. So, depending on the environment that I was in, I was dealing with different challenges. Some of the current challenges I see among African American boys are that some do not have the resources at home they need to succeed. Or perhaps they have grown up a little sooner because they support their single mom and younger siblings, so they are the caregiver in the morning, getting their brothers and sisters up and ready for school. In my current

situation, the social challenges that Black boys face are a lot different than maybe in previous years. Some of the social challenges I have seen are many African American boys not having their basic needs met. I also see many Black boys demonstrate a dislike for school; they either love school or dislike school. With that said, I find myself encouraging many Black male students to help put them on a path to let them know that middle school, high school, and college and beyond is accessible to them no matter what their current situation is at the moment.

Principal 4:

Unfortunately, our African American boys, particularly in the school I lead, come in at a low academic level. They are often two or three grade levels below. For our kindergarten and first-grade Black boys, when they step foot into our school building, it is the first time that they have been exposed to anything related to academics. Hence, many Black boys in my school lack the necessary skills, such as knowing their letters and knowing how to spell their names by the end of their second-grade year. They do not know how to recognize sounds, sight words, pictures, and things of that nature. As a result, Black boys are often labeled as bad, special needs, and kids who cannot learn. In my building, I have seen teachers fail to do the groundwork related to getting the interventions in place and catching these Black boys up to speed. The reality is once they come to our school, it is our responsibility to make sure that they learn.

Another challenge I see among African American boys is that sometimes they do not have supportive parents—not because their parents do not want to be supportive, but because they just do not have the time. If a parent is working two jobs to make sure that they are keeping lights on, food on the table, and a roof over their kids' heads, then they

may not have time to sit down and go over homework or catch a meeting with the teacher to talk about the child's progress. I often remind my staff that we cannot always assume that the parent does not have good intentions because the parent also has other things on their plate. Schools do a better job of fostering partnerships with African American boys' parents. These partnerships may combat the most significant challenges among Black boys, which is their lack of motivation to learn because education is not a topic discussed in their household.

Many young Black boys do not get exposed to books at a young age—no one's reading to many of them. Nobody is doing math projects with them or science experiments. All that stuff relies on the school, and sometimes it becomes a heavy burden because we now must start to focus on a motivation factor to get them even prepared to want to do the work.

Principal 5:

One of the social dynamics that impacts African American boys is the notion that many African American male students come from: "Hey, you hit me. I hit you back" mentality. "That is what my mama told me." "That is what my daddy told me." With that stated, I find that many Black boys find it challenging to resolve conflict without aggression because they have been told that aggression, in some instances, is the best way to solve problems.

I think that is one of the biggest challenges I have dealt with when leading and teaching African American boys. I have seen the aggression challenge manifest itself as early pre-K and kindergarten for some Black boys. When those young Black male

students do not get the help and support, they need early on, they have social adjustment issues for the remainder of their school years.

I have also seen an influx of Black boys that come to school with diagnoses given to them at birth that may significantly impact their behavior. Some of those diagnoses are directly tied to these young Black boys' home environment. Lastly, I cannot overstate how I have seen Black boys who come from good and challenging backgrounds succumb to peer pressure. Peer pressure continues to be a major problem for our young Black boys. Those are a few of the social challenges I have seen in African American boys.

Some of the academic challenges I have seen in African American boys are that many are low-functioning readers. Many young African American boys just do not like reading, and I think it is because they do not see themselves in what they read. Reading is already a challenging subject to grasp for many Black boys; so, if they do not like the content, if they do not like the material, and if the content is not being presented in an engaging manner, most Black boys are going to tune out, and in many cases and act out. I encourage teachers in my school to include reading material that allows all students to see themselves in what they read. However, this can be difficult when a school district's reading curriculum is so restricted that it leaves little room for teachers to alter the instructional content.

Principal 6:

I find that most students referred for special education services and most of the students in the Response to Intervention (RTI) process in my school are African American boys. African American boys continue to be ushered into special education settings at an alarming rate in my school. However, I find that many of these boys can achieve when



the proper interventions are put in place to address their social and academic needs. I have taken intentional steps to work with teachers to understand better how to interact with boys of color and delineate between minor and significant behaviors so that teachers are not placing inaccurate labels on Black boys in my school. I am also working with teachers to help them identify behavior disorders in our African American boys that need to be addressed quickly to ensure those boys' academic success. Teachers need more support to recognize better what are signs of attention-deficit or ADHD compared to when an African American male student is just hyper. I have observed that many of our boys, especially African American boys, are hyper and extremely active by nature; hence, teachers must find unique ways to engage with them to promote their academic and social success.

Principal 7:

I have served in leadership and taught at all levels. So, I have had experience with elementary, middle, and high school, and I would say I see various academic and social challenges at each level. However, I will state that at every level, including the elementary level, African American male students need a double lens on them. Furthermore, not only do young Black boys need a double lens; they need a different lens on them. I say that because there are so many other aspects that African American boys must contend with that are already set up against them. I always try to be sensitive to that dynamic as I lead young boys in that demographic.

My experience with Black boys continues to be that they are more aggressive. They are unruly in many instances. They are also seen by many as “we do not know what to do with them.” It is a hopeless kind of thing for many educators, so that has been my

experience. I often engage my staff in conversations concerning the lens they have on the African American boys to challenge their point of view if needed and offer them a different perspective with Black boys. I have had to be the voice of reason for the Black boys I lead with those that work with them. When it comes to Black boys, I lead with another level of passion because I know so many of them have the odds stacked up against them. I want teachers to support African American boys in the same way they support male students in other demographics. I know teachers support Black boys differently, and it is often not to propel them forward. The reality is that their Black skin is often used against them, and this concept begins at an early age for many African American boys.

Principal 8:

Some of the academic challenges I have seen among African American boys in my experience is that many of them are reading below grade level. While you may have some Black boys performing below grade level in math, I have found that the more significant disparity is in reading among many Black boys. So, it makes me wonder, how are we teaching? I have encouraged the teachers that I lead to dig deeper into the various learning styles of all students, especially Black boys, considering they lag other demographics in their ability to achieve academically. I heard a quote the other day. “Do we understand not just what we are teaching but who we are teaching?” Getting to know the student is paramount to their academic and social success. Many teachers fail to understand Black boys’ likes, dislikes, and the way they learn. Many teachers also miss the mark in making the lesson culturally relevant to African American males. When practitioners do not consider Black males’ background—that includes the community

they come from, their race, and norms associated with Black boys in America—they often teach lessons that are not culturally relevant, leading to Black boys' disengagement in the lesson.

Another social and academic problem I see among Black boys is the disproportionate number of African American boys identified as special needs. There has historically been a high number of Black boys who have been placed in special education programs. I often wonder if all the measures and strategies were exhausted before many Black boys were tested, and the team/teacher decided to place them in special education.

When I look at our suspension data in my school, it is clear that teachers are not utilizing all the strategies they can to support Black boys. Black boys are recommended for suspension at a higher rate than any other subgroup in my school. I often ask my staff, how are we motivating this group of students? When we talk about the positive initiatives to encourage them to achieve academic and social success, are we considering their likes and dislikes, and needs?

Principal 9:

I would say Black boys seemed to get less support in and out of the classroom, which has adverse effects on Black boys' ability to achieve academic success. In my experience, teachers and parents seem to have less patience with African American boys. Hence, many African American boys often navigate through school without their social and emotional needs being met. Concerning academic challenges among Black boys, while I have seen some Black boys excel in their academic endeavors, many need extra support to meet the bare minimum reading and math expectations. Many Black boys by fourth or fifth grade just check out when it comes to math and reading in my experience. I think

this is mainly because they do not receive the support, they need to be successful early on in their schooling experiences.

Principal 10:

The academic headlines often read that African American boys are behind, and I think there are multiple reasons for those headlines. One of the main reasons being many Black males are just being passed along because teachers do not want to deal with them. I also notice that a lot of African American male students struggle with mastering academic content in general. Many Black boys enter school with deficits because they lack basic skills such as learning their letter sounds or engaging in conversation with others to develop the necessary social and academic skills needed to achieve academically.

One of the social challenges I see among many Black boys is their inability to communicate their frustration or being able to cope with different things that they may disagree with; I see this often happens between Black boys and their teachers. I often work with the young Black males in my school on the idea of code-switching, and what does it look like to have a conversation when you are at school or to communicate something with someone at school versus what it looks like when you are outside of school. I feel that many African American boys need more support with communication skills, which, I believe, will lead to better social and academic outcomes for Black boys.

**Themes: Recognizing African American Male Students' Intellectual Needs Promoting and Professional Development of Teachers**

The principals were asked to discuss what steps they have implemented to address the social and academic issues faced by African American boys in their school. Based on the principals' responses, the following recurring themes emerged: The majority of the principals

asserted that they have implemented practices that include having a relentless focus on the data that sheds light on African American boys' intellectual and behavior performance in their schools. The principals also highlighted that they ensure their staff is aware of the academic and behavioral challenges many African American boys face and are aware of various interventions they can use to combat these challenges. Lastly, some of the principals indicated that they take deliberate steps to provide professional development opportunities that enhance their teachers' capacity to address African American boys' academic and social needs.

Principal 1:

One of the first things that I attempted to do is create awareness and ensure that my schoolteachers were aware of the data and the actual picture the data depicted. Reviewing our school's reading and math data consistently showed how our African American students, particularly the males, were either stagnant or falling behind academically. To help build teachers' capacity to better serve and educate African American students, especially our boys.

Next, I focused my attention on engaging my teachers in book studies and professional development to increase teachers' awareness of researched-based practices that would improve Black students' academic outcomes. We have done a book study every year since I have been there. This year, we are examining the book by Ron Clark called *Move Your Bus*. I have always kept male students of color at the forefront of my work to ensure the educational experiences provided to them considered the various ways they learn.

I have also engaged my staff in professional development related to restorative practices to improve the way teachers responded to less severe infractions committed by

Black boys in my school. I felt this was necessary because we had an influx of Black boys being put out of class for minor offenses like talking back or not tucking in their shirt.

The awareness piece is vast when trying to close the achievement gap between Black boys and their peers in other demographics. Many teachers do not realize that they naturally bring implicit and explicit beliefs into the classroom that significantly impact how they interact with African American boys. Hence, I have spent a great deal of time engaging my teachers in professional development centered on providing equitable learning opportunities for all students, including Black boys in my school. It is hard for a teacher to change their practice and behavior toward a particular group of students if they do not know the behavior exists and if they have no idea that the behavior needs to be altered. Those are some of the things that I have tried to implement to address the inequities in the educational system for our African American males.

Principal 2:

I would say you have to look at the data. The data equalizes the playing field, takes out all biases; there is no bias in a number. When I look at the data with my staff, we are looking at how our students are genuinely performing academically. When I see pockets of students who are consistently performing below grade level, such as many African American males in my building, I ask myself, “Do we expect them to learn?” If so, “How is that thought reflected in our school’s data?” I believe that high academic achievement starts with high expectations for students. I tell my teachers that it is expected that all students achieve high academic results in our school, including our marginalized groups, such as African American boys; we must have high expectations for all. With that stated,

looking at the data is not merely enough to help improve Black male students' dismal academic performance. After analyzing the data, I ask my teachers, "Now what?" What are we going to do about it? I encourage my teachers to jump into action focusing their attention on these individual Black boys' academic and social needs. In my school, we do a lot of targeted instruction to help close those achievement gaps between African American boys and another sub-group. I do weekly check-ins with my teachers to discuss how the targeted instruction is working and what needs to be changed to help these young males reach academic expectations. I find that it takes all of us working together to help these young boys reach their full potential, but it can happen when school leaders push staff and work with them to identify viable solutions. It is our responsibility to make sure that we get them to a sixth-grade level before leaving our school.

Principal 3:

Hiring individuals who understand the Black male scholars they are teaching has been an important step. I think it is essential to build relationships with your scholars, letting them know that you are there to support them in every way. I also work with staff to limit stereotypes and biases they have toward African American boys. I communicate with my teachers; it does not matter what students are bringing to the table; our job is to support them. Putting the right individuals in the right places [and] having quality teachers, counselors, and mentors are critical components to promoting Black boys' academic success. I work hard to put the right people in front of our Black boys because their success depends on it.

Principal 4:

One of the first things I have focused on is providing professional development to my staff concerning their approach to leading and teaching the students who attend our school. My school is 99% African American, and there are certain things we must consider when educating African American students, specifically our Black boys. With that said, I knew some of my teachers' practice needed to be altered toward Black students. However, I also knew I could not expect teachers and staff to change instructional practices if they are not aware of the strategies, they needed to implement to change the behavior [or] practice. Therefore, I have taken deliberate steps to ensure my teachers are aware of methods that they can implement daily to promote Black boys' well-being.

One of the things I have focused on lately with teachers is helping them really understand the whole child; this is critical for African American boys if we want to help them have better social and academic outcomes. We have this thing in my school called "morning circle." All the teachers in my building have received training on how to engage students during this time. Our morning circle is essential because it allows students to discuss how they are feeling. It also gives them an opportunity to share positive thoughts and positive affirmations about their classmates. I find this time of the day is crucial for our Black boys as they need to hear positive affirmations from their teachers and peers, considering many of them do not hear positive things often. The morning circle also allows the teachers to build relationships with our African American male students. The connection piece is big for Black boys; they need to know that those who are leading and guiding them genuinely care for them beyond the classroom.



I have done some other things with my staff, which includes creating a behavior response team, which I really initiated to focus on our students' mental health. We often focus on students' academic performance without considering their mental stability; unfortunately, this is often true for Black boys. The behavior response team is composed of teachers, the school counselor, and school psychologist. They work to better understand the triggers that are leading to disproportionate suspensions among groups like African American males in my school. They also provide professional development to our staff with restorative justice practices. The team also works with teachers to identify those daily occurrences that are happening to think of ways we can avoid those unwanted behaviors and avoid suspension at all costs. Suspending students does not work most times; I say that because many of these young male students who have been suspended come back and commit the same infractions, so feel it is better to promote teachers' ability to avoid the behavior altogether.

Lastly, a licensed therapist has worked with teachers in my school to better support our students; this includes our Black boys. Many things are exposed during these therapy sessions, such as traumatic episodes experienced by the child containing violent or sexual acts. Those licensed therapists have been significant to curbing some of the inappropriate behaviors demonstrated by our boys. I find that our Black boys are acting out a lot of times not because they want to but because they have no other way to express their frustrations. I have worked with staff extensively to minimize these frustrations.

Principal 6:

I am very intentional with my hiring practices. I have been more deliberate in hiring more people of color to ensure my staff is reflective of the community that I serve. The second

thing I have implemented is cultural sensitivity training with my team. I have worked to expand teachers' toolboxes with ways on how they can help support the Black males achieve academic and social success.

Principal 7:

The first year I became the school's principal, I had an African American male teacher approach me to let me know he was interested in working solely with an all African American male class. He desired to give them a positive role model and someone who understood their needs as Black boys. This teacher had a keen sense of how Black boys moved and what actions to implement to get the best response from Black boys. He knew that African American boys learned differently. In my conversations with him, he had a vast understanding of leading and teaching African American students in general, so I decided to pilot the program for one year. With that said, the program had some successes and some challenges. First, let me start by saying that even when a teacher has good intentions, they still need the proper training to lead and teach a class full of Black boys who come with varying academic levels and varying degrees and managing their aggression and behavior. I think it is essential to have the right person and systems and structures in place when creating a one-gender class that includes boys who have various needs and need support levels to ensure their academic and social success.

While putting all those boys in one class was a great idea, it came with a high level of frustration and anxiety for the teacher and myself. For starters, an all-male class needed to follow a different curriculum, other than the one issued by the school district. I also felt the all-male class needed a different curriculum centered around their needs and

interests as Black boys. Lastly, more support was required in that class, other than just the classroom teacher to adequately support those male students' social and emotional needs.

So, my learning from what I discovered is if we are going to do an all-boys class, it must be centered around who the boys in that class are and how to build them up; the curriculum must be different. The focus has to be different; the structures have to be different. Everything really has to be different to cater to those males and what their needs are. However, in a public school with a set curriculum and specific ways, a class should be organized that is difficult to accomplish. You would have to get past that bridge to get it done. So that is the one thing.

There are also specific professional developments that teachers need to engage when learning to teach Black boys. I think many school leaders skip PD and believe teachers will figure it out; as a result, our Black boys continue to suffer socially and academically.

Principal 10:

We do a lot of remediation; we have RTI groups; we have after-school tutoring. We have teachers that do lunch tutoring with our Black male students. I have former students that come back and support our African American male students. Students come from high school back to our school, and they help students in many lessons.

Socially, we are implementing a lot around social-emotional learning for our African American males. We have community circles. During the call-out circle, students can discuss how they feel and things that are bothering them. Our Black boys need more opportunities to express their frustration and examine how specific experiences made them feel and how it impacted them. I also have several after-school programs to give our

Black boys different opportunities to expand their experiences and offer them other social and academic opportunities.

### **Themes: Diversifying the Staff and Strengthening Community Partnerships**

The principals were asked to explain how they use their influence to involve internal and external stakeholders to support the academic and social achievement of African American male students in their school. Based on the principals' responses, two recurring themes emerged: First, most of the principals stated that they use their influence to create more diversified staff, who can better serve their African American boys. The principals also stated that they use their influence to foster relationships with various stakeholders in the community to help in their efforts to improve and advance their African American male students' academic and social outcomes.

#### **Principal 1:**

Being an African American male myself, I can lean on personal or professional relationships that I have that are outside the learning community to help positively impact the African American boys in my school. I am a part of a fraternity, so I use that resource to positively impact Black boys' academic and social advancement in my school. Some of my fraternity brothers come in and mentor some of the boys in my school monthly.

Next, I have noticed that most Texas students will probably have an African American teacher at some point. However, the likelihood that they will have an African American male principal is incredibly rare. With that said, I use my influence as a school leader to advocate for Black males in my school and Texas. I advocate for the needs at both the district and state level.

I also take intentional steps to ensure our Black boys see images of other positive Black men. For example, on career day, I guarantee that individuals who speak to my students represent the wide range of students who attend my school. This concept is especially important for our Black boys; African American boys need to see more positive images of Black males outside of the entertainment industry and sports arena. Enlisting businessmen and women of color in our community to come and talk to the young males helps to leave a positive impact on our young men's lives. I also commit to doing the same actions with the reading program that we participate in yearly called "Read Across America;" again I wanted to enlist men and women of color to come in to read to students. I want to reiterate the importance of Black boys seeing positive images that look like them in the schools they attend and their communities. As a school principal, I always try to use my influence to create more positive images for the African American males I serve.

Principal 2:

So, involving the community is paramount to ensuring the academic success of Black boys in my school. With that stated, I am fortunate enough to have a "parent-engagement assistant" in my school. I work closely with her to ensure all our students' needs are met to the best of our ability. When thinking specifically about our African American boys, many of them not only need more academic support, but they also need more social and emotional support. With that said, I leverage my influence as a principal to identify community resources through our faith-based organization and our community business partners to help foster better educational outcomes for our Black male students. Working with community members to address our Black boys' needs is critical because they spend

most of their time in the community and not in school. I really want to make sure students' needs are met in and out of school; the school day for my school is from 7:45 a.m. until 1:55 p.m. That is a very short school day. Students spend most of their time away from us; keeping that in mind, I understand that it takes a community effort to get positive results with our African American male students.

I also use my influence to galvanize support for our parents. I work with community members to advocate for more support for the parents in my school. I know that my school is in a low-income community. Hence, I see and speak to parents daily who need support with learning how to be a better parent or need a financial literacy class to manage their money better. My thinking is that the child benefits when they have a stable home environment. There are still too many Black boys living in compromised situations that can be altered when their parents have access to resources that build their knowledge around financial literacy and parenting skills. As a school leader, I have used my voice to advocate for more access to programs like this for many of my Black boys' families I serve because it is needed.

#### Principal 3:

When thinking about the internal stakeholders, I think about the people I bring into the building. When I first arrived at the school I currently lead, mainly made up of Black and brown children, I noticed right away that the staff lacked diversity. I knew that, internally, I had control over hiring some different individuals and what kind of individuals I wanted to put in place to promote all students' academic performance in my school. With that in mind, I was intentional about seeking out African American men to be in the schoolhouse; while there were already some men in the building when I arrived,

there just were not enough for me, and there were no Black male teachers in the school. Today I am proud to say that about a third of my staff is men, and out of that third, about 15 of those male teachers are African American men, which is significant for the elementary level.

When thinking about the external stakeholders and the school partnerships, I closely work with the local police department to provide more support to our Black and brown boys. These officers take time out of their busy schedules every other week to come in and have lunch with some of our fifth- and sixth-grade males who need extra guidance, and, boy, has it made a difference in their lives. The lunch-with-a-cop initiative has helped some of our high-risk scholars make a 360 in how they conduct themselves and how they see school.

I also think about how some of our male students want to be professional athletes, but through a mentoring program that my assistant principal established in the building, we are able to bring in males who have all taken different paths but have managed to achieve success. They show our African American males what success looks like on and off the field. Many of the men who come to speak to our boys have achieved success despite significant challenges. Like many of our Black boys, some have grown up with single moms but have become doctors, school superintendents, and lawyers; these men really inspire our boys.

So, I guess I use my influence to put the right people in front of these males to let them know that they have so many different life choices and they can be whatever they want to be, except a failure.

Principal 4:

One of the things that is so neat about being a principal is I get the opportunity to sit on various committees throughout my school district. I currently sit on the Chancellor's Cabinet, Elementary Principals Cabinet, and the district's budget task force. Being a part of various committees; I get the opportunity to advocate for our children. I get the chance to discuss what is going on in my school and our students' specific needs. Sometimes, I do have to advocate for the schools that are surrounding me. However, the focus is mainly on how my students are performing academically and the social-emotional needs of our students.

With that said, I do a lot of advocating for altering the prescribed curriculum in my district. I have encouraged our district leaders to include more African American literature in the curriculum. Many of our African American students check out of reading because they do not see themselves in the curriculum; this notion holds very true for our African American male students.

Another way I use my influence is with the teachers in my building. I understand that they have the biggest impact on my school's African American boys' academic performance. Therefore, I work closely with them weekly to help them consider how they will meet the needs of all the students in their class, including our Black boys. I just cannot preach it and not participate in it. And so, I think you get the buy-in factor when a teacher is thrilled to have their principal sitting with them in a planning session and giving pointers. I even went into a classroom this year and did a demonstration lesson for a teacher because she needed support teaching a math lesson.

I can use my influence in so many ways; as a principal, I have so many entry points to impact what is being presented in front of my male students and how it is being



presented. I believe school principals have to be hands on. We cannot be leading from the balcony. We need to be on the dance floor, in the basement, in the parking lot to ensure marginalized groups like Black boys have stellar educational experiences.

Principal 5:

Some of the external factors include the ability to allocate resources to help African American male students with social and emotional problems. When I was in my previous district, we had a large contingency for wrap-around services such as social workers, counselors, psychologists, whereas in my current school district, we do not necessarily have all those supports for our students. And of course, my African American male population generally benefits from those services most. I work with district leaders and community members to figure out how we can provide those services to some of our males who need those supports. I recently formed a partnership with a local church to offer counseling services to males in my school who needed it but could not otherwise afford those services. Internally, I need strong teachers, and growing teachers into powerful teachers is essential for me; I am very passionate about teacher education programs. I use my influence to promote better teacher education programs within my district. I believe good teachers are critical to helping our Black boys.

Principal 6:

One of the things that I have done is to engage in the community. We have multiple volunteers. One of the most exciting activities we did right before we closed for the pandemic was, we had an activity called the Million Fathers March. The male students at my school got to invite any male in their life and anyone who wanted to participate. This included any male, so it could have been their father, uncle, clergy, or cousin—whoever

they wanted to invite to participate. The event was so powerful; it was amazing to see so many of our Black male students being engaged with their dads, uncles, and other male figures. During the event, we had an opportunity to do a little STEM challenge; we also had some of our students perform for the attendees. I think African American males' academic and social success is highly predicated on community support. I take great pride in using my seat at the table to champion parents, volunteers, and community members to support our school's Black males' advancement.

Principal 9:

I would say my most significant influence has been on the number of African American males I have hired in our building. Recently, we had an opening for an assistant principal. I knew right away we needed to hire a man. We needed an African American man here because we need their perspective; we need their understanding. We need them because while I may try, as a woman, I cannot support a Black male student as another African American man can. This is especially true for our older African American boys. Black boys need positive images of men that look like them daily, so I have used my influencing power as the school principal to ensure that happens in my school. We have 50% male staff. Our male students have men in our building who look like them, who can communicate with them when they become extremely angry, or just when they need to talk to a man about man stuff.

I think that is where I have had the greatest impact on my school culture and the African American boys in my school. I believe ensuring Black boys see other men who look like them, who model appropriate behaviors, has influenced many of our Black boys

to say, “I am going to begin to act like Mr. ‘such and such.’” It also gives our boys a resource that they can depend on to help them achieve success.

Principal 10:

One thing that I have worked on since I have been at my current school is fostering more relationships in our community. If we are going to call ourselves a community school, then we need to involve the community. I spend a lot of time building community partnerships with different organizations within our city and our neighborhood. Our school is in Terme. Terme is a historical neighbor with a lot of musical influence and a lot of pure Blackness. There are also many places you can walk throughout the neighborhood and understand Black culture and understand the history of New Orleans. For many of our Black males, walking through the community can introduce them to a whole new world. Exposure is vital to Black males’ development and ability to achieve.

There are different organizations like the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club that are in our neighborhood. Various musician organizations are also in our community, such as the Mardi Gras Krewe, the Second Line clubs, and many other organizations. I spend a lot of time getting to know different people that are part of these organizations. After building relationships with them, I invite them to come into our building. We currently have churches that come in and support the Black male students in our building. I am a member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, so I also utilize members of my fraternity to come in and help our males. For me, it is all about community connections and how we can work together to support our African American boys.

## **Themes: Creating a Sense of Belonging and Understanding African American Male Students' Social-Emotional Needs**

The principals were asked to discuss what external and internal factors influence African American boys' academic performance in their schools. Based on the principals' responses, the following recurring themes emerged: The majority of the principals highlighted that when making African American boys feel like school was not a place where they belonged or were expected to do well academically, they performed at low levels. The principals also stated that challenging home-life situations for many African American boys and the lack of human capital to address African American males' social-emotional needs in and out of school presented significant negative academic consequences for many African American boys in their schools. However, the majority of the principals did state that when African American boys are taught and led in supportive school environments that support their social-emotional needs, African American boys were likely to perform better academically.

### **Principal 1:**

A big barrier for many African American boys is them not seeing themselves as a part of their school communities. Another obstacle is African American boys not connecting with those that teach and lead them. One of the things I have done is look at my hiring practice. When I started at my school, less than 20% of the teachers were of color. After this past year's hiring season, we now have 40% of the teachers in my school who are African American, and another large percent of the teachers in my school are Hispanic. Making sure students see themselves in the staff is critical. Many Black boys come to us with trust issues. These trust issues are exacerbated when African American boys do not have individuals they can connect with or people they feel can understand their lives

outside of the school. Do not get me wrong; I'm not saying by any means that only Black teachers can teach Black boys; however, I am saying there is a difference in the way African American teachers work with Black boys, especially those males who are at risk. With that in mind, I take very intentional steps to hire teachers of color.

As I stated before, there is an influx of Black boys who do not connect with school staff. I believe this is a big barrier to Black boys' ability to achieve. To address this issue, I started a mentor program that enables the Black and brown males in my opportunity to connect with males weekly. The program has been an enormous success. Many of the boys ask if we can meet more than once a week because they enjoy interacting and learning from the male mentors who run the program.

Principal 2:

When thinking about equity, we must work to create school cultures that support and recognize every child as a person who deserves equitable learning opportunities despite their race or gender. I often tell other principals we must be consciously aware of the individuals we place before our students. Everybody who wants to teach is not good for students. When I think about some of the teachers, we place before some of our Black male students, some are just not good for them at the end of the day—when you have a teacher who looks you in the eyes and states, “What do you want me to do with him? I give up; there's no hope for him.” You must ensure that you do everything in your power to make sure teachers like the one I just described are not in front of our Black males. The unfortunate reality is that many of our Black boys enter classes who are led by teachers with this deficit thinking toward Black boys.

The point I am trying to make is that too many African American boys get the short end of the stick in many schools. African American boys often attend schools with less than stellar teachers and have access to fewer resources. When you couple these aspects with many Black boys' challenging home lives, how can you not expect them to need more school support? I think about how many of my Black boys are struggling amid this COVID- 19 pandemic. Many African American boys were already finding it challenging to meet the expected learning outcomes, and the pandemic has increased this phenomenon among many Black male students across school districts. Furthermore, the implicit and explicit biases toward Black boys have increased in my opinion also during the pandemic.

A teacher told me that an African American male student in my school deserved to fail because during the distance learning period, he was not trying hard enough. Let me remind you that this young male is only in first grade and has limited support at home to engage in a type of learning he has no experience with; distance learning is hard for me as an adult, I can only imagine the strain it has placed on our babies. I asked the teacher if she had reached out to the child's family; she stated they were not responding, I told her we must give more grace to our students, especially in this current situation. I feel that this is many of our Black boys' stories; everyone is getting grace except for them. Teachers and school leaders must be more sensitive to the needs of our Black male scholars. To sum up my answer to the question, one of the biggest obstacles that hinder African Americans from excelling academically and socially is those that work with these males in their schools oftentimes. Individuals that lead and work with our Black boys

must do a much better job at getting to know them if we really want to champion their success.

Principal 3:

One of the most critical external factors impacting Black boys' ability to excel academically includes what they are dealing with in their neighborhoods and communities. We know some of our young Black males live in violent environments or have been exposed to the gangs or might have older siblings who do not do the right things. These are elements that our young African American scholars have no control over. However, that can harm males' in this demographic ability to achieve.

With that said, I often think about how I can help weed out those external factors and help the young Black boys in my school focus on what is most important, which is getting them to school every day and doing their best. I have those conversations with my Black males to discuss their grades, showing them data charts and saying, 'Hey, you think you are doing well at school, but look at this data. You are reading on a first-grade level.' Having those honest conversations with them and letting them know, 'Okay, you are in sixth grade, but reading on a first-grade level' is vital.

These conversations can be challenging; however, these are the things we must do to help our young African American males excel. I also have conversations with my Black boys to let them know what they need to do now and, in the future, to achieve their goals. I discuss the things they need to do to succeed in middle school, high school, and beyond. I tell them to take advantage of the care you are getting from us at the elementary level to help you achieve your goals.

Having those transparent conversations with Black boys and letting them know that we are invested in them plays an essential factor in helping them achieve. I also believe school leaders must take more deliberate steps to foster healthy relationships with Black males [so] that all the school leaders know them as individuals. It is not one-size-fits-all. I think many school leaders lump all Black boys into one group and feel the same approach can be used to educate all of them. This idea is never the case. All African American males bring a different set of strengths and challenges with them to the classroom. I work hard to understand all the Black males that attend my school—likes, dislikes, strengths, and areas where they need growth. I think many educators think all Black boys are the same and have deficit thinking with Black boys' ability to act appropriately and achieve academically. These stereotypes held by many schoolteachers continue to be a big internal barrier for many Black boys. This concept is one that principals must work hard to change to give Black boys a fair chance at succeeding.

Principal 4:

Unfortunately, outside of our school, there are some things that we cannot control. For example, my school is in a community that has a high crime rate. I can recall just last year, five of my students lost a parent to violence. Of course, this type of trauma can impact a child's capacity to achieve proficient academic results. For many of the African American males in my school, this continues to be their narrative outside of the school. Nevertheless, despite the trauma that many Black boys deal within my school, they are still expected to come to school each day with a smile and participate like everything is normal in their world, when it really is not.



I think one key component we must focus on, and a major barrier that needs more attention is Black boys' social-emotional health. Being a Black male in America comes with several challenges. I said that to say more attention needs to be placed on the idea of ensuring Black males are healthy mentally, whether they are excelling or struggling in their academic performance.

I focus on providing mental health access for all students who attend my school, including my Black male population. I also work with external partners to offer my staff training about how we better work with marginalized groups, such as African American boys. I think many educators also need more support and training in addressing Black boys' social and academic needs better.

Principal 5:

Well, I think you must work with people to understand the African American male perspective that is teachers, administrators, and the central office. Often, we pay lip service to discussing ways to close the gaps and do things to eliminate achievement gaps among Black males and their peers. However, are we committed to stop doing the things that are widening those gaps? Are we committed to listening? Are we committed to providing those resources? I also think listening to the students and finding out what they enjoy doing that is going to engage them is key to African American males' academic success in grade school. For example, do we think about how many boys like to move and are always talking about movement? Boys need kinesthetic activities. I mean, it is no wonder why boys, not just African American boys, but boys in general love P.E., because they love physical education; they love the idea of moving. It is natural for them.

Practitioners must work harder to understand the development of the male mind and male development; they must also better understand the African American male perspective.

So, for example, not to overgeneralize, but when students grow up in poverty, there are certain things that they must encounter. Let me explain—just hearing stories of some kids who do not have their own bed to sleep in or they share a couch. I recall having a student that slept all day in class; he said he had to sleep on one end of the sofa, and his sister had to sleep at the other end. So, things that we take for granted, we do not understand. Often, we wonder why some of our Black boys talk so loudly; however, they must speak loudly to be heard in some instances. In some households, if you have multiple siblings, that is how you get what you want; you must be assertive and loud in our advocating for children. It does not mean you cannot learn. It does not mean that those students need to be treated as problem students. It just means those males must be taught you can articulate your thoughts and be heard without yelling.

On the other hand, we always talk about African American boys, and they come from poverty, and those who come from different adverse social circumstances. But some African American boys are excelling. How do we support them? What are some programs that we can put in place to ensure that while we are working with the ones behind, we push the ones who are excelling? That is a big thing for me. I often reflect on the type of enrichment programs that we are giving those Black boys. I also ask what kind of careers we are pushing them toward (other than athletics) and things like that. Our Black boys need to be told and encouraged to explore success outside of sports and entertainment.

Principal 6:

I think that parental engagement is significant and continues to be a major barrier for many Black males when we think about their ability to achieve. I believe partnerships with the school and Black males' parents are vital to ensuring their academic and social well-being. I see the most successful Black male students when they have strong parental involvement.

When I think about internal barriers, I think one of the biggest culprits is how the staff works with Black males. One of the things I have implemented with my staff is culturally responsive training with our staff. Ensuring that staff has the training and the proper support in place to work with demographics like Black males is critical. I have also taken extra measures to let the young Black males in my school know we are here to support them. Hence, I initiated a program called project support for our Black males. The purpose of this program is to provide support to our Black males. The goal is to make sure that every male has someone they can go to for support. So, if it is me, the PE teacher, another classroom teacher, or the custodian, whoever it is, if they know that if they need to talk or need support, it is available. I think too little effort is put into ensuring our Black males have a robust support system in and out of the school.

Principal 7:

Well, I think the most significant factor that impedes on African American boys' ability to achieve is how they see themselves. Many Black boys are taught at an early age that being a Black boy automatically comes with deficits. Images in our culture, schools, textbooks, and the media champion this idea for many young Black boys, so before many of them start grade school, they already feel inferior to other males in other demographics.

One of the biggest things I try to do for Black boys in this predicament is help them to reimagine who they are. I have males who attend my school, and their story is, “I know my father is in jail. I do not live with my mother. I have 10 other kids in the house. Who am I, and what is my value? What do I bring to the world?” These young Black boys’ barriers of not knowing who they are and not knowing their worth can present significant challenges.

At my school, there is a large population of Black boys who struggle academically. Those academic struggles begin to manifest in other areas; it becomes a behavior issue. Next, we are dealing with the behavior issue versus the young Black males’ real problem, which is he really cannot read so he acts out. These problems begin to compound, and now this young Black male is in fourth and still cannot read because the true problem has not been addressed.

Another external and internal problem is funding, and I am not talking about material things; we do not need more materials. We need people. We need people that have the skillset, that have the temperament, to work with our Black males. We need more Black men in our schools. Our young African American males do not have enough positive images of themselves. They do not have enough people giving them positive affirmations. Our schools need more human resources, if a Black male is reading on a kindergarten level in the third grade, that third-grade teacher cannot meet the needs of that student and still meet the needs of her other students realistically. So, I think that it is really the resources; human capital is the most significant barrier. We must stop thinking we can do it all. For example, suppose you are an assistant principal. In that case, you cannot be the assistant principal, do the discipline, go into the classrooms, be a counselor,

go into the community, and speak with the parents. It is impossible to do it all; I think when we are forced to do it all, we push groups like our African American scholars further behind.

Principal 8:

As I stated earlier, I am more aware and deliberate with the people I hire. I work closely with my hiring team, and before we start our hiring season, we are talking about things like diversifying the staff—diversifying not only the expertise of the staff but even the demographics of the staff. That is real talk for me, and I think that maybe that is not the discussion that is happening in every school, but when you look around, again, it has to be diversified based on the needs of your population. Our school is trying to be even more strategic about how we go about staffing, especially when we think about groups of students like our Black males. Another barrier that must be addressed regarding Black boys is their social and emotional needs. Addressing African American males' mental health and social-emotional needs is critical. Making sure Black males' basic needs are met helps ensure they show up to school every day ready to learn externally.

Principal 10:

As far as external, I think that the most significant thing we need to address that many Black boys ask all the time [is] “Why is this important?” I think the question of “why” stems from many things that are going on in and outside of the school. I have gotten even more insight now, since we have been on distance learning since March, in the sense that Black boys are more concerned, and rightfully so, about their younger siblings that they must take care of at home. Or they are more concerned about where their next meal is coming from, or they are more concerned about whether they play in a park league for

football or whatever. For many of our Black males, so many things outside of school seem far more important than school. We must work harder to teach our Black males to value education.

### **Themes: Setting High Expectations and Providing Mentoring and Special Programs**

The principals were asked to share how they work to help African American boys in their school to overcome barriers that inhibit their ability to achieve academic success. Based on the principals' responses, the following recurring themes emerged: Most of the principals indicated that promoting healthy relationships and providing mentorship to African American boys was paramount to their academic success. The school principals also stated that setting high expectations, advocating for African American boys and being a voice to dismantle deficit thinking was associated with African American boys' ability to achieve academic success. Moreover, their ability to demonstrate proper behaviors played a vital role in achieving at proficient or higher academic levels. Many of the principals reported hiring more Black boys and more staff who could connect with African American boys and promote their academic performance.

#### **Principal 1:**

I see this question as an extension of five, so to restate what I said in the previous question, I work to ensure my staff is aware of Black males' academic and social needs. I fully understand that some Black males are doing well in school. However, this is not a reality for many Black males. Many African American males show up in our schools with various traumas that impact how they navigate through school. Teachers and staff must be aware of these things to build their capacity to work with African American males effectively.

One of the things that I try to do as a school leader is to be very intentional with the steps, I take to promote African American males in my school. It was not easy to do this at first because I do not want to preach and come off like I have only African American male students' interest. Still, being a Black man, I understand all too well the importance of teaching Black boys the importance of understanding education. I know the perils that await them when they do not do what they need to do as elementary students. So, I make it my mission to pour into young Black males in my school each day. I let them know that I have high expectations for each of them, and it is expected that they do well.

In addition, both myself and my assistant principal are African American men, so we thought it was essential to start a mentor program in our school for our boys of color. The mentor program allows us to meet with young boys. Most of them are African American males, and we are spending time with them. We get to talk about various subjects; we eat and teach the young men proper etiquette, such as not putting your elbows on the table when you eat. We are also doing things like teaching them how to tie a tie, even though I think I have only worn a tie to work twice this year. It is just not my thing, but I am always suited. We focus on teaching our boys things like how to engage in a conversation, how to give eye contact, things of that nature. To be very honest, when I was young, no one forced me to do something like that other than teachers who really cared. It transcended beyond those teachers just being a teacher; it made me feel like they cared for me beyond the classroom. I try to do the same for the African American males in my school. I want them to know I care for them beyond just being a student in my school. I really want to see them succeed in every aspect of life.

Principal 2:

Building relationships with Black boys is critical to their success. Growing up in America can be hard for our Black boys. It can be life-threatening, so school leaders must identify ways to make connections with people who can support them. I encourage my schoolteachers to speak more to our Black boys to find out what makes them who they are to tailor our approach with each of them to help them be successful. It is so that we know our boys' individual stories to give them voice. Some of our African American boys have a lot of bad energy balled up inside of them because we have not given them a chance to share their thoughts and voices.

I lost my oldest son; he committed suicide. I wish that there was more information for him to learn to share his thoughts and feelings with growing up Black in America. Many of our Black boys are hurting, and they do not know where to turn or how to express their pain. I believe if someone had identified my son's characteristics earlier that indicated he was drowning in pain; he may still be alive today. His pain did not come about overnight; it was a lifetime of struggle that nobody knew he was battling. Like my son's story, many other Black boys feel the pain is too unbearable for them to move forward. Black males have it hard in America. My son was in his early 20s when he died. I have learned a lot over the years, I have definitely learned that if we do not allow our Black boys to have an opportunity to share what is wrong and get them help, we are going to have a lot more dying. We must connect with them from the heart.

Principal 3:

As I said, I think just providing them with individuals that can support them, making sure those relationships are there. It could be as simple as having the little lunch bunch with



our young Black males. I have some sixth-grade boys I eat lunch with every week. Sometimes it is a matter of taking off the principal hat and just being real with them and having conversations about what it is like to be a Black male in the fifth or sixth grade, transitioning to middle school.

I also believe it is also critical to champion other teachers to challenge and change how they see our Black boys. The reality is most of our Black boys are taught by teachers who are not Black. I think around 80% of the teachers in America today are White. Think about that, which means there is a four out of five chance that an African American male will have a White teacher. Being a White woman myself, I believe it crucial that I change other White staff members' negative perceptions of Black boys when it comes to my attention. Until other White school leaders stand up and admit this happens in schools, we cannot fully address the matter and change our Black male scholars' trajectory.

Principal 4:

I think the biggest thing is to be honest with Black boys. Sometimes, some of my colleagues get into these positions, and they forget where they come from. Like many African American males who attend my school, I can relate to their stories concerning poor academic performance. I shared a story with some of my boys about how I did not learn how to multiply until I got into fourth grade. I told them it was nothing to be embarrassed about; I just did not practice and take things seriously until I got into the fourth- grade. However, once I understood the importance of taking school seriously, I changed my habits and mindset, which put me on a path to success. It is crucial to make meaningful connections with young Black males if you genuinely want to help them succeed.

As I stated previously, some of my boys are growing up in crime-infested communities and, unfortunately, see a lot of violence. Many of these Black boys think no one understands their stories because they have not had those experiences. However, when I tell them that I grew up in Philadelphia in a rough neighborhood full of crime (and drugs were around) but still managed to persevere despite my situation growing up.

I intentionally hire Black males. Young Black males must see other Black males in these roles and have a role model to look up to, so they do not think that it is all about the glitz and the glamour. As a principal, while I may not touch every student, I then employ teachers and staff to help do this work; I know I cannot do it alone. I must utilize all my power and resources to make that happen.

I also have a group of third-grade boys that I meet with every week to mentor. I selected third-grade boys because research shows that third grade is where they start that whole prison-pipeline situation for many Black boys. I want to keep them on track to help them achieve academic and social success early. The males and I get to eat lunch together; we read together and have discussions. I am building relationships with them simultaneously; I am making sure that I am impacting the way they view education. Small moments can make big impacts. No matter how little you may think action is, do not ever count it out because that one small thing can change one Black boy's world.

Principal 5:

So personal relationships are essential to African American boys' success. I also believe it is important to set high expectations for Black boys, pushing them to do well and not accepting mediocre work, but instead accepting only their best: empathy and sympathy. We do not have a lot of time for, "Oh, you poor baby. You are poor. You cannot learn."

No. Black boys must understand that they must work hard to make sure that they can read and write and meet math expectations despite things they may be dealing with outside of the school. Tough love can be hard to implement, but I do not allow my Black boys to think they cannot achieve because of their current situations.

Principal 6:

I think the first piece is building relationships. I have come to learn that African American boys seek you out, they open up, and they want to share what is going on when they have a positive relationship with a person.

Next, I work to acknowledge when Black boys in my school are doing well. Many teachers are always finding the things that our Black boys are doing wrong, but many are making positive choices. And even the ones who are not always making the best choices are doing something right. It is important as a school leader that I change the deficit thinking with Black males in my school. I find that all of the African American boys in my school have something positive that their teachers and I can highlight.

Another thing I do to support Black boys in my school is I identify problem areas quickly and implement the proper intervention to help them succeed. For example, if I know a Black male in my school has attendance problems, I quickly address the problem. I set up a meeting with his parents, teachers, pupil personnel worker, school counselor, and any other stakeholder in that male's life to identify viable ways to get that young man in school and keep him in school. I think too often, school leaders wait too long to help support Black males with areas where they need more support. We have to address these issues quickly to give them the best chance at succeeding.

Principal 7:

Sometimes my best way to support the Black boys in my school is to be what they need at that moment. Many of the Black boys in my school come needing varying things. Sometimes I step outside my role as a principal, and I go into the role of a “mama” or become a counselor. It is whatever they need to understand I am here to support them no matter what and I want to see them do well. I end up becoming far more intimate with many of the Black male scholars in my school so that they can see that I know who they are and that I am somebody that cares about them. I also make sure they know I am invested in them, and I will do whatever I can to ensure their success. It really is about making those connections for many African American boys.

Principal 8:

For me, it is all about forging those relationships with African American boys; I try to find some way to connect with them.

I also try to find the positive in their lives. I love making calls to those young Black boys’ parents who have been having a rough time in school. Seeing their faces light when I tell their parents that they are back on track is just a great feeling. So, building those relationships and leading from a positive place is critical to help Black males excel. They want to know that you are concerned. They want to know that you care. I make sure my African American male scholars know that I am their biggest and loudest cheerleader and that I am here to support and guide them.

Principal 9:

I really focus my attention on the way teachers are engaging Black boys in the classroom. When I visit classes, I am looking closely at what hands-on activity the teacher is providing. I am examining how the lessons allow African American males to see

themselves in the lesson if applicable, and I am looking to see how the teacher is addressing the learning needs of those Black boys. I think a laser focus must be on the instructional practices teachers are using with Black males to see Black boys improve in their academic performance. I ensure I set high expectations for the teachers and my African American scholars as they navigate through the teaching and learning process.

Principal 10:

It is important for leaders not to get too far away from the classroom and forget where the real work takes place. African American boys' ability to achieve is highly predicated on the quality of their educational experiences. Hence, I spend a great deal of time developing the teacher's capacity to effectively implement instructional practices to support Black males' academic outcomes.

I also teach a small group of students each week to ensure the coaching and feedback I am giving teachers is relevant. I have my own RTI group that includes mostly African American boys. Some of these boys are some of the most challenging in my school when it comes to behavior and academic performance. Teaching these students weekly allows me to prove to others that it is possible, and these students can learn if you set up the right things to be in place. The weekly teaching opportunities also allow me to dismantle deficit thinking related to Black males' ability to follow directions and learn. Another step school leader must take to promote African American boys' educational outcome is to pay attention to the data and implement support when needed quickly. Data has to be the most important thing that you discuss with your staff. If you are not looking at data and obsessing over how students perform, especially concerning marginalized groups like Black males, you are wasting your time.

I also work hard to get my Black male scholars invested in their own data. This can be life-changing for them because they do not want to be viewed as less than. They also do not want to be considered to not be doing well. Having those transparent conversations about how they are doing in school and what they can do to improve is essential.

### **Themes: Addressing Deficit Thinking and Implementing Culturally Responsive Practices**

The principals were asked to share what professional development strategies and opportunities they implement to promote cultural sensitivity toward African American boys in their schools. Based on the principals' responses, the following recurring themes emerged: Several principals highlighted that they engage their staff in professional development opportunities that aim to alter staff members' thinking toward African American boys who are influenced by deficit thinking and implicit/explicit biases toward Black male students. Many principals also shared they implement professional development opportunities that promote culturally responsive practices and the use of restorative practices to promote equitable learning opportunities for Black boys in their schools. However, some principals did indicate they have not engaged their staff in any professional development related to cultural sensitivity toward African Americans and those professional development opportunities were nonexistent at this time

#### **Principal 1:**

I wanted to make sure that we implemented the restorative practice professional development for the teachers in my building to support the way we approached discipline for marginalized groups like African American boys. From that professional development, teachers were required to do circles where they worked to build

relationships not only with just African American students but all students in their classroom. I also took intentional steps to help my teachers develop growth mindsets. We have been engaging in the growth mindset training for some years now. Teachers' deficit thinking with Black boys is highly influenced by a fixed mindset related to what they think Black boys are limited to accomplishing. I am working to promote growth mindsets in all of my teachers, concerning how they view and interact with African American males.

Principal 3:

I really like this question. When I read it earlier today, I thought, "Wow." It made me reflect, and I admit that the professional development that we have done has not explicitly focused on our African American male students. With that stated, this question makes me think about how we can create opportunities moving forward into next year to build my staff's capacity to support African American boys in our building better. Our school's population is about 50/50 now, 50% African American and 50% Hispanic. We have done a lot of professional development around English language learners and have not intentionally neglected our African American students. However, we need to do more, especially when it comes to our Black boys, to change explicit and implicit bias thinking that impacts how they navigate school. What can we do to ensure that we are helping teachers recognize their biases and eliminate them to best support our African American male students? As a school, I do not think we have had enough professional development that is specifically geared toward young Black boys. We have to get them young to avoid the school-to-prison pipeline, and just eliminating all those things.

Principal 4:

So, I have not done professional development directly toward African American boys. However, our school has done a lot of work around supporting our student's social-emotional needs. My staff has engaged in four professional development [sessions] this year centered around helping students' social and emotional well-being. We know that Black boys need more support in this area, so while this training was not implemented to Black boys only, they benefit from teachers' participation in this type of training.

Principal 5:

So, we have a solid equity team at our school, an equity team, the equity committee that delivers PD four times a year; some of our professional development has been geared toward African American males. We also deal a lot with trauma-informed instruction professional development to support some of our Black boys. The trauma-informed instruction professional development helps us better support students that come to us traumatized. The other professional development I focus on is having non-African American teachers give PD on understanding some of our implicit biases and microaggressions to promote our staff's ability to provide equitable learning opportunities to all students.

Principal 6:

The main professional development my staff receives is culturally responsive training each year. I feel many Black males fall victim to staff members who just do not know how to work with them or have stereotypes toward Black boys that prevent them from supporting those males properly. The culturally responsive professional development has helped my staff ensure their instructional practices are culturally sensitive to the needs of the African American boys in my school. The training has also helped my staff members



recognize some of the biases they possess toward African American boys and think about ways to change the negative views of these boys to better their academic achievement.

Principal 7:

To be honest, I am not going to say that I have had something specifically for African American boys. However, in March, we did begin a professional development initiative called “Book Talks.” I purchased various books for my staff; the books were not just centered on African American male students only. The books were related to topics/groups that teachers wanted to develop a greater skill set in supporting as it related to students’ academic performance. There was an ESOL group, there was a SPED group, and there was a group working with African American boys. The plan was to do book talks with them so that we can begin to develop experts through our experiences and reading more about strategies to support these various groups.

Outside of the book talks, I will state that I often show my staff data related to African American males. That has led to some professional development with restorative practices. Black boys are suspended at a higher rate than any other demographic in my school. We are working hard to identify better ways to discipline Black males, other than suspending them.

Principal 8:

I have to admit, professional development centered around African American boys only is definitely an area of growth and improvement for my school. It is a demographic that my staff needs more professional development in supporting. I feel the current state of our society, world, and what is going on in the media has opened the door for more

authentic, transparent discussions to happen at the school level regarding professional development with Black boys. I already see these conversations happening in my school.

For example, at a recent biweekly staff meeting, in light of everything that has gone on (the pandemic, the social injustice that has been taking place recently), the staff decided that we could not start our meeting without providing a safe space for our diversified staff to be open and transparent about what they were feeling at that moment. There was no agenda for that time. Well, the only agenda item was we are just opening the floor for anyone to share whatever is on their heart. It was quiet at first, but eventually, a few people from different races shared their hearts. Some people admitted that they used to think this way, but now they feel this way. Some people shared their convictions about having a warped mentality, if you will, based on their race and their upbringing, their experiences. That was the most recent opportunity to really open up the floor and create that safe space where we could talk about biases and things that we have experienced as a result of race and culture. I think more conversations and professional development like this are needed.

I also think we need to do a better job, so I will totally own that one. I think because of the makeup of my school, I do feel that there is one culture/demographic that probably gets more attention when we talk about cultural responsiveness and making sure that we are meeting the needs of our students. I think my staff focuses more on this particular race of students when thinking about my staff's professional learning opportunities. I have done a lot around that specific race, so now even some of your questions definitely have evoked just a sense of urgency for me, coupled with what is

going on right now in the world. We need to revisit how we are engaging staff with professional development related to African American boys.

Principal 9:

My professional development to support Black boys in my school has centered around what good instruction looks like for all students, including our Black boys. I believe our Black boys' academic performance will increase when they are engaged in good solid instruction daily. With that being said, I center my resources on developing all teachers' capacity in my school to lead all student groups to academic success. This approach holds true for how I am working with the teachers in my building to support African American male students.

Principal 10:

Obviously, just based on everything that is going on, but it is the life that we have lived. We are working with an organization called Overcoming Racism and doing sessions with them to just talk about the role race plays in schools and the role that White supremacy has played in the development of policy that impacts our schools. My school is also taking a more in-depth look at our school policies, whether it be ones that I implemented or policies that were in place before I became the principal. I am taking steps to examine and dismantle policies and practices that hinder groups like African American boys from reaching their full academic potential.

### **Themes: Leaning Into Experiences and Fostering Relationships**

The principals were asked what personal experiences most significantly influenced their leadership approach towards African- American male students. Based on the principals' responses for this question, the following recurring themes emerged: The majority of the

principals highlighted that their personal experiences impacted how they led African American boys in their schools; this response was prevalent among participants who Black males were. Most of the principals also indicated that their commitment to set high expectations for Black males in their schools influenced how they led African American boys. Lastly, the school principals shared that the relationship between them and their African American male students impacted their leadership practices with males in that demographic in their schools.

Principal 1:

When thinking about the personal influence that has the most significant impact on how I lead the African American male population in my school, two frames of thought come to mind. First, I think about my own experiences growing up as an African American male in the American educational system. Like countless Black boys today, I had teachers who had low expectations of my academic capabilities. I realize today had the expectation of what I could achieve been greater on my life by those who led and taught me, I probably would be farther in life. Do not get me wrong, by no means am I saying I am doing bad today, but I am saying that the push for me to do more was not always there. So, I use my personal experience coupled with what I see today in the classroom to push the African American boys in my building to perform at their best every day. I want them to know that they are expected to meet academic expectations regardless of their circumstances, and I am here to support them in any way that I can.

The second frame of thought is related to me being an African American male. As I have stated throughout this interview, being a Black man in America is challenging. Educators must acknowledge that if we really want to set our Black boys on the right track. I know there are certain behaviors that I have to work to change in African

American boys right away when I see them displayed, such as not coming to class prepared, not taking school seriously, or being disrespectful to their teacher. I know all too well when I do not work to change these behaviors in these boys, it can lead to other unwanted consequences for our Black boys in the future. So being a Black man and connecting with my African American males through my personal experiences has a considerable impact on how I lead Black boys in my school.

Principal 2:

I think for me, the most significant impact that influences how I lead African American boys in my school is related to the fact that I am the mother of Black males and the grandmother of Black boys. I know all too well what can happen when proper support is not provided to our Black boys. As I shared earlier, I lost my son because the emotional pain he had dealt with for years was never adequately addressed, so I often think about supporting our Black and brown boys' academic and social needs. With that stated, I recently shared a letter with my community that captures my feelings on those personal factors that impact how lead Black boys in my school. I think it is fitting to convey my thoughts concerning this question.

It says: "It would be remiss of me and quite frankly irresponsible if I didn't address the racial tensions which plague our world and its impact on our culture and our community. I take pride in being a leader of color, leading a school community representing families of a different color. And as much as I take pride in being a Black woman, I am equally saddened by the Black lives lost, murdered by the very agency whose motto is to serve and protect. I am frustrated and angry at the hunt-and-prey temperament displayed by those. My heart is sore and in agony at my fear of the lives of

all Black males. This includes my son and my biracial grandsons who live in a world that sees them as not being White enough to invoke White privilege but Black enough to be a target to place a knee on their neck. I do not have the answers to a complex, just simple inalienable right to live.

“I have grown weary of the constant cases, experiences, and situations of killing Black folks as if it were a sport, especially our men. It is as if there is an intentional plan of Black male extinction. By no means is it my intent to dismiss or belittle the struggle of any marginalized group of people. However, the number of Black males dying by a police officer’s hands supported by corrupt police administration is well documented. Daily we see phone videos, webcams, and body cams depicting the overwhelming evidence that Black men are being hunted. It is also evident by the solidarity of many races of people worldwide protesting the very injustices; they chant ‘Black lives matter.’ It is time for all of us to take a stance that people of color have been doing for over 400 years predicated in the free land. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of neutrality tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.’ We have work to do, and we each are responsible for our own scholarship in this work. We must start reading, knowing, and facing accurate history and then facing ourselves to recognize and change our own biases, implicit and explicit. So, rest up. Our school is poised to do the work, change the narrative that changes the attitudes of those we work with, and change the lives of our community. Let us provide breadth. Galatians 3:28: ‘There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and

female for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This letter sums up why I must leverage my power to support and move Black males forward in my school as a school leader.

Principal 3:

I guess, if I think about my upbringing and my exposure to diverse environments as a child, it was not very diverse at all. Everybody in my community was White—Catholic and Italian. So, I think going through high school and college and just being in different populations and recognizing that many biases existed among non-African American individuals toward African American individuals infuriated me. It was always a core value of mine that all people should be treated with kindness and respect. This thinking has definitely shaped my school leadership approach as I believe in giving all students the best educational experience possible.

It has also been my mission to make sure that the people I hire, the people I put in front of children, including our African American boys, are the best people for those students. We know not everybody comes with a sense that all students deserve the best. They bring those biases to the table, and I have been very intentional about taking steps to dismantle those biased beliefs among my staff with marginalized groups like Black males.

I know the statistics that exist out there about African American boys and how different teachers can drastically alter their paths in a positive or negative way. I think that having the right people in a building, bringing the passion that I have and just letting people know certain things are not acceptable; they are non-negotiable. If you work at my school, you want the best for all scholars no matter what race or gender the student is. I push my staff to acknowledge their biases and eliminate them. If this is not the population

of students that you desire to work with, no problem. I welcome you to relocate to another school environment because this is what we expect at my school. We have to do right by our children. With that stated, my upbringing and what I've read about and my passion for making sure all scholars achieve regardless of their race, gender, and socioeconomic background have had the most significant impact on how I lead and serve Black male students in my school.

Principal 4:

I think for me, it is my own experience growing up as a child. While I had African American boys in my life while growing up, not many of them were as a role model per se. Their role was more about managing and keeping me in line. Some would even threaten to take me to the jails to see how other Black men lived when they made bad choices. I shared that experience to say I did not get the African American male that inspired me to do better. I got the drill sergeant or the one who pumped fear in me. I did not get anybody who poured into me as an African American male until I was in high school in the Upward Bound program. I can recall it was not even the teachers; the counselors we worked with would talk about college and all the things that they experienced and what doors it could open for Black boys if we were willing to work hard. Those conversations really inspired me to develop the drive to be a successful Black man. I was determined not to become another brother from Philly who was a statistic. My personal experiences as a Black man and recalling the impact certain conversations had on my life as a young Black boy most influence how I work with Black boys in my school.



For me, it is about making sure that at the end of the day, I know that I walked into my building and gave it all I had. Everything that I do is connected to improving the students' lives, especially our Black boys. Every decision that I make is made with my students in mind first. Some of my staff may not like my approach to leading because they want an adult-centered workplace, and for me, I cannot do that. I care too much about these kids, especially our Black boys. Black males in this country already have a target on their back, one because we are Black and two because we are males in this country. At times, I feel it is not looking good for Black men today, and so each day, I have to get up and prepare myself to face the world to make sure that I'm in a good space for them to help ensure their academic and social-emotional needs are met.

Principal 5:

I would have to state what influences my leadership approach the most with Black boys is reflecting on how I would want someone to lead and teach my own child. I have a daughter that is 14 and getting ready to start high school. I try to approach it from the standpoint of what type of school I want my child to attend. I want my daughter to attend a school with high expectations for her, address her social-emotional needs, and be aware of her academic and social-emotional needs to ensure she achieves success. I try to create the same learning environment for my school students, especially Black males. I know many of them need extra support to ensure their academic success, like mentorship programs and making those connections in the community to support these young men outside of the school. Another thing that personally influences the way I lead Black boys is my mission to find out what they do well and nurture that gift or talent; our Black boys

have so much talent. I often reflect on how my leadership as a Black man influences Black males in my building to be their best selves.

Principal 6:

I think, once again, it is about being reflective and seeing myself in them. I tell the staff all the time, “Look, we get a chance to have a significant impact on these students’ lives this year. I tell my staff to make each day count. I also tell them to ensure all 180 days of the school year count and that they are meaningful and engaging days for all students. As elementary school teachers, I remind my staff that we are really shaping how students will view school for the rest of their lives. It is especially critical that we work to create a space where all students know that school is a place where they belong and are expected to do well; this concept is especially crucial for our Black boys. It is so important that we are good stewards in creating a safe space for our Black boys making sure that we are doing our job in making sure that they are successful.

Principal 7:

The first thing that came to mind when you asked that question was my African American son. In the spirit of where we are right now as a country, this is going to make me heavy. Knowing what my son can experience just because he is a young Black man and knowing that I did everything I could to raise him with dignity, respect, and manners—and that it does not matter to many people—hurts. The fact that he has long, gorgeous dreadlocks and his skin is chocolate as everything. Despite all these great things, he can be stopped by the police for just being Black. I can recall when the police stopped him and his friends, the police said to him, “Where are you going?” And he says, “I’m walking up to the school.” My son proceeds to ask the officer, “Why did you ask me

where I was going?” And the police officer replies, “Because you look suspicious.” We cannot keep doing this to our African American boys.

I felt like I failed my son when he told me that story about him and his friends. I did not teach my son how to be prepared for institutions in America to penalize him automatically because he was a Black man. My son’s encounter with the police at an early age helped shape my view on how I lead and support Black boys in my school. His experience has also given me a different lens and new energy with telling these stories about Black boys to ensure their stories are told to change the narrative that America has tried to impose upon our Black boys.

Principal 8:

For me, I think it is the personal impact of growing up with my single mother with my African American brother in a low-income community that has influenced the way I interact and lead Black boys in my school. I get their stories because I have lived their stories vicariously through my brother’s story. My father was not involved in my brother’s and my situation, so my school family was a big resource for my brother and me. I was fortunate enough to have wonderful schooling experiences, extraordinary educators, and great school administrators who significantly impacted my life. My mother did the absolute best she could, but there were things that she just could not do, especially for my brother. I can recall men in the school stepping in to support my brother with stuff related to becoming a responsible man. I remember men in the school, teaching my brother things like completing a job application or learning to tie a tie. With that stated, I think the school serves as a beacon of hope for many of our African American boys. I keep this in mind as I lead the boys in my school. Many of them rely on resources

in the school and community to help propel them forward. I believe that notion influences my approach with how I lead my Black boys in my school. I know a great deal of their success depends on their experiences with their school leaders and teachers.

Principal 9:

I think my mind always goes back to the fact that I am raising a Black male. I see my African American son in every Black male in my school. When I go into a classroom, I think about how my son struggles at times in his classes. My son has to be given specific directions and a lot of support to achieve the expected academic outcomes in class. With that being said, I often think about how many Black boys need that same type of support in my school and how we are supporting those boys. So, I would have to say the concept that has the biggest impact on how I lead Black boys is seeing them as an extension of myself. I see all the Black boys in my school as my sons; this view helps me lead from a passion for ensuring their academic, social, and mental well-being.

Principal 10:

My own personal influences have the biggest impact on how I lead my Black boys. I run my school in the way that I wanted my school to be run when I was in school. The experiences that I wanted as a young Black male in school, I try to create that for our Black boys. The things that I knew I struggled with when I was a young male are the things that I try to proactively solve for our Black boys or try to proactively create programs that can support them in dealing with issues they face today. I also think about the profound impact positive relationships with many of my teachers had on my life and how they help champion my success in life. I had so many teachers that influenced me and worked to create a space where I could achieve success no matter what obstacles

arose in my life. I think about those experiences often. For me, it is more than just about what you are teaching them in class. I want teachers also to consider the impact they are having on Black boys outside of school. Honestly, what makes the difference for many of our Black boys is knowing that the individuals leading and guiding them care about them as individuals inside and outside the school setting.

### **Summary and Preview of Next Chapter**

Chapter 4 reviews the themes and correlated responses that provided findings for this study. This chapter presents insight on the leadership behaviors and strategies elementary school principals are implementing to promote African American boys' academic performance. Based on the prevalent themes discovered through coding, I found that public school administrators have similar thoughts and experiences when examining their leadership practices that promote African American boys' academic performance.

Chapter 5 summarizes the findings for each subtopic and gives recommendations for administrators and future researchers. As the conclusion of this study, Chapter 5 also answers the research questions presented and discusses how the purpose of the study was met. Finally, this chapter describes how these findings could still be extended through future studies.

## **Chapter Five: Summary, Implications, Recommendations**

School principals play a critical role in the trajectory of African American boys' academic and social success. Statts (2015) highlighted that African American boys' academic success is highly predicated on school leaders' ability to create and foster educational settings where African American boys are expected to do well. School principals possess the power to influence the teachers they lead and the communities they serve to identify ways to best support African American boys who may otherwise have a challenging time achieving success in their academic and social endeavors.

### **Study Overview**

The purpose of this case study was to examine how principals at the elementary level used their perceived leadership behaviors to influence the academic success of African American boys in their schools. This study did not focus on just one aspect of educational leadership. Instead, this study explored multiple leadership behaviors that the principals enacted to influence African American male students' academic success, as perceived by the school principals. This chapter concludes this study with a summary and interpretation of the key findings, implications for change, and recommendations for future research. This chapter also connects the study results to this study's literature review.

### **Study Procedures**

The findings of this study were derived from semistructured interviews conducted with 10 elementary school principals. Each principal provided insight into the leadership behaviors he or she enacted to promote the academic success of African American boys. The principals also shared artifacts, such as meeting agendas and program information, that shed more light on the leadership behaviors they implemented with their staff, students, and community to help propel

African American boys forward in their school. The oral data shared by the school principals was recorded using the Zoom platform and transcribed using the transcription service TranscribeMe to ensure accuracy of the research participants' views and thoughts. Once the interviews were completed the research participants' responses were analyzed and coded to establish recurring themes that provided answers to the research questions.

### **Participants**

Ten elementary school principals from the Southeast United States participated in this study. All the participants in this study led in a school with a population of 50 African American male students or more. The principals in this study led in a wide range of school communities, ranging from low-to high-income in the Southeast United States. One of the 10 principals was White, and the others were African American. There was a total of four women principals and six male principals who participated in this study. The principals' years of experience in education ranged from 10 years to over 25 years.

### **Research Questions and Corresponding Themes**

The following research questions guided this study. Reoccurring themes that aided in answering each question follow the question below.

**RQ1.** How do elementary school principals perceive their leadership practices to influence the academic achievement of elementary African American male students? Based on the participants' responses, the following emerged as recurring themes: (a) promoting professional development of teachers, (b) recognizing African American males' intellectual needs, (c) creating a sense of belonging, (d) understanding African American males' social-emotional needs, (e) addressing deficit thinking, and (f) promoting culturally responsive teaching.

**RQ2.** What strategies do elementary school principals implement to foster the academic performance of African American male students? Based on the participants' responses, the following emerged as recurring themes: (a) leading with empathy and hope, (b) addressing home life and aggression, (c) diversifying the staff, (d) strengthening community partnerships, (e) setting high-expectations, (f) mentoring and special programs, and (g) fostering strong relationships.

### **Summary of Research Findings**

This study was guided by the conceptual framework of the CRT, which suggests that educators and school leaders often implement practices, whether intentional or unintentional, that lead to inequitable practices that create undesirable learning environments for African American students (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). Data analysis and the interpretation of several recurring themes from this study are aligned to tenants of CRT, which also suggests that race continues to be a significant factor in influencing the schooling experiences of African American students in comparison to their peers who come from other racial backgrounds (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995). The principals' response to many of the questions in this study reinforce the idea that many African American boys continue to experience disadvantages in their schooling experiences because they are young Black men.

The principals highlighted the importance of becoming aware of the innate negative consequences that come with being an African American male in America. One principal described young Black boys as America's prey that is being hunted in aims of devouring African American boys until they no longer exist. I want to acknowledge the thoughts shared by this participant are not representative of all of the principals in this study. However, the statement made by this principal provides context to the dire state of African American boys in America



today, and more must be done to dismantle infrastructures in the fabric of America that have led to undesirable outcomes for African American boys.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) contended the same school structure that builds up White students also tears down Black students, making them feel inferior. Nearly 25 years after the statement made by Ladson-Billings and Tate, the same still holds true for African American students, especially African American boys. Their educational experiences continue to be subpar at best, resulting in a life of hardship that extends far beyond their schooling years. Nonetheless, this study's recurring themes shed light on steps school principals can take to propel young African American boys forward by helping them achieve academic and social success despite challenges that may arise.

### **Leading With Empathy and Hope**

All of the principals expressed the importance of being empathetic to African American boys' academic and social needs. The principals highlighted that many young African American boys experience challenges outside of school at a much higher rate than their male peers in other demographics and these challenges may negatively impact African American boys' ability to succeed. Nonetheless, the principals also expressed the importance of being hopeful as one leads African American boys. The principals acknowledged that leading from a positive place helped them achieve more positive academic results for the elementary African American boys in their schools. The principals' responses are congruent with Essien (2017), who highlighted that African American boys must be led by principals who demonstrate a strong belief in African American boys' ability to achieve expected learning outcomes despite past or current experience. Essien (2017) also indicated the importance of school principals being cognizant to social infrastructures that impede on African American boys' academic progress to effectively support

teachers and community members in dismantling those infrastructures to aid African American boys in achieving academic and social success.

### **Addressing Home Life and Aggression**

Several of the principals expressed that African American boys are often viewed as being overly aggressive, low-performing students who cannot communicate their frustrations. The principals shared these views possessed by many practitioners lead to young African American boys being placed in special education programs at disproportionate rates and receiving suspensions at higher rates than boys in other demographics. The principals highlighted that more steps must be taken by school principals to support African American boys in and out of school, as many African American male students lack the support needed to help them achieve the expected learning outcomes while in school and at home. One principal stated that many African American boys' exacerbated tendencies to demonstrate aggression and that not achieving academically is a result of their basic needs not being met at home and in school. The principal stated that like all other students, African American boys want to be cared for, loved, and have their basic needs met. Brown et al. (2013) contended that African American boys are forced to navigate school environments that perpetuate the stereotypes that they are intellectually inadequate and will exhibit behaviors that will become problematic. White (2009) asserted that negative stereotypes connected to African American male students can be altered when school leaders, teachers, and parents take deliberate steps to work together to support African American boys both in and out of school.

### **Recognizing African American Male Students' Intellectual Needs: Importance of Professional Development**

The majority of the principals shared insight on the critical practice of ensuring school staff is aware of the intellectual and behavioral needs of the African American boys in their schools. The principals highlighted the importance of analyzing school performance data on a continuous basis to support teachers and staff with implementing the proper interventions to support African American boys in meeting the expected learning outcomes (Greer et al., 2018). The principals also indicated the vital role data analysis played in helping them decide what professional development opportunities to engage their staff in to enhance their staff's capacity to address African American boys' academic and social needs in the best way possible. The principals' responses were aligned to Miller and Martin's (2014) findings that school principals have the ability to significantly alter all students' educational trajectories regardless of their demographic by developing teachers' capacity to meet all students' academic needs. Miller and Martin (2014) highlighted the critical role professional development played in improving teacher practice when working with marginalized groups, such as African American boys.

### **Diversifying the Staff and Strengthening Community Partnerships**

The principals discussed the significant role of a diversified staff in promoting the academic performance of African American boys in their schools. The principals highlighted the need for hiring staff whom African American boys could relate to, as this notion played a vital role in propelling African American boys forward in their schools. According to Brown (2015), school principals must take deliberate steps to hire staff who are diverse and well qualified to provide effective instructional experiences to African American boys in order to advance their academic performance. The principals also highlighted the critical role of community

partnerships in helping African American male students improve in their ability to meet academic expectations. Washington (2010) asserted that effective school leadership by principals significantly influenced the type of relationships that were created between the school and community to support African American boys while in school and in the community. Forming these community partnerships can support the academic success of African American boys (Washington, 2010).

### **Creating a Sense of Belonging and Understanding African American Male Students' Social-Emotional Needs**

The participants expressed the importance of making their school environments feel like school was a place where the African American boys belonged and were expected to do well. The principals highlighted that when they considered and acknowledged the African American boys' social-emotional needs, they were more successful at creating a sense of belonging among the African American male students in their schools. The principals stated that when African American boys are taught and led in supportive school environments that support their social-emotional needs and create a sense of belonging, they are more likely to meet academic and behavioral expectations. Johnson (2015) asserted that when African American boys are taught and led by teachers and school leaders who create a school environment that fosters a high level of belonging, African American boys have better academic and behavioral outcomes.

### **Setting High Expectations and Providing Mentoring and Special Programs**

The principals shared insight on the importance of providing mentorship and setting high expectations for African American boys as these components were paramount to their academic success. One principal stated that when African American boys know they are expected to perform at high levels, they will rise to the occasion. Hallinger (2015) stated that school leaders

and teachers' ability to set high expectations for African American boys resulted in better academic performance for African American boys. Noguera (2009) stated that in addition to setting high expectations for African American boys, school principals must develop mentorship that cultivates African American boys' leadership and skills and that continually supports boys in and out of the classroom to help them achieve academic success.

### **Addressing Deficit Thinking and Implementing Culturally Responsive Practices**

The participants believed it was crucial to address staff members' thinking toward African American boys that was influenced by deficit thinking and implicit or explicit biases toward Black boys. The principals also shared they implement professional development opportunities that promote culturally responsive practices and the use of restorative practices to promote equitable learning opportunities for African American boys in their schools. Little and Tolbert (2018) shed light on the significant role of deficit thinking toward African American boys in creating negative schooling experiences for them by impacting their self-esteem and overall ability to achieve academically. Brown et al. (2013) asserted that deficit thinking must be altered in school environments if African American male students were to achieve academically. Similarly, White (2009) postulated that deficit thinking must be replaced with appropriate culturally responsive practices that promote African American male students' educational outcomes.

### **Leaning Into Experiences and Fostering Relationships**

The majority of the principals highlighted their personal experiences and stated that their ability to foster meaningful relationships with the African American boys in their school was paramount to their academic and social success. Some of the principal shared initiatives such as lunch bunches or attending a sporting event with African American boys in their schools to help

build those relationships with African American boys. The principals also stated that African American boys in their schools were more likely to meet academic and behavioral expectations when meaningful relationships were forged between the principals, staff, parents, and African American male students. African American boys often come from families that place high value on relationships and family; hence, similar interactions between educators and African American boys often translate into better academic performance for African American boys (Noguera, 2009; White, 2009).

### **Implications for Change**

1. Principals should establish strong relationships with internal and external community partners to support African American boys while in school and out of school. These community partnerships can be in the form of mentorship programs or specialized programs supporting the advancement of African American boys academically and socially. Principals should also consider how they can engage African American male students in mentoring opportunities through distant learning platforms such as Zoom. Black boys attending schools in marginalized communities and low income areas may need more support and mentoring opportunities to ensure their academic success during Distance Learning initiatives.
2. Principals should create a committee that sets a goal of hiring and creating a diversified staff—namely, one that resembles the African American male population in the school. The committee should hire a certain percentage of African American male teachers and staff each year. African American male students must see more positive images of staff members who look like them.

3. Principals must establish a robust system that enables their staff to review data related to African American male students' academic and behavioral progress on a continuous basis. When deficits are identified in African American male students' academic and behavioral performance, effective interventions should be identified and implemented quickly.
4. Principals provide continuous professional development that promotes teachers and staff's ability to implement improved instructional practices that propel African American male students forward. The professional development should also help teachers and staff alter deficit thinking toward African American boys that causes teachers and staff to act on implicit and explicit biases toward African American boys, thus hindering their academic and social progress.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Below are considerations for research that can advance and expand the body of knowledge regarding how to advance African American male students' academic and social progress.

1. It is recommended that future studies focus on how school districts are diversifying school district principal pools to hire more African American male principals. Research suggests that African American men are hired at much lower rates than individuals from other demographics. However, Black male principals may play a significant role in addressing challenges encountered by African American boys during their schooling years.
2. Future research should focus on school principals who lead African American male students at the middle school and high school level to identify what leadership behaviors they are implementing to promote the academic and social success of African American

male students. This study only focused on the leadership behaviors of principals at the elementary level.

3. In conclusion, it is recommended that future research examines the steps school districts are taking to professionally develop school principals to better lead and serve African American male students, especially for school districts with high populations of African American male students.

### **Conclusion**

The participants in this study used their voices and their experiences in leading African American male students at the elementary level to shed light on the progress that has been made in educating African American male students. The participants also highlighted the areas of growth that are still needed in many schools across America to help place African American male students on equal academic footing with their male peers in other demographics.

The principals in this study provided many valuable leadership behaviors that other principals can emulate to propel African American boys forward in their academic and social attainment. However, the principals did bring to the forefront the injustices and adverse schooling experiences that many African American male students continue to face in and out of school. School principals must continue to address the narrative among staff and the communities they serve that suggests young African American boys are overly aggressive, disengaged, and come from families who do not value school.

The principals in this study shared how when proper leadership practices are demonstrated with staff and the community, African American male students can achieve academic and social success. This research study sheds light on the significance of principals



forging strong relationships between the school and community as well as setting high expectations for African American boys so that they can succeed.

In conclusion, principals have to become advocates for African American boys, and this leadership practices has to begin during African American boys' elementary years. It is no surprise that African American boys need much more support than their male counterparts in other demographics, especially considering the current state of America, which sends messages to our young African American boys that their lives are not valued. School principals possess the power to use their influence and platform to change this narrative among the African American boys they lead and serve, I hope this study can serve as a tool that school principals can utilize to gain more insight into how to better serve and lead African American boys at the elementary level.

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## Appendix A: Professional Standards for Educational Leaders

Standard 1: Mission, Vision and Core Values	Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.	Standard 6: Professional Capacity of School Personnel	Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms	Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being.	Standard 7: Professional Community for Teachers and Staff	Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Standard 3: Ethics and Cultural Responsiveness	Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.	Standard 8: Meaningful Engagement of Families and	Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Standard 4: Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment	Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being	Standard 9: Operations and Management	Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Standard 5: Community of Care and Support for Students	Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.	Standard 10: School Improvement	Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being

*Note.* Adapted from *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*, by National Policy Board for Educational Administration, Reston VA, p. 27. Copyright © 2015 by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration. In public domain.

**Appendix B: Instrumentation**

Number	Question
1	Can you describe your experiences as a school principal in working with African American males?
2	Can you discuss some of the academic and social challenges you have observed related to African American males?
3	What are some steps have you implemented to address the social and academic issues faced by African American males in your school?
4	In what ways do you use your influence to involve internal and external stakeholders to support the academic and social achievement of African American males in your school?
5	What do you consider to be external and internal factors that influence the academic performance of African American males in your school?
6	How do you work to help African American males in your school overcome barriers that inhibit their ability to achieve academic success?
7	What professional development strategies/opportunities do you implement to encourage cultural sensitivity in your school towards African American males?
8	What personal influences have the most significant impact on how you lead African American males in your school?

## Appendix C: IRB Approval

### ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



June 1, 2020

Jamel Kimbro  
Department of Education  
Abilene Christian University

Dear Jamel,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "A Qualitative Study on School Principals' Perspectives on How Leadership Practices Influence the Academic Achievement of African American Males",

was approved by expedited review (Category 6 & 7 ) on 6/1/2020 (IRB # 20-066 ). Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Request Form within 30 days of study completion.

If you wish to make any changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Study Amendment Request Form.

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Unanticipated Events/Noncompliance Form.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs