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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF BLACK MALE PROFESSIONALS' ATTRIBUTIONS
OF EDUCATION, CAREER, AND SUCCESS

By
KAMILLE N. LEPTZ

A doctoral dissertation submitted to the
College of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Education
in Organizational Leadership

Southeastern University


August, 2018

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF BLACK MALE PROFESSIONALS' ATTRIBUTIONS
OF EDUCATION, CAREER AND SUCCESS


by

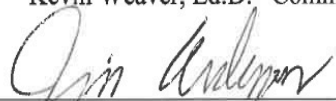
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Dedication

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who breathed life into me and gave me purpose.

To my parents, Herman and Cheryl Leptz, and my grandparents Hilton and Eleane Fenty, who first taught me the value of education and faith in God.

To my brothers and sister, Wayne, Herman, and Nicole, who continue to inspire me with your love and support.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors to which Black professional males attribute their persistence in education and their professional success. This qualitative case study is founded on the theoretical frameworks of attribution, growth mindset, and grit. The research participants were a criterion-based sample consisting of four Black male professionals who earned at least a bachelor's degree and were employed full-time in their respective professions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants to gather rich, detailed information about their experiences in both education and their professions. Data collected from interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to determine emergent themes. Findings from this study suggest that having a growth mindset, coupled with grit, positive role models, and faith in God were significant attributes related to each research participant's success in college and career.

Key Words: black male, african american male, grit, perseverance, mindset, high school, college, career, success, attribution, mentor

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What makes certain people successful or unsuccessful? Is one's motivation to succeed primarily extrinsic or intrinsic – or perhaps a combination of both? Stories of personal and professional success as well as cautionary tales abound. Most people define success according to their own personal system of beliefs and envision success as either attainable or unattainable. Why do some people persevere and succeed while others give up?

Since the mid-twentieth century, researchers have studied questions related to motivation to succeed and its effects on human behavior. Some of the earliest studies in psychological literature discussed attribution theory and determined that internal and external factors influence human behavior (Heider, 1958). While motivation varies from individual to individual, motivation has a tremendous effect upon one's determination to succeed.

Dweck's work (2006) on mindset further extends attribution theory by discussing ways that mindset contributes to one's ability to succeed. According to Dweck, mindset is defined as, "a view [one] adopts for [himself]" (Dweck, 2006, p. 6). Dweck goes on to state that one's positive mindset can grow and change. Her work with young adults is especially important for therapists, teachers, and mentors dedicated to helping young people develop the growth mindset necessary for achievement. Dweck's research (2006) demonstrates that mindsets can shift and adapt; her work is also important when working with adult professionals.

This research study will explore the factors to which Black male professionals attribute their success and perseverance in education and career. The theoretical basis for conducting this qualitative study is derived from attribution, grit, and mindset theories.

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study and Review of Relevant Literature

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory “involves the study of how people infer causal relationships between events” (Rogoff, Lee, & Suh, 2004, p. 364). Heider (1958) was one of the first researchers to study causal structures of behavior and is considered the forefather of attribution theory. He concluded that there were two types of causal factors of behavior – the individual (internal factors) and the environment (external factors). Weiner, Freize, Kukla, Reed, Rest and Rosenbaum (1971) reported that external causes, such as difficulty of task and internal causes, such as effort, can be either constant or varied depending on the task, the situation, or the individual. Weiner (1992, 1994) studied attribution theory in education to determine the ways that high and low academic achievers attributed their successes or failures. His research found that high achievers generally attributed their success to hard work, ability, and effort. Low achievers generally attributed their failure to lack of luck, the task’s difficulty level, or their teachers as the root causes of their failures (Weiner, 1994).

Fries-Britt (1998) found that Black college students enrolled in a merit-based scholarship program for majors in science, engineering, and math attributed their perseverance in college to having a network of fellow high-achieving Black peers who helped to reduce feelings of isolation. Similarly, Shaunessey-Dedrick, Suldo, Roth, and Fefer (2015) found that high school students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses attributed their academic success to proactively forming bonds of friendship with peers who also had high academic standards. High achieving AP and IB students also attributed the value of parental influence, such as communicating high value for education, understanding the rigors of

college-level coursework, and knowing times when the student needed encouragement as instrumental factors to students' overall student success.

Burrell, Fleming, Fredricks, and Moore (2015) conducted a study of 15 Black male engineering students attending a historically Black university (HBCU) who were interviewed to determine factors that attributed to their persistence in the engineering program. Eight of those students were African American, while the remaining seven were Black international students. The study found that teachers' expectations were important attributes of students' persistence in the university's program. Both African American and international students reported that teachers at the HBCU had higher academic expectations of international students. Some international students stated that they did not ask questions in class when they clearly did not understand the content because of the stereotype that they were academically superior to their African American counterparts. Both African American and international students reported that succumbing to social distractions and lack of preparedness rather than intelligence were determining factors that inhibited engineering students' success.

Shaukat, Abiodullah, and Rashid (2010) conducted a study of 300 students enrolled in the second year of undergraduate studies in Pakistan and found that high achieving students attributed their success to internal factors, including good study skills, interest in the subject matter, study groups with peers, and the importance of the subject in terms of the students' future. High-achieving students also reported that external factors such as the teacher's commitment to students, teaching style, and whether or not the teacher was fair as important factors in student success. Low-achieving undergraduate students stated that internal factors such as poor study skills, poor time management, and depression contributed to their failure. The low-achieving students also attributed their poor performance to external factors such as teacher

favoritism and lack of teacher commitment to help students learn. Shaunessy-Dedrick, Suldo, Roth, & Fefer (2015) uncovered similar results when they studied struggling high school students. These students reported that lack of teacher effectiveness was a contributing factor to their academic deficiencies.

These studies point to the important role of attribution to an individual's persistence and success in educational environments and in the achievement of future career goals. A second theoretical framework that impinges on attributions of success, mindset, is discussed below.

Mindset

Mindset theory is centered around the ideas that intelligence and ability are either fixed and cannot change or that intelligence and ability are malleable and capable of great change. According to Dweck (2006, p. 7), "growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are the things you can cultivate through your efforts." Dweck (2006) asserts that the human brain is a muscle; the more it is used, the more it gains strength. She reports:

When you learn new things, these tiny connections in the brain actually multiply and get stronger. The more that you challenge your mind to learn, the more your brain cells grow. Then, things that you once found very hard or even impossible – like speaking a foreign language or doing algebra – seem to become easy. The result is a stronger, smarter brain (2006).

Dweck's mindset theory has been studied in a number of settings. Shaunessy-Dedrick, et al. (2015) studied high school students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses. This study included six schools representing three districts. Each district selected one school with an IB program and a second school with an AP program. Students who were concurrently enrolled in AP and IB courses were excluded from the study.

Researchers in tandem with school administrators purposively selected research participants based upon extreme cases, such as students who were highly successful and those who were least successful in their academic coursework. The researchers conducted one-on-one interviews with selected participants. All students identified stressors related to their enrollment in the AP or IB program such as multiple assignments, the difficulty of coursework, and lack of time to complete all assignments. The authors found that students who excelled academically were successful in redirecting their thoughts as a means of coping with the stressors of overwhelming workload and pressure to succeed from family, teachers, and self. Rather than looking at the difficulty of a particular assignment or task, these students chose to focus on future benefits such as earning an IB diploma and preparation for the rigors of college. These students reported that they also placed their stressors into context by reminding themselves that their circumstances could be far worse. Successful students attributed the importance of forming strong bonds with peers who placed high value on academic achievement to provide a strong sense of belonging in AP courses or IB program. Finally, the researchers reported that successful students in this study mentioned the teacher's pedagogy far less often than struggling students as a factor in their academic performance.

Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens (2008) conducted a study of 374 African American students in grades 7-12 who attended a predominately African American school in a rural American southern state; students completed a survey designed to determine their attributions of future education orientation (FEO), self-efficacy, ethnic identity, and perceived paternal support. For the purpose of the study, future education orientation was defined as the expectations and goals one has for his or her future; self-efficacy was defined as having a high belief in one's ability or competency. Ethnic identity was defined as an individual's beliefs and behaviors that

are associated with a particular ethnic group, thus providing kinship and a sense of belonging. Parental support included the influence parents have in conveying their interests, support, and perceived expectations for the child. Demographic variables for this study included the adolescents' age, gender, family structure, and each parent's educational attainment Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens (2008). The Future Education subscale of the *Future Orientation Questionnaire* (Nurmi, Seginer, & Poole, 1990) was utilized to measure the FEO. Ethnic identity was measured using the *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure* (MEIM-R; Roberts, Phinney, Masse, Chen, Roberts, & Romero, 1999). To measure self-efficacy, the researchers utilized the *Self-Efficacy Scale* (Sherer, Maddux, Mercandante, Prentice-Dunn, Jacobs, & Rogers, 1982). To measure parental support, researchers utilized the *Adolescent Family Process* assessment (Vazsonyi, Hibbert, & Snider, 2003).

The results of the Kerpelman et al. (2008) study revealed that self-efficacy, ethnic identity, and perceived maternal support were positively related to African American middle and high school students' overall academic achievement. Interestingly, survey results also revealed that these African American male students, regardless of their current academic achievement, had a similar FEO to each other and to low-achieving female students. This study's findings suggested that "while it is important to foster positive beliefs about reaching future academic goals among African American adolescents, regardless of gender, male adolescents need more strengthening in this area" (Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens, 2008, p. 1004).

Shane, Heckhausen, Lessard, Cheng, and Greenburger (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of 532 high school seniors who were surveyed to determine the relationships between one's personal control beliefs and career strivings. The researchers administered surveys to selected students in three phases: one month prior to high school graduation, one year after high

school graduation, and one year after completion of the second survey (two years after high school graduation). The researchers measured primary-control-contingent causal factors, such as effort and social-connections, and primary-control-independent causal factors, such as luck and ability during each phase. The researchers also measured career-related, controlled strivings, defined as an individual's use of primary and secondary control strategies to pursue a desired career. The authors of the study concluded that students' personal control beliefs in areas such as effort and social-connections were significant predictors of their career-related controlled strivings, while factors such as luck and ability did not significantly predict students' career-related controlled strivings one year after graduating from high school. Students who reported higher beliefs in effort and social connections were significantly more motivated to achieve their career goals. Furthermore, "These results lend support to the concept that individuals who are actively engaged in pursuit of a goal optimistically bias their perceived belief that they are in control of causal factors relevant to goal attainment" (p. 167). This study's results suggest that mindset is a critically important factor in goal achievement.

An individual's mindset greatly impacts and shapes his or her success or failure (Dweck, 2006). Shaunessy-Dedrick, et al. (2015) found that there were positive, significant correlations between performance, high goal setting, and strong personal work habits among high school students. According to Brendtro and Mitchell (2015), "Every healthy brain has the potential to develop high levels of intelligence" (p. 43).

Mindset, Resilience, and Grit

Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) asserted that "grit" is an important factor in determining success. Grit is defined as "voluntary continuation of a goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29).

The research conducted by Duckworth et al. (2007) revealed that when an individual has high expectations and demonstrates grit in the face of adversity, he or she has a far greater chance of achieving the expected or hoped-for outcome. Resilience is “the ability to surmount adversity and thrive,” which is “programmed into our adaptive brains” and is “a mix of internal strengths and external supports, offset by environmental risks” (Brendtro and Mitchell, 2015, p. 45).

“Steeling” is a process by which an individual demonstrates resilience in the face of adversity and grows stronger as a result (Rutter, 2012). Alternatively, individuals may experience a heightened level of sensitivity or vulnerability as a result of facing tremendous obstacles (Rutter, 2012).

Logically, people with a growth mindset can demonstrate grit and resilience in the face of adversity compared to those with a fixed mindset. The ability to reframe a problem or to place it into context and to form bonds with like-minded peers is an effective coping strategy for academically high-achieving students faced with adversity (Shaunessey-Dedrick et al., 2015; Burrell et al., 2015; Shaukat, Abiodullah, & Rashid, 2010). Having a growth mindset, resilience, and the grit or determination to succeed are positive attributes that can help a person achieve expected goals in spite of opposition, barriers, and challenges. Further exploration of these concepts is critical to understanding the ways that youth and adults achieve success in academic and professional settings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors to which Black professional males attribute their persistence in education and their professional success.

Methodology

This qualitative study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do Black male professionals define success as it relates to their profession?
2. To what do Black male professionals attribute their persistence in education?
3. To what do Black male professionals attribute success in their profession?
4. What recommendations do Black male professionals have for educators and other professionals to encourage young Black males?

After approval of the study by Institutional Research Board (IRB) at Southeastern University, the researcher posted an announcement on *LinkedIn* in an attempt to draw a sample of convenience of four voluntary research participants from professions such as education, law enforcement, medicine, business, and the military. Participants were required to meet the following criteria established by the researcher:

- They must self-identify as African American or Black.
- They are more than eighteen years of age.
- They have completed at least a bachelor's degree.
- They are currently employed full-time.
- They earn at least \$40,000 annually.

Four research participants were purposively selected from among the respondents to the *LinkedIn* announcement based on adherence to the study's criteria for participation. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews of four Black male professionals. Interviews consisted of the aforementioned research questions and other ancillary questions for follow-up and clarification. The researcher also asked the selected research participants to respond to an open-ended questionnaire to determine demographic information such as: age, degree(s) earned,

college or university attended, number of years in the profession, and whether they believed they were successful according to their personal definition of “success.”

The volunteer research participants received a copy of the informed consent form and gave verbal assent to the researcher to conduct the interviews. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a neutral setting mutually agreed upon between both the participant and the researcher. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Participants’ personal identifying information was assigned a code and pseudonym to ensure anonymity. All of the researcher’s notes, interview recordings, transcriptions, and data were kept on the researcher’s password-protected laptop to which only the researcher had access.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

The first assumption in this study was that all research participants were volunteers, genuinely interested in the study, and understood that the results of this study were important to furthering the body of knowledge to help young, Black males succeed in their educational, personal, and professional lives. As a result, one can assume that research participants were honest in their responses. Furthermore, the researcher assumed that the criteria for inclusion in this study was appropriate for the purposes of the research. The researcher also assumed that all research participants had no ulterior motives and had nothing to gain personally or professionally from their participation in this study.

Limitations

A limitation of this study derived from the fact that the researcher is a Black female. Because this research study focused on Black males’ attributions of perseverance in their education and success in their profession, some of the researcher’s personal experiences may

have been similar to that of the research participants. As a result, the researcher's personal views were set aside during the sample selection, interview, data analysis, and reporting processes so as not to interfere with the research; without this level of objectivity, the credibility of the results would be severely limited. Conclusions should be drawn solely based upon the research results rather than on preconceived notions (Bertelsen, 2005). To ensure that the researcher's preconceived notions did not interfere with research results, the researcher utilized a process called "bracketing," which is an acknowledgement that the researcher's points-of-view and assumptions were suspended in order to view the research participants' experiences objectively.

A second limitation of this study related to the small sample size ($n = 4$) and the resulting inability to generalize to a larger population. However, the purpose of qualitative research is often to create in-depth pictures and detailed analyses of phenomena, behavior, attitudes, and perceptions (Creswell, 2013).

A third limitation of this study was that the researcher is a Black woman of Caribbean descent, and the research participants are Black men. The research participants may not have been as comfortable sharing their feelings with a female as they might have been with a Black male. To counteract this possibility, the researcher encouraged research participants to be open and honest and sought to make the interview process comfortable by choosing neutral settings for interviews. The researcher also chose to carefully phrase questions in such a way that they were not considered inflammatory or judgmental, in order to not influence the participants' responses.

Delimitations

The role of the researcher was to interview Black male professionals who graduated from a four-year college and who had obtained at least a bachelor's degree, who were employed full-

time, and who considered themselves successful. This specific sample was selected because the men had presumably reached a point in their lives at which they could reflect upon their educational experiences in the context of graduating and moving into careers in which they had found success. This study focused on the research participants' attributions of success; if the participants believed that they were unsuccessful, their responses to the fundamental research question would have had no practical value for the expressed purpose of this study.

In this study, the researcher selected participants who met the criteria in terms of annual income, race, degree(s) earned, and perception of success. The researcher chose an annual income threshold of \$40,000. According to data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), the average salary of a 2016 college graduate was \$50,556, while the average starting salary of an education graduate in the same year was \$34,891 (Poppick, 2015). Since this study focused on education and sought recommendations for educators on ways to help Black males succeed, the researcher chose not to exclude educators from the research sample due to income considerations. The \$40,000 income threshold was established by the researcher in order to include experienced educators who would have a greater reservoir of experience from which to draw compared to a first or second-year teacher.

Finally, the researcher chose a non-experimental qualitative research design for this study to emphasize the importance of hearing research participants' stories and to provide an in-depth analysis of their experiences.

Definition of Terms

Attribution Theory. A psychological theory that focuses on the ways to which humans attribute their actions, thoughts, and behavior. An individual's future actions are dependent upon feedback from previous actions. "Potential causes are classified along three dimensions that span

a matrix of possible causal explanations: i) locus: internal versus external, ii) stability: stable versus unstable, and iii) globality: global versus specific causes. Some formulations of attribution theory focus on controllability as the third dimension” (Korn, Rosenblau, Rodriguez Buritica, & Heekeren, 2016).

African American. A term utilized in the United States to describe those persons whose ancestral origin is in Africa (Agyemang, Bhopal, & Bruijnzeels, 2005).

Black. A term utilized in the United States to describe those whose ancestral origin is in Africa (Agyemang, Bhopal, & Bruijnzeels, 2005). This term also includes a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including those who are African American, Afro-Caribbean, and African (Agyemang, Bhopal, & Bruijnzeels, 2005). The researcher chose to utilize this term to encompass the ancestral origins of the research participants presented in this study; the term is also the common usage to describe individuals in educational settings.

Fixed Mindset. Fixed mindset is the belief that an individual’s intellect and ability are inherent and cannot be changed (Dweck, 2006). People who have a fixed mindset are often hesitant to try new tasks that may test their intelligence and/or ability because failure is due to a perceived lack of inherent ability.

Future Orientation. Future orientation is the process by which individuals weigh their actions against their goals for the future (Wesely, Dzoba, Miller, & Rasche, 2017).

Grit. A term used to describe one’s ability to demonstrate perseverance and passion in the face of adversity (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Growth Mindset. The belief that intelligence is malleable and that skills can be developed through hard work, self-discipline, and effort (Dweck, 2008). Those who have a growth mindset are often open to new challenges because learning is a positive experience,

provides the opportunity to acquire new skills, and mistakes are considered opportunities for growth.

Incremental Theory of Intelligence. The belief that “intelligence has been scientifically proven to increase when new learning of information and practice occurs” (Espinoza, Areas da Luz Fontes, & Arms-Chavez, 2013, p. 109).

Intergenerational Fulfillment. This term refers to an individual’s “desire to meet elders’ and parents’ expectations of being excellent for the betterment of their communities both locally and globally” (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015, p. 88).

Natural Mentoring Relationships. Natural mentoring relationships describe a child’s long-standing relationships with parents or non-relative adults who serve as mentors (Hurd, Varner, & Rowley, 2013).

Self-Concept. Self-concept refers to the manner in which individuals view themselves in the context of the world (Sousa, 2011).

Steeling. Steeling describes an individual’s resilience in the face of obstacles and the individual’s resulting growth (Rutter, 2012).

Stereotype Threat. Stereotype threat occurs when an environment causes individuals to recognize and consider negative stereotypes that exist about their racial or ethnic group; this recognition can have an effect upon the individual’s performance. Typical effects may include disassociation (disengaging from the environment), hyper-performance (working hard to supersede perceived lack of expectations due to the stereotype), and stress-related health issues such as high blood pressure and anxiety. The individual need not believe that there is truth to the stereotype; however, the individual needs to have knowledge of the existence of the stereotype (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002).

Significance of the Study

This study can lead to greater understanding of Black male professionals' attributions of perseverance in education and success in career. This research can help educators improve high school and college retention rates of Black men and ways that organizations can recruit and retain Black male professionals. The current study will provide further understanding of attributes of Black males who have overcome adversity to earn their college degree(s), leading to success in their respective careers. The recommendations for future research should lead to greater access to educational and economic opportunities, thereby increasing earning potential and ability to guide and influence younger generations of Black males.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors to which successful Black males attribute their success in both education and career. This literature review explored the theoretical underpinnings of the current study: attribution theory; social developmental theory and the roles that educators, family, and community play in the development of adolescent and young adults' views of self and others; and resilience theories of grit and growth mindset. All of these theories appear to play important roles in the overall development of character traits among adolescents that promote perseverance in the face of adversity in personal, academic, and professional lives.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory has its foundation in the studies of Fritz Heider (1958) and Bernard Weiner (1985). Attribution theorists generally focus on causal relationships in order to understand human behavior and motivation. Attribution theory “presumes that motivation is best represented as a temporal process initiated with an event and ending with some behavior or behavioral intention” (Graham & Weiner, 1996, p. 71). According to Weiner (1986), there are three dimensions of causality: locus, controllability, and stability. Locus refers to whether the cause is external or internal, such as when an individual attributes his or her success to self-discipline (internal) or sheer luck (external). When an individual attributes a positive outcome to an internal locus, the individual will typically have a positive outlook in a similar circumstance. Conversely, when an individual attributes a negative outcome to an internal locus, the individual tends to have a more negative outlook in a similar circumstance. Controllability refers to whether the causality can be manipulated by the individual, such as loss of a job due to corporate downsizing (uncontrollable) or loss of a job due to poor performance (controllable). Stability

refers to whether the causality is due to a one-time lapse, such as in the case of a normally diligent student who forgets to prepare for a test (unstable) or a perceived lack of ability to perform at an acceptable level based upon previous test grades (stable). In other words, stability refers to consistency over a period of time.

Attribution theory is actively at work in the classroom setting in both teachers' and students' thoughts, attitudes, and behavior. The Pygmalion effect (Eden, 1992, 2003), also called a self-fulfilling prophecy, has been studied extensively, often in terms of teachers' expectations of students. The Pygmalion effect "evolves from a strong social constructivist perspective" (Al-Fadhi & Singh, 2007, p. 53). In other words, one cannot separate learning from the social context. The classroom environment is one in which expectations are continuously communicated verbally or nonverbally between teachers and students. The Pygmalion effect and human relations research suggest that teachers tend to adapt their behaviors toward students based upon their initial expectations of student achievement, thus creating an environment in which students unknowingly or subconsciously meet teachers' expectations – for better or worse (Brophy, 1983). For instance, if a student suffers an illness (uncontrollable) and performs poorly on a test for the first time (unstable), the teacher may perceive this phenomenon as a one-time event and may continue to have high expectations of the student. On the other hand, if a student who typically has low or average grades suffers an illness (uncontrollable) and performs poorly on a test (stable), the teacher may view the student's performance as 'normal' (expected) and continue to have low expectations of the student.

Social development attributions. While teachers' initial expectations of a student may be low because of past performance, teachers' may have high initial expectations of students who are considered highly intelligent or gifted. Empirical research suggests that intelligence is

malleable, responsive, and can be developed (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016; Boaler, 2016; Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Vandewalle, 2012). This growth-oriented thinking can help students who have the intellectual capacity but not the resources or opportunities available to traditionally gifted students (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2014). Teachers' perceptions of lack of giftedness can be a gatekeeper to access to more challenging, advanced curriculum. Studies have revealed that "placing students in remedial or advanced classrooms not only establishes the type of instruction they receive, it may also determine the likelihood of obtaining higher education" (Riley, 2010, p. 230).

When students have the opportunity to learn in courses or programs that encourage and support academic success such as Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, teachers have greater opportunities to ascertain markers of academic talent (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2014). Teachers can positively impact student academic growth and development by providing sound curriculum with high expectations, building rapport between and among teachers and students, and managing classroom behavior and interactions that emphasize students as citizens (Kennedy, 2011).

Woolley, Strutchens, Gilbert, & Martin (2010) conducted a study by which a stratified random sample of Black middle school students ($n = 933$) were selected to determine whether teacher expectations of students, coupled with a rigorous curriculum and positive teacher-student relationships, impacted students' math performance. All of the research participants had math teachers who participated in the Transforming East Alabama Mathematics, or TEAM-Math program (2009); this program was "designed to provide professional development to teachers in order to increase the use of reform instructional practices by teachers and to increase the effective communication of high expectations and standards for success in mathematics to

students” (Woolley et al., 2010, p. 43). Student participants were in the sixth grade ($n = 337$), seventh grade ($n = 160$), and eighth grade ($n = 436$); the sample included 521 girls and 410 boys.

Research participants were surveyed to examine the relationships between student results of the math subtest of the *Stanford Achievement Test*, (*SAT-10*; Harcourt, 2003) and students’ perceptions of teacher expectations, teachers’ instructional practices, and student motivation. Surveys were administered to research participants to measure student motivation (confidence, interest, and general anxiety), student perspectives of math teachers’ beliefs and practices (teacher expectations, teacher standards, and reformed instructional practices), and student mathematics outcomes (expected math grade, hours spent studying math outside of class, and scores on the math section of the *SAT-10*). For the purposes of this study, reformed instructional practices of math teachers were described as a “focus on students explaining their reasoning and their sustained work on challenging tasks” (Woolley, Strutchens, Gilbert, & Martin, 2010, p. 47). The student survey addressed student perceptions of math class using a Likert scale. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the study’s results. Highly significant relationships were found between students’ perceptions of math teachers’ expectations and the math students’ confidence, interest in math, and level of anxiety ($p < .001$); between student confidence and expected math grade ($p < .001$); and between student anxiety and student performance on the *SAT-10* (Harcourt, 2003) ($p < .001$). In addition, significant relationships were uncovered between student perceptions of math teachers’ reform practices and student confidence ($p < .01$); student perceptions of math teachers’ high standards and student anxiety ($p < .01$); student confidence and the *SAT-10* (Harcourt, 2003) ($p < .01$); student confidence and the number of hours spent studying; and between students’ level of anxiety and their expected

math grade ($p < .01$) (Woolley et al., 2010). This study confirms previous research that supports the importance of teacher expectations of student achievement (Kennedy, 2011; Brophy, 1983). Students should have the opportunity to take high-level math courses from highly qualified teachers to prepare them for the rigors of college-level studies (Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015). In Woolley et al.'s (2010) study, the student survey questions that focused on student anxiety "contained three items each of which tapped into a different aspect of anxiety including affective ("scares me"), somatic ("makes me sick"), and cognitive ("get mixed up")" (Woolley et al. , 2010, p. 47). The results of the survey demonstrated that students' perceptions of math teachers who had high expectations and who implemented reform practices were associated with secondary students who experienced less anxiety regarding their performance in math. Woolley et al.'s (2010) study points to the importance of the teacher's role in providing rigorous academic content, high expectations, and forming strong relationships with students to promote academic achievement.

Mindset and Grit

Individuals who possess growth mindsets believe that with effort, their abilities can grow; those who have a fixed mindset believe that if they have to work hard, they do not have natural ability (Dweck, 2006). In dealing with setbacks, individuals who have a growth mindset believe that with more effort, such as studying more frequently or finding a different way to study, they will ultimately succeed. Those who have a fixed mindset typically tie their lack of success to their ability or intellect, and are less inclined to study or to exert additional effort (Dweck, 2006). "The fixed and growth mindsets create two different psychological worlds. In the fixed mindset, students care first and foremost about how they'll be judged: smart or not smart" (Dweck, 2007, para. 10).

Grit is defined as “passion and persistence for long-term goals” (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009, p. 166). While grit is described as the ability to persist in attaining long-term goals, hardiness is defined as the ability to adapt and perform under duress (Maddi et al., 2012). Some individuals struggle and persevere while other individuals struggle and quit. “Students who value effort are said to have a growth mindset; they perceive ability as a malleable skill” (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015, p. 47). Those who have a fixed mindset are often anchored by their perceptions that past experiences predict future outcomes when faced with similar circumstances. People with fixed mindsets have difficulty imagining a different outcome (Vandewalle, 2012). Individuals who believe that they can learn new things but that their underlying ability is unalterable are considered entity theorists, while individuals who believe they can learn new things and as a result, their ability level can increase, are considered incremental theorists (Levy & Dweck, 1998).

Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly’s (2007) study of grit focused on the attritions of West Point Military Academy (WPMA) freshman cadets after completing an intensive summer training program; normally, one in twenty cadets drops out prior to starting the fall semester. West Point has a reputation for its stringent admissions process; few applicants are accepted to pursue their studies at this highly regarded institution. During the application process, the *Whole Candidate Score* (WCS) is used to rank WPMA applicants. The WCS is a composite score based on high school rank, extracurricular activities, *Scholastic Aptitude Test* (SAT; College Board) scores, and a standardized physical assessment score. Among incoming freshmen candidates in 2007 ($n = 1,248$), 75% were White, 7% Asian, 7% Hispanic, 7% Black, 1% American Indian, and 2% other. Eighty-five percent of the research participants were male. Participants completed the *Grit-S* (Duckworth et. al., 2007) to measure grit. The researchers also

obtained each participant's *Whole Candidate Score* and each student's retention data and then conducted binary logistic regressions using cadet retention as the dependent variable (Duckworth et al, 2007).

Cadets who scored a standard deviation higher than average on the *Grit-S* were 99% more likely to complete summer training ($B = 0.69, p < .001$). The Whole Candidate Score, the composite score used by West Point to admit candidates, did not predict summer retention ($B = 0.06, p = .64$). Further, in a hierarchical binary logistic regression predicting retention with the Whole Candidate Score entered in Step 1 and Grit-S scores entered in Step 2, Grit-S was a significant predictor over and beyond the Whole Candidate Score, $B = 0.69, p < .001$ (Duckworth et al., 2007).

The results of Duckworth et al.'s study revealed that after controlling for factors such as past performance, achievement, and aptitude, the measure of one's grit was the best predictor of success among freshmen cadets in the summer intensive program (Duckworth et al., 2007). However, the researchers did not report the results of analyses conducted based on disaggregation of ethnic groups; since black cadets comprised just 7% of the sample, one has to wonder whether the grit scale would be the best predictor of grit for Black male freshman candidates.

Maddi, Matthews, Kelly, Villarreal, & White (2012) conducted a study of first-year cadets at the West Point Military Academy to determine whether grit and hardiness were significant predictors of cadet retention and performance. The WPMC is known for providing mentally and physically challenging environments for cadets in order to prepare them for the rigors of military service. All of the research participants were first-year WPMA cadets ($n = 1,261$). Eighty-five percent of the first-year cadets were male; 76% were White, 9% Hispanic,

6% Black, 6% Asian, 1% Native American, and 2% other ethnicity. Upon entrance to the WPMA, research participants were administered the *Personal Views Survey III Revised* (PVSIII-R; Maddi, Harvey, Khoshaba, Lu, Persico, & Brow, 2006), which is a scaled assessment of factors of hardiness such as control, commitment, and challenge. The mean score for the research participants in this study was at the 65th percentile of more than 10,000 individuals who had previously taken the PVSIII assessment. Cadets were also administered the 17-item *Grit Scale* (Duckworth and Quinn, 2009), which measured factors such as “consistency of interests and perseverance of effort” (Maddi et al., 2012, p. 23). In addition, the researchers also obtained cadets’ Whole Candidate Scores (WCS) to collect information on past performance such as high school grade-point average (GPA), SAT scores, leadership roles within extracurricular activities, and physical fitness performance. The researchers obtained first-year Cadet Performance Scores (CPS), which measured cadets’ academic performance, military coursework performance, and physical fitness. Finally, researchers collected student retention data from WPMA school records and coded the data nominally (1 = retained and 2 = not retained). One hundred and thirty-seven cadets left the WPMA by the end of their first year.

Maddi et al., (2012) computed correlation coefficients to examine the relationships between the variables. The cadets’ WCS ($p = .009$), hardiness ($p = .037$) and grit ($p = .017$) were all significant predictors of cadet retention at the end of the first year; however, “grit had the larger effect over the other variables” (Maddi et al., 2012, p. 25). A positive correlation was found between hardiness and grit ($r = .46, p < .01$) of cadets after completion of the first year of enrollment at the WPMA. In addition, the WCS, which was based upon cadets’ past performance, was a highly significant predictor of cadet retention ($p < .001$). Grit scores combined with the WCS was a significant predictor ($p < .05$) of cadet retention. Finally, there

were significant, positive correlations between CPSs and measures of grit ($r = .073, p < .01$) and hardiness ($r = .123, p < .01$).

These studies point to the importance of grit, hardiness, and prior performance as important factors in predicting whether an individual will persevere in the face of adversity. Research participants in the study conducted by Maddi et al. (2012) demonstrated academic and leadership abilities in high school; however, those cadets who demonstrated the aforementioned qualities coupled with the ability to persevere showed an increased likelihood of graduating from the WPMA. If an individual has the academic preparation and the determination to succeed, the individual is more apt to achieve his or her goal, whether graduating from a top military academy or graduating from college or university. Preparation and determination are key components in an individual's pursuit of educational and career goals.

Attributions of Perseverance in Education

A great deal of empirical research has focused on the challenges Black males face in education (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016; Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Bates & Anderson, 2014; Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Kafele, 2012; McGee & Pearman, 2015). Challenges that Black males face in college are well documented; however, research focused on assistance to Black students to persevere in their educational goals are emerging. Lancaster and Xu (2017) conducted qualitative research to determine factors that helped Black students who major in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) to persevere and to graduate from a predominantly White four-year research university. This case study consisted of 25 research participants, of which 21 were male and 4 were female. Participants, all of whom were Black, were comprised of freshmen ($n = 5$), sophomores ($n = 6$), juniors ($n = 7$), and seniors ($n = 7$) who majored in computer science, computer engineering, or mechanical engineering. The researchers

noted that the college at which this study was conducted had an 80% attrition rate of Blacks who were STEM majors. The researchers conducted focus groups using a semi-structured interview protocol. The results of the study are discussed below.

Research participants in Lancaster and Xu's (2017) study described the importance of having a peer support network. Subjects classified as juniors and seniors described their having the same network of friends within their major throughout the course of their collegiate careers. Peer networks were described as study groups and peer-tutoring groups. These networks were comprised of students who had the same major, which meant they often took the same courses. The engineering graduates stated that if their peer support network had consisted of students outside of their major, the engineering students most likely would not have achieved the same academic success.

According to the students in the focus groups, Black student organizations provided a structure to help Black students persevere in college. According to Lancaster and Xu (2017), Black student organizations created opportunities for students to connect and network with other students through a variety of activities. One research participant noted that the Black student organization held a picnic for engineering majors. As a freshman, one of the participants met upperclassmen who took the same course; the upperclassmen gave the participant advice regarding professors and assignments, which the participant described as important to her academic success.

Research participants in Lancaster and Xu's (2017) study described mentoring as an important part of their perseverance in education. Participants attributed both formal (campus organizations) and informal (family, peers, and upperclassmen) mentoring relationships to their ability to persevere in college. The mentors served as role models, encouragers, and teachers.

Mentors taught the participants how to manage their time and organizational skills. One participant described his mentor as one who “keeps me on track; it would be easy to just miss that deadline and just let that semester slip by. I would probably be failing out of my classes. I probably would not be here” (Lancaster & Xu, 2017, p. 184).

The research participants in Lancaster and Xu’s (2017) study attended a predominantly White institution that had a high retention rate of Black students in their STEM majors. The positive retention rate was due to the school’s ability to integrate students into campus life by providing opportunities for strong formal and informal mentoring relationships. Underclassmen were afforded the opportunity to network with upperclassmen who were already familiar with the school culture. This understanding of the school culture helped students to develop proper study skills, understand professor expectations, and provide students accountability through a network of support.

Support systems such as the Minority Engineering Program (MEP) at colleges and universities were created after legislation for affirmative action was enacted (Newman, 2016). To examine MEPs at two predominantly White colleges, Newman (2016) conducted interviews with 70 research participants using a semi-structured interview protocol. Research participants consisted of students ($n = 37$), faculty members ($n = 9$), administrators ($n = 16$), and recent graduates ($n = 8$). Administrators selected for participation in this study served in roles directly related to the engineering major, minority initiatives, or to the school MEP. Faculty selected for this study were considered to be supportive of African American and Black students by research participants in each school’s MEP. The students selected for this study had a 3.0 GPA or higher, considered themselves African American or Black, and had declared a major in engineering. Participants in Newman’s (2016) study stated that the MEP provided a safe, welcoming place

that had supportive administration, faculty, and staff. One participant discussed his experience with a support staff member:

I mean it starts with the way she treats you. She treats you like you are her children I guess, she has a motherly type personality. So she will be very nice to you, but she'll get stern with you if she needs to. I remember in Summer Bridge, I think like half these students didn't do well on their first [comprehensive] test. So she took away all the computers, the TV's and video game systems, from us. That is the same thing a mother would do, be nice to you and give you everything you want, but if you start messing up she is the one to get strict with you and tell you this is how it needs to be, and this is what you guys need to do to be successful (Newman, 2016, p. 226-227).

Students in the 2016 study by Newman described MEP staff as concerned about their academic success. Staff were accessible to students who often communicated by text messages. The staff also provided access to tutors and guidance to students in need of assistance. One student described his experience as part of the MEP at his college:

We definitely have a lot of resources and a supporting staff. The MEP office . . . they are all very supportive and if we have any issues like there is somebody to talk to because if I ever felt like I don't know how to pay for my next textbook or I think I may need to drop this course before the drop/add deadline, I know who to go talk to and get some consultation, before I make that decision on my own (Newman, 2016, p. 228).

The research participants in Newman's (2016) study described a familial environment in which students received support, encouragement, and guidance. Students also earned consequences for not performing up to expectations, such as restricted access to potential distractions such as electronics and video games. The staff at the MEP office succeeded in

fostering trusting relationships with students, which in turn provided an open door for students to seek advice pertaining to both academic and non-academic concerns. By having a program in place that operated as a safe haven that provided both support and a genuine concern for minority students, the MEP was successful in retaining minority students and helping them thrive academically and personally, which helped the students to graduate from college.

Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez (2015) conducted a qualitative study of two African American males who grew up in rural communities, were first-generation college students, attended a predominantly White college or university, and who graduated from their respective college at least two years prior to the start of the study. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the two graduates. Both men attributed their desire to attend college from their families. One stated that his family told him that he was going to go to college and succeed in life. The participant described the men in his family as motivators to graduate from college:

I just didn't want to wind up like my grandfather or my father or my uncles. My grandfather, I could tell that he wished that he had had more from an academic perspective. I think he felt that he was less than a man because he had 21, 22-year-old kids coming into his workplace telling him what to do and he had been working there for 20 years (Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015, p. 230).

Both research participants stated that their families wanted them to be role models for other Black men in the community, especially their younger relatives. Both men reported that other adults, such as those involved in Junior Reserve Officer's Training Corps (JROTC), Upward Bound, and college preparation programs, helped the students to plan for life beyond

high school to include attending and graduating from college (Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015).

Upon entering college, both men in the Hines, et al. (2015) study reported that they faced challenges as they tried to adjust to college life. Both felt underprepared for the rigors of college and failed courses during their first semester. Both stated that they had mental breakdowns, while one reported that there were times he wanted to commit suicide. When discussing suicidal ideations, the research participant stated, “ How can I go back home to my parents, my mom who thinks I’m the smartest dude she knows and tell her, ‘I can’t do this’” (Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015, p. 233). To cope with mounting pressures, the research participant started using drugs. He eventually sought the advice of the director of the multicultural affairs department at his college. The director advised the participant to speak to his professors about his extenuating circumstances and gave the young man the contact information of a therapist whose practice was off-campus.

Both of the participants in the Hines et al. (2015) study attributed their academic and social development to their campus support networks. These support networks included those who worked in the multicultural affairs and student affairs departments as well as professors who took a personal interest in them. The director of multicultural affairs had an open-door policy; one of the research subjects stated that “You could come and talk about whatever issues that were going on, and she had that policy because she knew we were catching hell on campus, quite simply” (Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015, p. 234). One research participant noted the importance of having African American professors who served as mentors:

I wish I would have found them my first couple of days, especially those who also had been first-generation college students... I wouldn’t have graduated without

them . . . One [professor] would say, “You can really do this. No reason for you to give up now. You really have a brilliant mind. You just gotta believe in yourself” (Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015, p. 234).

In describing his overall experience attending a predominantly White institution, one research participant noted:

This university was a fire. It was a cauldron. It literally was. They say it takes fire to make steel, though, you know? Like, iron, you can’t make anything worth anything without some time of a tribulation and this was my first real tribulation ‘cause high school wasn’t a challenge. This was a challenge. They weren’t gonna give me a grade cause I was black. My professor did what he was supposed to do (Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015, p. 239).

Both research participants discussed their perseverance to graduate in terms of creating a legacy for others to follow. One participant described being the Black man who spoke up whenever racial issues were discussed in class. He felt that his tenure at a predominantly white institution was “exciting”. He explained:

“Because not only was I having to deal with this college, but this college had to deal with me. I wasn’t the soft guy. Like, I wasn’t the one who was gonna just sit back. I forced them to deal with me and I think, because of that, and not just me, a lot of my friends, brothers have an easier time here now than we had when we got here, at least I hope they believe that (Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015, p. 237).

Both men acknowledged that because they graduated from college, they should continue to help others realize their dreams of obtaining a college degree. The participants expressed a desire to be an example to their children and to others in their respective communities. One

participant stated that he knows what it takes to succeed in college, and he will prepare his son for the rigors of college. He stated, “I have a ticket to do more. I have an obligation to do more. Now that you have the degree you’re a part of an elite group. What are you gonna do with it? What do you feel compelled to do with it?” (Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015, p. 239).

Attributions of Success

While there is a dearth of research about the ways that professional Black males define success, research exists that conceptualizes Black males’ perseverance to succeed in their careers. A study conducted by Hotchkins & Dancy (2015) focused on successful Black males and Prakash & Waks’ excellence theory (1985). According to Prakash & Waks (1985), the four standards of individual excellence are mental proficiency, disciplinary initiation, self-actualization, and social responsibility. Mental proficiency can be measured by “standardized achievement tests, college admission requirements, and seen as a direct result of a student’s cognitive competency” (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015, p. 76). Disciplinary initiation, or the ability to think critically, “occurs as a result of problem solving, but also requires creative, high-order imaginative abilities” (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015, p. 76). The concept of self-actualization refers to “the development of [the individual’s] unique mind, and mental and other powers in the pursuit of cognitive and other personal ends to actualize himself or herself” (Prakash & Waks, 1985, p. 85). The individual has the ability to “own [his or her] personal development” (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015, p. 77). The fourth and final standard of excellence, social responsibility, refers to values the individual places upon communal success and the roles of individuals in helping others to achieve.

Hotchkins & Dancy’s (2015) qualitative study analyzed the lived experiences of seven Black males who attended a Christian university located in a southern state. Five research

participants were elected to leadership positions on campus by their peers, while the remaining two participants were appointed to their respective leadership positions. The campus groups that were led by the research participants were the Black Student Union, LGBT Queer Students of Color, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, National Association of Black Journalists, National Association of Black Engineers, and Black Males United. Positions held by participants were president, vice-president, chaplain, historian, and social-media lead. Participants' ages ranged from 17- to 25-years-old, and their GPAs ranged from 3.33 to 3.83 on a 4-point scale.

All of the research participants in Hotchkins & Dancy's (2015) study discussed having a singular focus on succeeding in college, particularly within their major. Their singular focus included studying, speaking to their professors outside of the classroom, engaging in activities with potential job opportunities, and networking with individuals within their major and professionals in the field. One participant stated the importance of his being "well informed about the ins and outs, interns, job fairs, and conferences where I can present my work to peers and colleagues for critique and acceptance" (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015, p. 84). These student leaders attributed their willingness to take on additional tasks or assignments as reasons they were considered leaders by both faculty and students at their college. The research participants believed that professors viewed them as intellectuals rather than as simply Black males because of their dedication to learning. One participant discussed the importance of having a relationship with professors:

Relationships with my [professors] are essential because if they know you're committed, 98.9% of them will be committed to your being successful. Plus, I want to earn a Ph.D. in communications so I already know writing with the least amount of errors is fundamental! (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015, p. 84).

The research participants viewed themselves as part of a collective, or a representation, of Black males to others. Participants discussed dealing with “intellectual shock and awe” from others who made assumptions about their intelligence because they were Black males (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015, p 85). The students reported that their role was to be a positive representation of all that it means to be a Black male both on campus and in society. One participant stated, “If I excel in the class, outside of class maybe the perception of my academic effort can be transferred to other Brothers, in a positive way, making me my Brother’s keeper, and thinker!” (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015, p. 86). Each participant discussed the importance of intergenerational fulfillment, which was defined as meeting expectations of parents and elders to achieve in order to help others in the community (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015). Participants stated that that they hoped to open doors of opportunity to other Black students. One participant stated:

Internships. Summa Cum Laude. Bank rolls. It all amounts to nothing if the work I do in college does not prepare me to transition into a profession that empowers me to earn for and provide for my [Black] community. I stand on the shoulders of giants! [Grandma] swept floors 60 hours a week to send my pops to college. He sacrificed financially so I wouldn’t be in debt upon completing college. The ultimate goal is crystal clear to me, uplift my old people, raise up my young people. Prepare the next generation to live well, better than I did despite the racism I faced. Hopefully, my work will buffer their trek (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015, p. 88).

After graduating from college, Black males often face a new set of challenges such as starting a career and navigating workplace politics. Wright (2013) conducted a phenomenological study to examine the lived experiences of eight Black male professionals. Each research participant had at least a bachelor’s degree, was employed full-time, and served as

a mentor to Black male high school students through a mentoring program located at a college in the northeast. Respondents were interviewed individually using a semi-structured protocol. Similar to the participants in the Hotchkins & Dancy (2015) study, the men who participated in the Wright (2013) study actively participated in campus organizations, fostered relationships with professors, and promoted parental and family involvement while they attended college. Participants in Wright's (2013) study described factors that motivated them to graduate from college, such as having part-time, low-wage jobs and internships. Describing his experience, one respondent stated:

I worked in several retail jobs, worked at the Hershey Store, worked at Blockbuster, I worked at Hollywood Video, I worked at Daffy's. Eventually, I ended up working at Commerce Bank, before it was TD Bank, and that was my last full-time job before I started doing internships and such. At that point, there was one consistent theme for me that was my driving force of staying in college, and it was looking around shoulder to shoulder with my peers at the workplace and seeing people who were twice my age making the same amount of money as I because they had no degrees (Wright, 2013, p. 55).

Another respondent acknowledged that his time spent working for a large financial organization "really opened my eyes to the world of possibilities for my career" (Wright, 2013, p. 55). Upon graduation, many of the research participants described encountering culture shock while searching for jobs. Respondents discussed their surprise at low salary offers for recent college graduates and at the level of responsibility required. One participant stated:

I came out of college thinking I would be making like \$70,000 a year doing very important things, you know, making a change in the world because, you know, a lot of

people, especially those who are educated, want to come out and do something major and do something big, you know. That was my impression. It did not really work out that way (Wright, 2013, p. 58).

Seven out of the ten research participants in the Wright (2013) study discussed the importance of having a career mentor. According to the participants, the benefits of having a mentor were learning about additional opportunities, gaining an understanding of the organization's culture, and learning ways to navigate the culture more efficiently. Participants believed that they had greater opportunities for advancement as a result of having a mentor.

Grit, Mindset, and Success

One's outlook on life can reflect whether one has a growth or fixed mindset. In a phenomenological study conducted by Land, Mixon, Butcher, & Harris (2014), six Black high school seniors were interviewed about their experiences and their outlook on life and education. These students were eighteen years of age and attended a low-performing high school located within a low-income community. Of the six students, two lived in a household with siblings headed by a single mother, one student lived in a shelter with his mother, one lived in public housing with his mother, while another lived in public housing with his mother and grandmother. All of the students had received public assistance and had been without one or both parents during various points in their childhood. Reasons for separation for one or both parents included "death, drugs, or incarceration" (Land et al., 2014). All of the students were offered at least one college scholarship and were expected to graduate high school and go to college.

All of the research participants stated that the lack of a father figure at home caused them to grow up quickly because they had to deal with circumstances without the guidance and wisdom of a positive, male role model. One participant commented, "I used to long for a father

when I was younger and I used to always wonder why my father was never around” (Land et al., 2014, p. 149). Each of the research participants stated that his home environment lacked involvement from parents, and the men had little financial support from families. All of the participants acknowledged that the communities in which they resided were filled with negative influences, and they mentioned peers who were shot or killed and relatives who were in and out of jail. All of the research participants stated that they received a poor education from their school and said that many teachers had low expectations for them because of their race and socioeconomic status. One participant, a star basketball player recalled, “The teachers never said anything to me productive as I was an athlete so they would just do what needed to be done to keep me playing” (Land et al., 2014, p. 152).

The research participants discussed several factors that helped them to succeed. Those factors were spirituality, inner motivation, responsibility to their mothers, and helpful school staff. All of the research participants stated that their faith in God helped them to gain the strength needed to overcome negative people and circumstances both within and outside of their home environments. In describing the importance of faith in God, one research participant stated:

I believe the most important of them all would be the support that came from my faith. Through it all, from when I was younger even until today, my faith is what has kept me standing because there was plenty of times when I felt like I wasn’t going to make it or I wasn’t going to be able to get to where I am today (Land et al., 2014, p. 153).

The research participants mentioned inner motivation to succeed as a factor in their success. Each described the experience of watching their mothers and grandparents work long hours, struggling to make ends meet; these men made a conscious decision to do better for

themselves and their families. They knew that having a college education would help them to climb out of their current circumstances. One participant described his growth mindset and his motivation to succeed:

My grades went up and I guess I matured a lot more. And I started assessing the detail — what I wanted to be— how to stand out. I wanted to be the smartest kid in America and so, I told myself, no matter what, I'll always try to take it to the next level, never be satisfied. I mean, you know the person in the gym or the person on the field is always going to be the better athlete. The person that studies more is going to know the most, you know. So from there, I grew and I kept getting better. Successful students always want to be better than what they are at that particular time. They just want to be the best. I mean who wants to be in second place? (Land et al., 2014, p. 155).

The research participants all described having respect for their mothers (or mother figures), who provided them the guidance and motivation to do well. The men sought to make the women in their lives proud of their accomplishments and stated that their mothers' hard work was a factor that gave them the drive to succeed. Finally, all but one of the research participants stated that the high school faculty and administration were instrumental to success. One participant described not having any school supplies the first day of school his senior year. He stated that he walked up to a teacher that he did not know and asked how he (the student) could obtain supplies. The teacher called an administrator, who gave him all of the supplies that he needed for the school year. As a result, the student established a deep connection with the administrator who helped him. The administrator became his mentor and was present to offer advice and support whenever needed. Participants also stated that teachers provided support, yet kept them grounded (Land et al., 2014).

In an effort to determine protective and risk factors in relation to high achieving Black male high school students, McGee and Pearman (2015) interviewed thirteen Black males who were considered high achieving in mathematics. For the purposes of this study, high achieving was defined as being enrolled in courses such as Calculus, Algebra II, Trigonometry, and Statistics. Teachers who taught these courses identified young men they considered the top students in their respective courses. The students selected to participate in this study were in grades 10 ($n = 5$), 11 ($n = 4$), and 12 ($n = 4$) and attended one of four charter schools within a public school district. The students reported that their primary caregivers were: mother and father ($n = 5$); mother ($n = 6$); mother, grandmother, and grandfather ($n = 1$); mother and aunt ($n = 1$); and mother, father, sister, and uncle ($n = 1$). The students' ages were 15 ($n = 1$); 16 ($n = 7$); 17 ($n = 4$); and 18 ($n = 1$), while their high school GPA ranged from 2.9 to 3.5. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews that included an interview protocol of demographic questions and open-ended questions.

Student participants reported several factors that helped them to succeed academically. Students believed that their performance in high-level math courses increased the likelihood of their obtaining a well-paying job. To cope with the social pressures of acceptance by their peers, students reported that they used humor in class and developed a good relationship with their teacher. The students admitted that they wanted to impress both the teacher and their friends in their classes. One student stated that he dressed "preppy" because he noticed that teachers smiled at him more and seemed to have respect for him. In describing why he dressed in this style, the student stated, "I ain't never seen no dude in detention dressed preppy" (McGee and Pearman, 2015, p. 528). Another factor that helped students was taking advantage of math activities, such as a STEM summer camp designed "to provide the students a greater sense of

empowerment and to enhance their learning processes and critically evaluate their future college trajectories” (McGee and Pearman, 2015, p. 528). Students also spoke of their desire to learn more about math as a factor in their academic perseverance. These students discussed being street-smart, which included acting tough, sagging their jeans, and walking through their neighborhood with a group of friends. They believed this posturing was necessary to avoid their being perceived as weak by other youth who lived in their neighborhood. One student stated that these actions helped him to “stay alive” and not become victimized by acts of violence (McGee and Pearman, 2015, p. 524). Sports was another coping mechanism for these students, who reported that participating in activities such as track, football, and basketball helped them to focus better in class.

In discussions of risk factors, the students in the McGee & Pearman study (2015) reported concerns about Black male stereotypes. Several of the students mentioned off-handed, racial comments made about President Barack Obama. They noted that although President Obama came from a middle-class household and was highly educated, even he could not escape the negative stereotypes of Black males. One student described interactions with one of his teachers:

Sometimes my teacher may say something like, “For a Black guy from the ghet-toe, you are really on the ball. You go boy!” And I be sayin’ in my mind, don’t you know how stupid you sound saying that? But I don’t doubt my own abilities and my mom always told me that when I grow up I can be whatever I wanted to be and if I try I can succeed at anything that I want to. So her ignorant comments, they don’t make a difference to me because I still know that I can do it (McGee and Pearman, 2015, p. 531).

Students felt a sense of despair as they thought of the enormous pressure of being Black males in a world where they are at once admired and unaccepted. As one student said,

“I love it and I hate it. I love that I’m being copied across the world. They all want our style, our language, our finesse, our bodies, but they don’t want shit to do with our minds. Sorry, I had to say it just like that. That’s the part I hate” (McGee and Pearman, 2015, p. 531).

Students also felt the burden to be successful because their families were proud of their accomplishments and, as a result, shared their pride with neighbors and friends. Due to their intellectual prowess, many people told them they wanted them to go to college, succeed, and come back to the neighborhood so they can help others. While the students wanted to help others, they understood that they had to succeed first.

The research participants in the McGee and Pearman (2015) study demonstrated a growth mindset; they desired to challenge themselves to learn. They demonstrated grit because of their perseverance in spite of obstacles such as racism, peer pressure, and the burden to achieve in order to help others in their community.

Expectations of Self

Bates and Anderson (2014) studied high school students’ educational expectations, educational performance, and graduation from post-secondary schools. This study consisted of a stratified random sample of 15,000 high school students representing 700 high schools. Researchers used data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS: 2002). Baseline data were collected from high school sophomores who were then tracked throughout high school and for two years after the students’ anticipated year of high school graduation. A pre-survey of students’ expectations of educational achievement was administered; answer choices ranged

from acquiring a general education diploma (GED) to acquiring a doctoral degree. The survey also asked the students to report academic performance (GPA), parent(s) highest level of education attained, household income, household structure (single or two-parent), parents' country of birth, home language, secondary school characteristics (public or private), and the students' race or ethnicity.

Analysis of the data from the pre-survey administered during students' sophomore year of high school found that there was a significant difference ($p < .001$) between Black students' expectations of post-secondary education (73.92%) compared to White students (78.31%). Among students who had low GPAs, the differences between White and Black students' expectations of post-secondary education were highly significant ($p < .001$) (Black students = 33.79%, White students = 11.58%). The differences between Black students (66.21%) and White students (88.42%) who had high GPAs and expectations of post-secondary education were highly significant ($p < .001$). Significant differences were also observed between proportions of Black and White students in terms of parents' highest level of education: Black and White students whose parents had less than a high school education (Black = 4.48%, White = 1.87%; $p < .001$); parents who graduated from high school (Black = 23.15%, White = 18.68%; $p < .001$); and parents who had some college education (Black = 27.48%, White = 21.34%; $p < .001$). Interestingly, there was no statistically significant difference between proportions of Black students (44.89%) and White students (58.12%) whose parents completed college. From a sociological point of view, the results of the Bates and Anderson (2014) study are disconcerting and demand further research.

Findings from the follow-up studies of ELS: 2002 (2007) conducted by Bates and Anderson (2014) indicated that regardless of ethnicity, background, or other pertinent variables,

high school students with higher GPAs were more likely to enroll in a post-secondary school. Students with both high expectations and high achievement had greater probability of post-secondary enrollment than students with low expectations and low achievement. Students with high expectations and low achievement had greater odds of post-secondary enrollment than students with low expectations and high achievement. Student expectations of college or university as sophomores in high school was a greater predictor of post-secondary enrollment than prior academic achievement. These results imply that academic achievement is mediated by affective variables that can be nurtured and encouraged.

Gregory and Huang (2013) studied the expectations of high school students, their parents, and the students' 10th grade math and English teachers. As with Bates and Anderson (2014), Gregory and Huang (2013) utilized the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS: 2002) to analyze student data. The researchers' sample consisted of high school sophomores ($n = 15,000$) representing 752 public and private schools. Researchers gathered tenth-grade student achievement data from standardized tests in both math and reading during the spring of 2002. Students, parents, and teachers answered a single-item survey which asked, "How far in school do you expect or how far in school do you think the student will get?" The answer choices presented and assigned values were:

Less than high school graduation; High school graduation or GED only; Attend or complete 2-year college/school; Attend college; 4-year degree incomplete; Graduate from college; Obtain Master's degree or equivalent; Obtain PhD, MD, or other advanced degree. (Gregory & Huang, 2013, p. 44).

In a follow-up study of students who enrolled in college or university, Gregory and Huang (2013) found that "expectations accounted for 6% more variance than the student

characteristics such as achievement, race, and gender [and] overturns assumptions that ‘simple’ beliefs in student potential would be weaker predictors of college-going than student characteristics such as family income and achievement level” (Gregory & Huang, 2013, p. 50). This study suggests that students who have high expectations for achievement are most likely to enroll in college, which is surprising considering that lack of family income and low academic achievement are perceived as barriers to students’ acceptance into a post-secondary institution.

Bias, Stereotypes, and Stereotype Threat

The factors to which a teacher attributes student performance can be influenced by personal bias or belief in stereotypes about their students. For instance, a study by Nurenberg (2016) found that high school students who were tracked and placed in lower-level academic courses demonstrated higher frequencies of negative behaviors in the classroom, had a negative view of their own and their peers’ academic achievement, and often were minorities who came from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Teachers’ and administrators’ personal biases in terms of race and ethnicity can have a profound impact upon the quality and quantity of students’ education. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2017) reported that minorities, particularly Black males, were disproportionately suspended, expelled, or sent to alternative schools compared to other ethnic groups. The NCES extracted student suspension and expulsion data from the U.S. Department of Education’s Department of Civil Rights. To analyze the data, the total number of students who were suspended or expelled from school were divided by the total number of students enrolled in public and secondary schools based on a snapshot from a single day of attendance between September 27 and December 31 during the 2010-2011 school year. The results revealed that 6.4% of the total population of students was suspended out-of-school, while 15.4% of the

total number of Black students received out-of-school suspensions. Comparatively, 4.31% of the total number of White students and 5.95% of the total number of Hispanics received the same consequence (NCES, 2017).

Student expulsion data from NCES show a similar trend as the suspension studies. Students who were expelled from school were either permanently removed from the school setting altogether or were sent to an alternative school for an extended period of time (NCES, 2017). This consequence differed from an out-of-school suspension in which students are removed from school for as many as ten days. Of the total number of Black students, 0.51% were expelled from school, compared to 0.16% of the total number of White and 0.20% of all Hispanic students. Unlike White and Hispanic students, Black students were expelled at a higher rate than the national average of 0.22% (NCES, 2017). Furthermore, 0.87% of Blacks who received suspensions or expulsions were referred to law enforcement compared to White students (0.42%) and Hispanic students (0.52%). According to the NCES (2017), school-related arrests were defined as arrests made for incidents that occurred on campus during school hours or outside of school hours during a school-sponsored activity such as extracurricular activities or transportation to and from school. Among students who were arrested for a school-related matter, Black students accounted for 0.25%, which was higher than the national average of 0.13% ($p < .001$); the percentage of White students (0.10%); and the percentage of Hispanic students (0.13%) for similar school-related incidents.

The phenomenon known as stereotype threat describes people's responses to their abilities in the face of stereotyping according to culture, race, ethnicity, and gender (Aronson, Fried, and Goode, 2002). Stereotype threat can influence an individual's physical and emotional health by inducing anxiety and high blood pressure, among other health maladies (Aronson et al.,

2002). Individuals do not have to believe that the stereotype is true; they simply have to believe in the existence of the stereotype and care enough to dispel the fallacy (Aronson et al., 2002). More importantly, students may be hyper-aware of a stereotype and seek to disengage their identities from the stereotype by either over-performing to achieve success in a particular area or disengaging altogether when “success is elusive” (Aronson et al., 2002, p. 114). Stereotype threat is especially dangerous for young Black students.

When Black students focus on characteristics of academic achievement such as good grades, studying, and speaking with a high level of diction, they are accused of “acting white” (Fordham, 2008). In a 2007 *Washington Post* article, author Aleta Payne described her surprise when her son came home quite upset after spending time with his friends. Payne, whose children attended predominantly White private schools in Raleigh, North Carolina, described her reaction as “dumbfounded” when she and her husband realized that their son was upset because his White friend asked him why he “didn’t act Black” (Payne, 2007, para. 2). Her son shared that his friends expected him to be a rapper, to which he lamented that his friends expected him to be something he is not. Payne went on to report that her son “certainly felt isolated by the expectation that he should behave like some modern-day minstrel in bling instead of blackface” (Payne, 2007, para. 7). Unfortunately, Payne’s son is far from the only Black male with this experience.

Fordham’s research (2008) on the dual role of Black students socially and academically suggested the following:

Black high achievers were compelled both to be and not to be socially White, to respect and retain their citizenship in the Black community while struggling for recognition in the dominating White society. Many sought to convey the impression that they were not

concerned with academic excellence – if only as a cover for their real ambition
(Fordham, 2008, para. 18).

Educators and organizational leaders need to be aware of stereotype threat in schools and organizations in order to afford Black students and professionals optimal environments for success.

Teaching Students to Have a Growth Mindset

The foundation of growth mindset is that the brain is malleable and capable of change. Educators can teach students to develop a growth mindset. Students should be taught the concept of neuroplasticity, defined as “the brain’s ability to form and reform new neural connections in response to experiences and changes in the environment” (Robinson, 2017, p. 18). By sharing the scientific evidence that the brain changes when learning new tasks, teachers can help foster a growth mindset. “Students are more likely to learn thinking skills in classrooms where teachers nurture a love for learning and establish a setting that is conducive to creative and critical thought” (Sousa, 2011, p. 254). Helping students learn ways to persist in the face of setbacks can help students develop self-esteem and the grit necessary to continue to persevere when faced with challenges.

The term self-concept “describes the way we view ourselves in [the] world” (Sousa, 2011, p. 56). The fear of failure can thwart a student’s efforts to develop the needed grit to overcome obstacles (Sousa, 2011). Individuals often recall past experiences when dealing with new yet similar experiences (Sousa, 2011). If prior learning experiences were positive, students tend to remain open to process new information. If prior learning experiences were negative, students are apt to avoid learning and processing new information (Sousa, 2011).

Along with promoting a sense of belonging in the school environment, teachers can further promote a growth mindset culture in their classrooms by cultivating an environment in which mistakes are accepted as part of the cognitive growth and development process. Students who possess fixed mindsets find failure unacceptable and, as a result, may avoid trying new tasks that stretch their abilities for fear of failure. “When teachers teach students how to persist, a growth mindset develops, thus improving grit to overcome any challenges” (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015, p. 49).

Creating Connections in the Classroom

Lin-Siegler, Ahn, Chen, Fang, & Luna-Lucero (2016) conducted a study of high school students’ motivation towards learning science when presented with background information concerning the struggles and failures of great scientists such as Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, and Michael Faraday. The study consisted of 9th and 10th grade high school students ($n = 402$) from four high schools in a large, urban district. More than 68% of the students were either Black or Hispanic, and 71.7% of student participants were eligible for free or reduced lunch. Males comprised 60% of the participants, and females comprised 40% of the participants. Of the participants, 18.4% were born outside of the United States and 31.8% spoke English less than half of the time at home.

During the first week of this five-week study, students were given a pretest to determine “beliefs about intelligence, effort, goal orientation, and attributions regarding failure” (Lin-Siegler et al., 2016, p. 318). Students were then randomly assigned to one of three groups: intellectual struggle stories ($n = 131$); life struggle stories ($n = 136$); and achievement stories ($n = 135$). The first group read articles of scientists’ who made mistakes in their scientific inquiries but who persevered through effort. The second group read stories of the scientists’ personal

struggles such as poverty and lack of family support but who persevered through effort. The third group read stories that discussed the great triumphs and achievements of the aforementioned scientists. Stories were similar in word and sentence length and level of diction as measured using the *Reading Ease Metric* (Flesch, 1948). In each group's stories, the introductory paragraph listed the scientists' accomplishments, the body of the text consisted of the treatment condition, and the last paragraph reiterated the main idea.

Student science grades during week one and week six were converted into z-scores for each class to measure student performance. Students completed a 6-item survey by Levy and Dweck (1997) consisting of statements such as, "You can always greatly change how intelligent you are" to determine student beliefs about intelligence. Students' beliefs about effort were measured using a 9-item survey by Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck (2007) consisting of statements such as, "If an assignment is hard, it means I'll probably learn a lot doing it". To measure student goal orientation, students completed a survey that included items from the *Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey* by Midgley, Kaplan, Middleton, Maehr, Urdan, Anderman, & Roeser (1998). This survey consisted of statements such as, "If an assignment is hard, it means I'll probably learn a lot doing it". Researchers also assessed student attributions toward failure by responding to the following scenario from Blackwell et al. (2007):

You start a new class at the beginning of the year and you really like the subject and the teacher. You think you know the subject pretty well, so you study a medium amount for the first quiz. Afterward, you think you did okay, even though there were some questions you didn't know the answer for. Then you got your quiz back and you find out your score; you only got a 50%, and that's an F (Lin-Seigler et al., 2016, p. 319).

After reading the scenario, students responded to statements that measured non-helpless attributions such as, “The test was unfair”. Researchers also measured student responses to failure that included statements such as, “I would try not to take this subject ever again”. All of the survey responses used a 6-point Likert Scale that ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree).

Lin-Seigler et al. (2016) found significant, positive correlations between students’ science grades and their beliefs about effort ($p < .001$), goal orientation ($p < .05$), and positive responses when faced with failure ($p < .05$). No significant correlation was found between students’ science grades and their beliefs regarding intelligence and negative responses to failure. Students who had limited understanding of scientists’ struggles tended to perceive them as geniuses who easily achieved success (Ahn et al., 2016). When students learned about the struggles great scientists encountered, they understood that learning is a process of trial and error and that hard work rather than reliance on innate ability can determine one’s success as a scientist (Ahn et al., 2016).

Teachers play an important role in humanizing the subjects of their instruction by showing students ways that others encountered and managed to overcome obstacles (Ahn et al., 2016). Students need to have role models they identify with (Kafele, 2012).

Mentoring Children and Young Adults

Effective mentoring can make a positive difference in the lives of youth and “can play an important role in promoting resilience among at-risk children and adolescents” (Southwick, Morgan, Vythilingam, & Charney, 2006, p. 577). Often, at-risk students cope with stressors at home and as a result of this strain, may not be academically engaged at school (Davis-Kean, 2005).

Wesely, Dzoba, Miller, & Rasche, (2017) conducted a qualitative study of 20 mentors, ranging in ages from 19-64, who participated in a nationally recognized program designed to mentor middle school students from two area middle schools who were at-risk for academic failure. Each mentor committed one hour of mentoring per week for three months in the fall of 2012. The researchers sought to determine strategies that would be most useful in mentoring at-risk youth. Prior to being assigned a same-sex middle school student to mentor, all mentors participated in a two-hour basic training session. Mentors were randomly selected to work at one of two area schools. Ten mentors who were assigned to work at one school were given an additional 45-minute training session which was an “overview of the four positive coping strategies of emotional regulation, conflict resolution, future orientation, and active listening,” (Wesely et al., 2017, p. 203). The mentors who worked with students at the second middle school did not receive any additional training (Wesely et al., 2017).

After three months of mentors’ working with their students, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with mentors that inquired of each mentor’s background, reasons for wanting to mentor, descriptions of a typical mentoring session, sources of their student’s stress, the mentor’s responses to the student’s stressors, and mentors’ perceptions of the mentoring relationship (Wesely et al., 2017). Among mentors who received the additional 45-minute training, interview questions about their responses to their mentees’ stressors were framed using terminology from the additional training related to the four positive coping strategies. Researchers utilized the process of open coding to search for themes among interviewees’ responses; as themes emerged, researchers used focused coding to determine examples of themes found in mentors’ responses.

One theme that mentors reported in this study was the mentees' perceptions of strain in their lives. Mentees shared difficult home lives and strained family relationships with their mentors. One mentee was removed from her mother's home, moved from foster home to foster home, and alluded to sexual abuse. Another mentee described feeling ignored by his parents due to his father's leaving the family; because he was the eldest sibling, he had to take on the role of a parent to his younger siblings. One mentee shared that his high absenteeism in school was due to his mother's forcing him to stay home to babysit his sister, which was subsequently brought to the attention of truancy officers by the school. Another mentee described the community in which he lived as dangerous because he could hear gunshots and police sirens at night. The mentees attributed strains or stressors in their home lives to their poor academic performance (Wesely et al., 2017).

The second theme that emerged in this study was the mentors' perceptions of their students. Mentors overwhelmingly described their mentees as highly intelligent and talented; however, they acknowledged that their mentees' lives outside of school served as distractors to their academic performance. Mentees who experienced a difficult weekend, for example, refused to discuss their experiences with their teachers and became more isolated or prone to acting out in class. Some mentees demonstrated no behavioral issues at school and were generally considered to be average students. However, at least one mentee failed to be academically challenged by her teachers. Another mentee who had a reputation as a fighter at school learned at an early age to fight for survival and had few positive coping mechanisms. Another mentee who felt constantly victimized by others became a bully to both peers and siblings as a means of seeking control (Wesely et al., 2017).

The third theme that emerged in this study was the mentors' response to their mentees' stressors. Mentors described the process of helping their mentees to stabilize their emotions. This process entailed having mentees learn to employ strategies of "monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions" (Wesely et al., 2017, p. 206). In the case of a mentee who reacted to conflict by yelling, the mentor helped to guide the mentee through the process of considering the possible outcomes of reacting in a different manner. One mentor described using conflict resolution as a tool to help the mentee comprehend that everything is not a personal slight and to see a particular conflict in terms of whether it truly mattered in terms of his long-term goals. Another mentor described helping her mentee learn to accept others' points of view rather than immediately reacting in the form of judgment.

Another coping mechanism, future orientation, was a process by which mentors guided mentees to view their actions in terms of their goals and hopes for a better future (Wesely et al., 2017). One mentor described her telling the mentee, a struggling student, that if she intended to become an attorney, she needed to be able to read well. Another mentor described his mentee's inquiring about colleges; the mentor discussed his own path to college and that having good grades would help the mentee to get scholarships and grants. Other mentors helped mentees differentiate between short-term and long-term goals, assisted their mentees in defining their personal goals, and framed a connection between both their short-term and long-term goals.

Mentors also described the importance of active listening when working with their mentees. These mentors stated that active listening built rapport and helped mentors to navigate questions to ask and when, and to determine areas in which the mentees most needed help. With regard to active listening, one mentor stated:

You can't be future-oriented with a person if you don't know what they plan for their

future and like they don't have a relationship with you, which I feel like you build through active listening. And it's hard to get people to open up about their problems for conflict resolution type situations if you don't listen to them, or they feel like you're not listening (Wesely et al., 2017, p. 211).

Mentors, whether or not they received the additional 45-minute additional training on positive coping strategies, described these strategies and ways they employed them within the context of their relationships with their mentees, possibly demonstrating that the mentors who did not receive additional training had an innate ability to mentor students. All mentors were focused on relationship building with their mentees and on modeling expected behaviors. They described active listening and the need to help mentees to reframe their stressors by considering their long-term goals as critical strategies in building successful relationships with their mentees (Wesely et al., 2017).

Natural mentoring relationships, which are those in which the child has cultivated strong relationships with parents and supportive non-parental adults who have a longstanding relationship with the child, have been successful in helping to promote the child's social and emotional growth and well-being (Hurd, Varner, & Rowley, 2013). Strong natural mentoring relationships may act as "a buffer against the developmental risks associated with the onset of depression among adolescents and young adults" (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2014, p. 25). The presence of natural mentoring relationships has a positive effect on adolescents' relationships with their parents and with their peers (Hurd et al., 2013).

The Professional and Personal Lives of Adult Black Males

Wiebold and Spiller (2016) conducted a qualitative study of twenty-two Black males to understand how they "defied statistics of endangerment (violence, prison, unemployment, early

death) and achieved some measure of success” (p. 6). The research participants were selected from a sample of convenience. Eligible candidates for this study were at least 22 years old, employed full-time, considered themselves financially self-sufficient, and “not currently under the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system” (p. 6). Semi-structured interviews were conducted that lasted approximately an hour and a half. Among the research participants, 10 were between the ages of 25 and 39, 10 were between the ages of 40 and 59, and 2 were more than 60 years of age. Research participants varied in their highest level of education attainment: two earned a high school diploma; six attended college but did not graduate; one earned an associate’s degree; seven earned a bachelor’s degree; and six earned a graduate degree. All research participants resided in the Midwestern US.

Many of the research participants attributed their ability to succeed to discretion with regard to individuals with whom to socialize. One research participant stated:

I quit hanging out with people I thought or knew were in gangs or selling drugs. I’d still talk to them in school but it wasn’t necessary to associate with them outside of school or anything like that . . . I just stayed to myself a lot (Wiebold & Spiller, 2016, p. 9).

Aside from being able to identify relationships that might prove to be disadvantageous, research participants attributed their success in their careers to being goal-oriented and self-reliant. One research participant remarked:

I couldn’t be an average guy going through the motions, doing the things that everyone else was doing. I had to be better than everyone else in order to survive because if I made one mistake, I’m gone. No one was going to give me a second chance (Wiebold & Spiller, 2016, p. 10).

Research participants were also able to demonstrate resilience and the ability to maintain engaged and focused when faced with adversity. One research participant had recently lost an election for a local government office. The participant stated, “I guess I always focus. I focus on the long term; what I want and how I want to get there. I’m always thinking long term . . .” While speaking about how he felt after losing the election, the research participant framed his perspective in a positive light. He stated that “there are a lot of ways that I can recognize in myself that I’m not a typical twenty-something—as much as this election sucks—not many people my age gets 33% of the vote” (Wiebold & Spiller, 2016, p. 11).

Research participants shared that their being exposed to different perspectives geographically and socially were important parts of their growth and development. Many of these men were exposed to different cultures when they moved to different geographic regions within the US, attended predominantly White primary and secondary schools, or in the case of one participant, attended a predominantly Hispanic and Asian high school. Research participants noted that they learned ways to adapt to a variety of environments and ways to interact with people from different cultures (Wiebold & Spiller, 2016).

While the research participants understood that to be successful in life, they should understand other cultures, they also knew that their choice to be successful led others to question their “blackness” (Wiebold & Spiller, 2016). One research participant stated:

. . . I don’t think they think I’m a Tom, or whatever. But I do think because I have a different way about—like I said, I can be professional with you, professional with the VPs, but at the same time we can go have a beer and talk totally different, you know. They don’t see that. They see if I’m with the VPs and doing something with my life, then I sold out; it’s not just doing a job. As I say, being a Tom doesn’t really matter, but if

you're calling me directly a Tom I'm going to straighten you out! (Wiebold & Spiller, 2016, p. 17).

Another research participant noted the tension between remaining authentically Black while living in a society in which the cultural norms are predominantly White. He stated:

It is really a balancing act of staying Black, staying true to who you are, “keeping it real” but how do you “keep it real” when White culture is your professional and legal and every system oriented—every system, everything we have as a system is White. [He gestured to his clothing] You see what I mean? I can throw on a pair of khakis and a dress shirt, loafers with no socks. I am wearing moccasins with no socks! I am not someone a cop would look at and say, “This is one bad-ass big Black dude” (Wiebold & Spiller, 2016, p. 17).

Aside from having the ability to understand and adhere to cultural norms of the predominantly White workplace, the research participants believed that their work ethic and attitudes were also important attributes to their success (Wiebold & Spiller, 2016). Their attitudes were a reflection of the individualistic mindset of many Americans that differ markedly from other nations.

According to the Pew Research Center's study on Global Attitudes and Trends (2012), 36% of Americans agreed with the statement, “success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control”, which is in stark contrast to countries such as Germany (72%), France (57%), and Spain (50%). Within the US, those who did not have a college degree were far more apt to agree that they had little control over their success (41%) than those who had a college degree (22%) (Pew Research Global Attitudes Project, 2012).

The research participants in the Wiebold and Spiller (2016) study had an individualistic mindset. That paradigm helped them to separate themselves from those who were negative influences, afforded them a strong sense-of-self in terms of their work ethic while learning to adapt to White middle-class cultural norms in both the work and school environments.

Summary

The literature review discussed in this chapter explored attribution theory, mindset, and grit theoretical frameworks as a means of contextualizing research on personal success and perseverance in education and career. Research has demonstrated that a growth mindset can be cultivated by the infusion of life lessons in the classroom and at home. Student interest in learning is greatly increased when lessons include stories of personal and/or professional challenges many great thinkers had to overcome in order to achieve success, thereby making them more relatable to students (Lin-Seigler et al., 2016). Adolescents and young adults thrive in a classroom and home environment in which the culture views mistakes as a learning opportunity rather than as a detriment (Lin-Seigler et al., 2016; Wesely et al., 2017).

Adolescents and young adults experience successful mentoring relationships when their mentors have long-term and frequent contact, utilize active listening skills, show mentees ways to cope with adversity, and methods to develop positive relationships with family and peers (Hurd, Varner, & Rowley, 2013; Wesely et al., 2017)). Successful adult Black males who demonstrated a sense of purpose in their work ethic found a way to balance being “black” while maintaining a sense-of-self in the workplace and in school (Wiebold & Spiller, 2016).

The goal of this study was to add to the body of knowledge of Black males’ attributions of success and to provide further evidence on the personal tools and attributes that Black males require to promote academic and professional achievement. The methods used in the

dissertation research study to obtain additional evidence on Black male professionals' attributions of success and perseverance in education are described in chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Method

Introduction and Overview

This chapter describes the procedures, processes, and reasoning for the design of this research study. The chapter includes in-depth information about the research sample, research design, data analysis, ethical considerations, and issues of trustworthiness.

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors to which Black professional males attribute their persistence in education and professional success. First, this qualitative study sought to explore the ways that Black male professionals define success as it relates to their profession. Second, this study inquired about the factors to which Black male professionals attributed their persistence in education. Third, the study examined the factors to which Black male professionals attributed success in their profession. Fourth, the goal of this study was to seek recommendations from Black male professionals for educators and other professionals to enable and encourage young Black males.

This dissertation study used a case study approach to address each of the research questions. The case study is defined as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003, p. 18). This theory-guided empirical inquiry utilized attribution, mindset, and grit theories as the conceptual framework and rationale for the study. According to Levy, “The more case interpretations are guided by theory, the more explicit their underlying analytic assumptions, normative biases, and causal propositions; the fewer their logical contradictions; and the easier they are to empirically validate or invalidate” (Levy, 2008, p. 5). Furthermore, utilization of an empirical inquiry provided the researcher a basis to gain a detailed description of research participants and their experiences, which helped

to triangulate multiple forms of data to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomena. This process added “rigor, breadth, and depth to the study and provides corroborative evidence of the data obtained” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Research Participants

After approval by Southeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), the research participants selected for this study were chosen using criterion-based sampling. To obtain prospective research participants, the researcher posted an announcement via *LinkedIn*, a digital social networking site for professionals. *LinkedIn* was chosen as an ideal method for soliciting participants because the researcher could readily access profiles and professional contacts of prospective subjects. In addition, *LinkedIn* provided a ready-made form of communication with prospective subjects using instant messaging within the site. The researcher communicated the following criteria for eligibility to participate in this research study:

- Research participants must self-identify as African American or Black.
- Research participants are over the age of eighteen.
- Research participants have completed at least a bachelor’s degree.
- Research participants are currently employed full-time.
- Research participants earn at least \$40,000 annually.

Subjects were required to hold at least a bachelor’s degree because the study focused on Black males’ attributions of perseverance in graduating from high school, earning a four-year college degree, and success in career. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 38.1% of White males who began their studies at college or university in the 2008 cohort graduated within four years compared to 16.2% of Black males. The five-year graduation rate for White males was 55.6% compared to 30.1% of Black males for the 2008

cohort. Furthermore, 60% of White males graduated within six years compared to 35.3% of Black males from this same cohort. These data include public, private, non-profit, and for-profit schools (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], n.d., table 326.10). The researcher considered the aforementioned data when creating the criteria for choosing attribution theory, grit, and mindset as theoretical frameworks of the study.

Research subjects were also required to earn at least \$40,000 annually. The researcher carefully selected \$40,000 as the minimum annual salary to include those who were educators. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, the average starting salary of students who graduated in 2015 with a bachelor's degree was \$50,219, while the average starting salary of an educator who graduated in 2015 with a bachelor's degree was \$35,686 (*National Association of Colleges and Employers* [NACE], 2016, figure 4). According to the Florida Department of Education, the average teacher salary in Florida during the 2015-2016 school year was \$45,666 (Florida Department of Education [FLDOE], n.d., table 326.10). The aforementioned data were considered when establishing the criteria for research participants in order to ensure that professional educators were not excluded from participation in the study.

Research Design and Data Collection

The researcher created a brief survey designed to acquire background information about prospective research participants, to determine whether they met the criteria for research, and to explain “underlying individual’s perceptions, as well as the similarities and differences in perceptions among participants” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 149). The following questions were included in the survey sent to prospective research participants:

1. What is your name?

2. What is your gender?
3. What race/ethnicity best describes you?
4. What is your age?
5. With whom did you live with as a child?
6. In what city and state do you currently reside?
7. Which of the following best describes the principle industry of your organization?
8. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
9. From which college/university did you obtain your highest degree?
10. How much money did you personally earn in 2016?

This qualitative study addressed the following research questions:

- Q1: How do successful Black male professionals define success as it relates to their profession?
- Q2: To what do successful Black male professionals attribute their persistence in education?
- Q3: To what do successful Black male professionals attribute success in their profession?
- Q4: What recommendations do successful Black male professionals have for educators and other professionals to encourage young Black males?

Black males who expressed interest in participating in this study and who met all of the selection criteria were sent a copy of the informed consent document (Appendix B) and a brief survey (Appendix C) to obtain demographic and background information. The men who were selected to participate in this study met the aforementioned criteria, worked in a variety of professions, and served as mentors outside of their profession. Selected participant ages ranged from 29-49 years of age.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews of four Black male professionals in order to gather qualitative responses to the research questions. According to Creswell (2013, p. 157), this number of case study participants “should provide ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases as well as conduct cross-case theme analysis”. The semi-structured interviews consisted of the research questions and other ancillary questions for follow-up and clarification. Semi-structured interviews “are used to facilitate more focused exploration of a specific topic” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 155).

The participants chose a neutral setting for the interviews so that each participant felt comfortable sharing his experiences. The interviews ranged from one-and-a-half to three hours in length.

Strategies for Validating Findings

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed by an independent, proprietary transcription service. The researcher verified the accuracy of the transcriptions against the audio recordings. The researcher utilized a web-based computer application to analyze the qualitative results of the interviews. Significant statements and phrases from participants’ responses to the interview questions and the research questions were highlighted then extracted from the interviews. Meanings were formed from significant statements and then formed as themes. These themes were then formed into clusters and categorized.

A preliminary analysis of the interview data was conducted by coding specific themes by color. The researcher then solicited validation from the research participants by asking them to compare the researcher’s descriptions with their own lived experiences.

The researcher addressed each research question by reporting the results of the compiled qualitative data analysis. Conclusions derived from the research were discussed, and recommendations for future research were proposed.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount when conducting research. Prior to initiating this study, the researcher first received IRB approval from Southeastern University. All research participants who expressed interest in participating in this study were given an informed consent form which described the research study, its implications, and possible benefits and risks.

All participants were given pseudonyms when the data were analyzed and reported in order to protect identities. All notes, transcriptions, and any other identifying information were stored in a locked file cabinet and were stored on a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher.

Issues of Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, the researcher employed triangulation of data, which included interview and demographic survey data for each research participant. Interviews were semi-structured; the researcher asked a number of follow-up questions to gain detailed insight into the experience(s) of research participants. The researcher also utilized member-checking, which included transcribing an interview and then sharing the transcription with each research participant. Member-checking is a form of checks-and-balances to ensure that the material gathered from each interview is the research participants' words and thoughts rather than subjective interpretations of the researcher. Transferability was addressed by the researcher by providing rich depth of detail in

the description of the research participants. The results of the research study are presented in chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of the current study was to determine factors to which Black professional males attributed their educational perseverance in high school and college; in addition, the study was designed to determine the factors to which Black professional males attributed success in their respective professions. Chapter four discusses the results of the analyses of the qualitative demographic and interview data gathered in this case study. The researcher interviewed four Black males who graduated from colleges and universities within the United States and who are currently employed full-time in their respective professions. The discussion of the results focuses around responses to the research questions and the themes uncovered in the case study. These themes include: mentoring others as a form of paying it forward; being an example of one's racial group; the role of mentors and father-figures; faith in God; and advice to leaders in secondary education, higher education, and organizations to help recruit and retain Black males in their respective organizations.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- Q1: How do successful Black male professionals define success as it relates to their profession?
- Q2: To what do successful Black male professionals attribute their persistence in education?
- Q3: To what do successful Black male professionals attribute success in their profession?
- Q4: What recommendations do successful Black male professionals have for educators and other professionals to encourage young Black males?

Research Participants

Three of the four research participants interviewed in this case study were born in the southeastern portion of the United States, while one participant was born in Jamaica and relocated to the US while in high school. The three male subjects who were born in the US self-identified as African American and Black, while the male subject who was born in Jamaica self-identified as Black. Participants ranged in ages from 29 to 49. Three of the four research participants were married and had children, while one research participant was single and had no children. The following table illustrates research participants' ages, degrees earned, locations of colleges attended, and current profession.

Table 1

Demographic Data of Research Participants (n=4)

Pseudonym	Age	Raised By	Bachelor Degree	School Location	Graduate Degree	School Location	Profession
Matthew	34	Mother and Father	Education	Southeast US	Master of Education	Southeast US	Assistant Principal
James	29	Mother and Father	Marketing	Southeast US	Juris Doctor	Southeast US	Attorney
Paul	42	Mother Father died in prison	Environmental Science	Northeast US Transfer to College in the Southeast US	Master of Education Juris Doctor	Southeast US Southeast US	Education Administrator
Mark	49	Mother and Father	Business Management	Multiple Locations via the Military	Master of Human Resources Master of Conflict Management Completed courses in Master of Education Leadership Program	Northeast US Southeast US Southeast US	Human Resources Specialist

Research Participant #1 – Matthew

Matthew was a 34-year old assistant principal who worked in a large public-school district in the southeast region of the US. Matthew was born in Jamaica and relocated to the US when he was in the eighth grade. Matthew was raised by both parents whose highest completed level of education was high school. Both parents were employed full-time and encouraged Matthew to focus on his studies and to earn a college degree. A self-described “average” high school student, Matthew reported that he did not receive much positive recognition from his teachers. Upon graduating from high school, Matthew enrolled in a large university in the southeast region of the US and obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree in Education. He then taught language arts at an urban school district. While married with two children and employed full-time, Matthew enrolled at a large, public university in the southeastern region of the US to obtain his Master of Arts degree in Educational Leadership. After serving as a dean for two years, Matthew was promoted to his current position, assistant principal. As an assistant principal, he served at a middle school for three years and then at an elementary school for one year. Matthew was actively involved in his church as a youth pastor and mentored both teens and young adults.

Research Participant #2 – James

James was a 29-year old attorney who worked for a large, urban public-school district in the southeast region of the US. Both his mother and father, who were college graduates, raised James. As a high school student, James performed well in both the classroom and on the field as an outstanding football player. James knew that he would go to college, an expectation placed upon him from both his parents and grandparents, who were also college graduates. Upon graduating from high school, James attended a small, private liberal arts university in the South,

where he graduated with his Bachelor of Arts in Marketing. James then enrolled in a law school in Florida, where he earned his Juris Doctor degree. After graduating from law school, James obtained his current position as a staff attorney for a large, urban public school district. Aside from his work in law, James also served as a mentor to teens.

Research Participant #3 – Paul

Paul was a 42-year old education administrator who oversaw a program dedicated to closing the minority achievement gap in a large, urban public-school district in the southeast region of the US. His mother raised Paul because his father was incarcerated during the majority of Paul's life and died while in prison. Paul attended a middle school for gifted students. Paul did not like attending the school for the gifted because he was one of only seven Black students and because the friends with whom he had grown up attended a different school. Purposefully, Paul struggled academically while in middle school because he wanted to force his mother to withdraw him from school so that he could enroll in the zoned school attended by his friends. In high school, Paul excelled academically and earned a scholarship to attend a public university in the Northeastern US. Paul soon realized that his scholarship did not cover all of his expenses; he had to work multiple jobs to meet his financial needs. After two years, Paul transferred to a large, public university in the Southeast where he earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Environmental Science. Paul also earned his Master of Arts degree in Educational Leadership from a large, public university in the Southeast US. He then worked as a math teacher, administrative dean, and as an educational administrator. While married with children and employed full-time, Paul enrolled in a large, public university and obtained his Juris Doctor. He plans to take the bar exam in order to practice law. Paul has also taken an active role in mentoring teenagers.

Research Participant #4 – Mark

Mark was a 49-year old human resources specialist at a government agency in the southeastern region of the US. Mark was raised by both parents in a small, rural town in the southeastern US. An average high school student, Mark's guidance counselor recommended that he attend community college. Faced with having to either re-take classes at the community college that he had already taken in high school or the prospect of working at his small town's factory, Mark decided to enlist in the Army. While enlisted, Mark took college classes and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Business Management with a concentration in Human Resources. After retiring from the military, Mark served as a Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) teacher for three years in the southeast and enrolled in graduate school to earn a master's degree in educational leadership. However, due to the need to relocate, Mark did not complete his degree. When Mark relocated to a Southern state and obtained employment in human resources, he enrolled in a small, private college where he earned his Master of Arts degree in Human Resources.

Data Analysis

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews of each of the four research participants to address each of the research questions. Prior to the interview, research participants were invited to fill out a questionnaire that consisted of 10 questions to determine participant background or demographic information (see Appendix C). If a research participant did not complete the questionnaire prior to the interview, the researcher included the questions found in the questionnaire during the interview. Interviews were semi-structured, which allowed the researcher the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to extract the richness of each research

participant's experience. All interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed to determine emergent themes.

Interview Results

Q1: "How do successful Black male professionals define success as it relates to their profession?"

When asked to define success as it related to their professions, all four research participants described success as having a reputation of integrity and hard work so that they could have a positive impact in the lives of others. Matthew stated:

When I originally started as an educator, I kind of looked at success as moving up the rungs. I started as a teacher in the classroom. I saw success as doing the next thing, being an assistant principal, being a principal, moving on to being a superintendent or what have you. As I continue this profession, I measure success in the students and the people I impact. For me, my success has more to do with the students that leave our building educated as opposed to those who came with a lack of education.

James described his personal maintenance of a high standard of self as part of what it means to be successful. He stated:

It's being very competent in what you do and having the respect of your peers, to think that. Ultimately in our profession, it's not so much word of mouth, but it is. Your reputation is based upon how other lawyers view you and your success is gonna be based on your ability to know. I also say success is also measured by your ability to really uphold your professional standard. You can be good and be underhanded, but I think a successful attorney, in my eyes, is one who knows the law and does the right thing.

For these interviewees, one's character and reputation were defining elements of success, especially in relation to the ways that Black males are viewed in society. Mark described his being highly conscious of the ways that others perceived him, and he understood his role in helping to disprove Mark's perception of stereotypes that society has of Black males. Mark stated:

I think it's all about how you carry yourself, how you present yourself to people. I teach my kids, "People are always watching, so whether you're doing good or bad, somebody's watching what you're doing." I do my best to carry myself in a positive light. As crazy as it may sound, I know this is something I gained from the military, as well as my upbringing. I like to consider myself to be an ambassador for the African American community, for America. Why do I say that? Number one, I feel like how I conduct myself gives people an opportunity to see that what you may hear on the news doesn't speak for all one race.

Mark also discussed the fact that he enjoys his role as "an ambassador for the African American community." A self-described extrovert, Mark enjoys meeting new people and taking advantage of opportunities to share his experiences and to learn about others. Mark discussed wanting to be a positive role model and a strong desire to expand others' perceptions of Black males. He also defined success in terms of having a sense of purpose and helping others to achieve their goals:

My definition of success is setting your own personal goals for yourself and determining what is your purpose and passion for existence and how you can make this world a better place. Pursuing that and being happy with what you choose to do and not being led by what, maybe, your parents may want you to do. Not building your success on what we've

been always taught is the American dream. That to me is not what success is. It's teaching people to really understand that we are all here for a purpose and tapping into why you exist other than for yourself.

Matthew described success in terms of being a positive role model to his students as an educator. He reflected:

I wanted kids to see a reflection of themselves in a professional male. I wanted kids to see that they, too, could make it. I had that example, and so it was important for me to ensure that I lived what I taught my kids, and that my black male students and that my Black students would see a successful individual represented in front of them. I wanted definitely if I was going to preach, "Get a good education," in my classroom, then certainly I wanted to be emblematic of someone who was educated.

Paul described success as perseverance in the face of adversity and having the opportunity to share his philosophy on the importance of resiliency to others. He has shared the mantra, "It's not over until it's over" with students, teachers, and administrators. Paul also stated that, "It's just how God made me. It's not over until it's over. You always have a chance for redemption."

Q2: "To what do successful Black male professionals attribute their persistence in education?"

As a high school student, Matthew described himself as intellectually capable, yet unfocused and immature. Matthew started attending college at age 16. Matthew described feeling that he could not compete with his college peers academically. Though Matthew's parents had the equivalent of a high school diploma, they encouraged him to go to college and get a degree. Matthew acknowledged that though his parents wanted him to succeed, they did

not necessarily have the tools to help him do so. Matthew stated, “I think if any portion of my college education was emblematic of grit, it would be those first two years where I did often feel like giving up because I didn't feel that the support was necessarily there at the institution that I went to, but I did have parents that pushed me to keep going.”

Matthew also attributed his persistence in his educational endeavors to a high school health teacher who always offered words of encouragement. “. . . Every time I spoke to her, it was positive. It was, ‘You're going to be somebody. You're going to impact the world. You're going to change lives.’ I kind of carry that with me.” Matthew also attributed his perseverance to, “Just not wanting to let my parents down, but knowing that there were people that saw something positive in me was enough for me.”

James shared that even as a child he knew that he needed to succeed in school because he came from a long family line of academic achievement. During his first semester in college, James earned a 1.6 GPA and was subsequently placed on academic probation. James readily admitted that he lost his academic focus because for the first time in his life, he was far away from the constant, watchful eyes of his parents. James recalled his father’s telling him, “We can’t baby you . . . We’re not going to hound you about what you’re doing. You’ve got to want that [degree].” Reflecting upon his father’s advice, James stated,

The one thing I didn't want to do is be this person who had come from a family that my grandparents are both college educated and had successful careers, my parents educated, master's degrees, successful careers. Here I am coming from what seems to be a great environment and oh, he's got it all made then I get kicked out of college. Some of it was that I had to dig deep within myself and say, "You're better than that.”

Although he had a scholarship to attend a university in the Northeast, Paul still needed to cover the financial burden that was not covered by his scholarship. As a result, Paul had to obtain employment while in college. Time management and a lack of study skills were Paul's greatest challenges as a college student. Paul shared that when he took an engineering graphics course, he told his professor that he had great difficulty understanding the material. His professor told Paul to meet him during his office hours. Paul told his professor that he needed to go to work. His professor responded, "If you really want to learn this stuff, you'll be there."

Paul accepted the challenge. After working a shift at the local hospital, Paul walked two miles back to campus. As he walked, his mind was focused on grasping the concepts that had evaded him in class. He arrived at his professor's office. "You actually came," his professor said.

"Yeah. I need to learn this. I need to know this," Paul responded.

His professor scheduled a time for Paul to meet with him that was most convenient to Paul so that they could talk. During a scheduled meeting, Paul's professor asked him something that Paul never forgot. The professor asked Paul if he had a bar of soap. Paul answered in the affirmative. His professor then advised Paul to get a knife and a bar of soap to carve out what he saw in the engineering problem when at home. Paul's professor demonstrated what he wanted Paul to do with a knife and a bar of soap in his office. He then asked Paul to "draw out what you see." Paul accomplished what was asked of him. Paul's professor shared something else that he never forgot. He said, "It's not that you don't understand, you just learn differently. You're a kinesthetic learner, so you have to see it for it to make sense."

Paul shared that his newfound understanding of his learning style gave him confidence and a desire to learn. Paul continued to meet with his professor throughout the semester. The

course that he was failing only a few weeks previously became the course for which he earned a B-minus. When Paul thanked his professor for “giving” him the grade, his professor stated, “I didn't give you a thing. I've never seen anyone work so hard in such a short amount of time to learn as much as you did. You earned every bit of that.”

This experience taught Paul ways to study and prioritize his responsibilities, which served him well as he continued his journey and faced many other challenges along the way to earning a master's degree and a law degree.

Mark had dreams of attending Morehouse College. He was a gifted student, who was accepted into a middle school designed to meet the needs of gifted students. When he matriculated to high school, his focus shifted from academics to his social life. Mark stated, “I wanted to be the class clown, chase the girls.” Soon after his shift in focus, his grades shifted into a downward spiral. Still dreaming of attending Morehouse, Mark spoke with an admissions officer at the school. Mark explained to the admissions officer, “I'm smart enough to make it. I just made some mistakes.”

Mark reported that the college admissions officer answered, “I understand, but, I have thousands of others who have the requirements. I need for you to go prove yourself at community college.”

For the first time in his life, Mark did not know what would be next. Growing up in a small, rural town, Mark took the path that others in his town took; he worked in a factory. While at work one day, Mark met an older gentleman who said, “Don't get stuck here.” Mark did not get accepted into Morehouse, did not want to go to a community college, and did not want to spend his years working in a factory, so Mark turned to what he considered to be his only other option, which was to sell drugs.

Mark's perceived lack of choices led him to a street corner to meet up with the local drug dealers. Within minutes of his arriving at that corner, a shootout took place. Everyone scattered. In his interview, Mark described a moment of divine intervention. He stated, "God spoke to me; He said, 'This is not how you want to live your life.'"

Mark described driving around town for approximately two hours, saying to himself, "You got to do something, because this is not the life you want." Two hours later when Mark arrived home, he told his parents, "I'm joining the Army." He never told them why.

Understanding that his options had greatly narrowed, Mark was determined to take advantage of every opportunity while serving in the military. One of those opportunities was a free education. Mark reflected:

I'm 19-years old, single, living in the barracks and every day I would get off work, I would grab my book bag and walk to school. All my other friends were sitting out on the balcony, listening to music, having a good time. I'm saying to myself, 'Man, why am I going to this class? I should be out here hanging out, having a good time after working all day.'" When all of a sudden, probably about six months down the road, one of my roommates said to me, 'Man, we look up to you. We watch you every day as one of the youngest soldiers in this building. You come from work and you go to school and all we do is sit out here and drink and listen to music.' Half the people in that building started taking college classes, based upon what they told me, of seeing what I was doing.

Mark also attributed his perseverance in education to advice his father repeatedly gave him since Mark was a little child. His father often reminded him that, "Son, because you are Black, you may have to work twice as hard as the next person." Mark stated that the words his father shared, "stuck with him." As a result, Mark asserted, "I was determined not let anyone

tell me that I couldn't do something just based off of the color of my skin.” Mark’s favorite phrase to describe how he feels when it comes to facing challenges came from the movie starring Denzel Washington, *Training Day*. In the film, Denzel Washington’s character exclaimed, “King Kong ain’t got nothin’ on me!”

Q3: “*To what do successful Black male professionals attribute success in their profession?*”

Each of the research participants described the roles mentors played in providing sage wisdom at important junctures in their lives. Matthew described being involved in Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) while in high school. Matthew’s mentors were Mrs. J., the FBLA teacher who always told him that he was going to do great things in life and Dr. L., a dentist, who volunteered to mentor youth through the FBLA. Matthew worked in Dr. L.’s office while in high school and wanted to be just like Dr. L, which included making money.

Whenever he spoke of both Mrs. J. and Dr. L., Matthew’s eyes lit up and his countenance brightened. He fondly remembered the many times as a college student when he called them because he wanted to quit. Mrs. J. and Dr. L. offered words of wisdom and encouragement that kept him on track to graduate.

When Matthew got further into his undergraduate major that required high-level science courses, he contacted Dr. L. Matthew reported that Dr. L. stated, “You don't have to be me. What is it that you love to do? Do that thing because you could be successful doing anything.” For the first time, Matthew felt safe to be himself. For the first time, Matthew believed in himself. As a result, he decided that he wanted to be a positive influence in the lives of young people like himself. He wanted to be the Dr. L. and Mrs. J. in the lives of countless others, which is why he decided to become an educator.

James also discussed the profound role that mentorship had in his life as a young attorney. James stated that his mentors guided him in the application process when searching for jobs as a lawyer. Rather than apply to every open position as a recent college graduate, his mentors told him otherwise. James stated:

A lot of my mentors told me to find a place as a young lawyer that you can grow and develop and they can kind of nurture you and baby you a little bit because you'll learn those techniques and skills as a young lawyer that you'll carry on, so [my current employer's] environment, legal environment was very conducive to my success. It allowed me to take some things to people and say, "How do you really _____?" You can go to law school and learn the law, but then how do you actually apply the law? How are you practicing law?

James also attributed his success to his father who had "always been a role model, mentor, dad, friend, all that. I appreciate his tough love and honesty. One thing that my family's big on is that people who love you need to be open and honest with you."

Paul described the importance of having mentors who gave him important advice when he was not reappointed to teach at a school the following school year. Paul reflected upon a time he perceived that he was unfairly treated by a principal:

You [the principal] cut me but you kept two White first year math teachers who [had no prior experience]. They were enrolled in [an alternative certification program] but hadn't done any of the work. I was a graduate of [an alternative certification program]. I had just won [an] award for the top twenty-five percent of math teachers of that year.

I had [recruited] volunteer tutors, and then when [they] were short of math teachers, [I] volunteered to teach the pre-algebra class. Also, because you needed one more math

teacher for a section, I volunteered to do that. So, I felt kinda jaded towards the school, or towards the principal when that happened.

Though Paul was cut from the desired math position, he wanted to continue working at the school. Paul recalled another experience when he sought a position as a coordinator for a program where he worked with students identified as would-be first-generation college students. An assistant principal told Paul that he was going to be offered the position. Paul decided to speak to the principal to express his interest in the role as coordinator. Paul's principal was offended that Paul inquired about the position. When Paul shared that the assistant principal told him about this opportunity, the principal stated, "He shouldn't have told you." Paul responded, "I'm sorry. I had nothing to do with that. Paul added:

But me being who I am, saw this principal doing some really shady things to other people, and I never spoke out about it. I thought about it. I always kept a note and there was going to come a time where I'd need to face this. It's only a matter of time and it's going to happen to me.

The principal told Paul that she could not keep him on staff because they were cutting the particular program. Soon thereafter, Paul attended a school board meeting and heard the superintendent speak of this program's success and that the district was planning to add resources to existing programs and to expand them to additional schools. The superintendent mentioned the number of students who enrolled in four-year universities as a result of this program, and he wanted additional schools to replicate the program's success. During the summer, Paul saw that the principal not only kept the program, but also hired someone else to be the coordinator.

Later, Paul spoke to a friend who worked for the district about his experience with the principal of that school and Paul mentioned that he knew someone who sued the district for a matter far less complicated than Paul's experience. The friend who worked at the district level advised him not to sue. He urged Paul to reconsider his position. He stated:

You have a great case, in fact a better case than he [the individual who sued] had. You can sue for a whole heck of a lot more money than he did, but what's gonna happen to you? What's gonna happen to [your wife] because she's still working here. You would never be able to work here again. You'd have to leave and what would happen to her?

Thinking of possible retaliation against his wife, Paul opted not to sue the school district. Shortly after this experience, Paul was offered a position as an administrative dean at a high school. The assistant principal who hired him was also a Black male who had a number of years of experience as a school-based administrator. The assistant principal became Paul's mentor. The assistant principal advised Paul, "Let me tell you, don't let them pigeon-hole you in the district; it's very easy as a Black male for them to get you involved in school-wide discipline and forget about you."

The assistant principal told Paul to ask for opportunities to get involved in areas of leadership involving curriculum so that he would avoid his being pigeonholed as the Black disciplinarian. Not long after receiving this advice, Paul found himself known only for his role in school discipline. He reflected:

And I saw that happening. I always asked, "Hey, can I help out with the school improvement plan? Can I help out with this?" And they're like, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, just email me." And I'd email, but I didn't get [any] response. I'm not really the kind of person to really push. You either want me to help or you don't. I would ask to help out.

No one else would. But then [they would] give the opportunity to [someone else].

Paul saw that he was once again unfairly treated in the workplace. Paul soon learned his next lesson. A mentor told him that he needed to learn how to forgive. The mentor knew that if Paul was unforgiving and carried the baggage of his past experiences, Paul would never advance in his career. Paul recalled:

I had to learn to let some things go. I had to learn that professionally, spiritually, and it just wasn't working for me holding onto that. Even though yes, it was a wrong, yes it was. But it's done, so that other part of grit is yes, you've gotta move on, but you've gotta know when to let go. I can't adequately climb that ladder if I'm holding on to that hundred-pound weight. So, I had to let that go.

Mark attributed success in his career to a teacher he had in elementary school. Mark grew up in a Southern state during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a tumultuous time in the history of the US due to social unrest. Mark stated:

There was one teacher that I would never forget. My kindergarten teacher had a major influence on my life. Growing up in the south, in the late 60's and early 70's, when I was young in South Carolina, a lot of racism existed, even in the school that I went to. Just growing up and seeing that, she taught us at an early age. Every morning when we walked into the school, she would make us form the line to [the] James Brown song, "*Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud*". She wasn't teaching us to dislike those who didn't look like us, but what she was trying to do for the young minds at such a young age was to teach us to be proud of who we are and how God made us. That's how I accepted it and that gave me something to hold my head up high. Even though people treated me different because of the color of my skin, I held onto that and say that I do have a purpose

and I am somebody of value.

This kindergarten lesson was something that Mark took with him in the military where he was immersed in a very diverse environment for the first time in his life. He took that lesson with him during his travels to other nations as part of his military service. He took that lesson with him as he attended predominantly White colleges and universities and obtained his bachelor's and master's degrees. He took that lesson with him into the workplace as an educator and as a human resources specialist.

Although the research participants gave credit to mentors whose advice carried them through their life's journey, all four interviewees attributed their success in their careers to their faith in God. Matthew discussed relying on his faith in God when he was an aspiring leader, working on his master's degree in Educational Leadership and facing the challenge of his wife's difficult pregnancy. Doctors did not give Matthew and his wife much hope for their son's survival. Matthew spent many long days in the hospital praying for his firstborn child. During those times when Matthew had little strength to serve his students in his customary manner, he had the responsibility to be a source of strength for his wife and newborn son. Matthew relied on God. He testified of his faith that God would guide his family through the most difficult time any of them had ever faced and that faith was a key attribute to persevering as he prepared lessons that would help his students to thrive in the classroom.

James also attributed his perseverance to his faith in God. James stated, "I never lost faith in my belief, my faith in Christ, and what the Bible preaches." James discussed facing challenges that "humbled" him. He relied on his faith in God to help him overcome those challenges and allowed God to teach him the lessons he needed to learn. James mentioned his

work with children and used those humbling experiences to show kids that they, too, could survive life's challenges. He said:

I've been humbled plenty of times in my short career. I've been practicing [law] for four-and-a-half years. A lot has happened to me in that time and sharing that with kids.

Telling them I was on academic probation. Telling them I almost got kicked out of college and law school. Telling them that I've been arrested before. Things that I had to go through that I learned a lot from. All they see on a resume is, he's Florida bar this. He was elected to this and president of this and vice president of that. Okay.

James realized that his experiences gave him a platform to relate to the kids he spoke to and mentored. He admitted that he was not proud of his mistakes, but he was happy that those negative experiences could be used to help others.

Mark described his faith in God and ways he dealt with others while in the military and in the workplace. He stated, "I just want to see this world as a whole get better. You know, I love God and it calls for us to make this world a better place. I try to do my part." Mark gave credit to the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Mark paraphrased the words of Dr. King, "When they do [my] eulogy, don't talk about all the great things [I] did, but talk about the fact that [I] tried to make this world a better place."

A self-described outgoing and positive individual, Mark shared that people noticed the days he when was frustrated. Those were the days when he usually kept silent. Mark described how he handled those dark moments using his military experience. He said:

For example, right now, if I had on a military uniform there's an expectation of my conduct. Everybody knows that [I'm] a soldier; they are expecting certain things from me. I'm so used to being in that light, when I have that uniform on, there's those

expectations. I can't be out here looking raggedy because people would think, what is he doing? I can't be out here talking a certain way, because I'm representing that flag, our country. I think it started to become second nature for me, that it's not overwhelming, but, on those days that I need to let it down, I just find some way just to be alone, just to be by myself and review it.

Paul too experienced moments of stress and frustration. Paul expressed gratitude to God for helping to carry him through difficult times in his life both personally and professionally. While working two jobs to make ends meet, Paul tried to balance fatherhood and his studies as a full-time student. He was stressed. Some of his friends understood that he had priorities greater than hanging out, while others did not. As time progressed, the ones who were most faithful and encouraging were the friends who remained. Paul stated, "I lost a few connections. But I'd say the ones that God allowed me to maintain are the ones that are family." He then said, "I don't shy away from it, but I let people know, this is me, this is how I got to where I am, there's no emotion outside of God. So I know I got everything because of God. I'm going to tell you, this is how I got it. This is what He allowed me to see, this is what he allowed me to do and he's still teaching me."

Q4: *"What recommendations do successful Black male professionals have for educators and other professionals to encourage young Black males?"*

When asked about giving advice to educators and other professionals to encourage young Black males, all four of the research participants discussed the importance of building relationships and mentoring. Matthew discussed the limited opportunities his Black male students have compared to his White students and the need to expose Black males to the world

outside of their neighborhoods. Broadening students' perspectives would give those young men impetus to imagine great things for themselves. He stated:

I have young people in this building who have not left [this city]. Now, granted, they're young, they're elementary school kids. I've been in middle school for a while. I've had kids who have not left their city, never been in a plane before, never really been around a corporate setting. They don't know what it looks like, and so we have to expose them to that, but you can only do that by building relationships with kids.

Matthew also discussed the role of the teacher and the ways the role should look. He said:

When we deal with children, you have to build that relationship first so you can figure out, "What is blocking you from accessing education?" We do this when we're meeting people. We want to break those barriers down to create a connection. In education, that's not always true. I think teachers teach with an expectation that the relationship just comes naturally. It's something that you have to work at, especially your more problematic students, especially black boys. You have to build that connection.

James discussed the need for cultural responsiveness when dealing with young people. In working with Black males, he said that it's important to understand their culture and ways that people can misinterpret Black males' responses to situations. He said, ". . . The way I respond to something doesn't mean that I'm angry . . . it's just [my culture]." He gave an example of cultural responsiveness in action based on a conversation he once had with a White female principal. The principal shared with James the story of one of her students who came to school one day with a bouquet of flowers in hand because he was going to ask a girl out to the homecoming dance. When the student realized that the girl was absent from school that day, the young man

“freaked out and got mad and got frustrated and he walked off campus because he was going home to put his flowers in the refrigerator and didn't want them to die.” As he was leaving campus, the school resource officer stopped him. James reported that the resource officer asked, “Where are you going?” The young man answered, “I don't want to talk about it.” Already upset, he became very agitated and yelled at the officer. The principal then came over and talked to the student. When the student finally explained why he was upset, the principal said, “Hey, we have refrigerators here. Let me help you out.”

With those words, the principal alleviated a situation that could have led to an arrest and suspension from school. James reflected:

Some schools I know immediately would have been, he's got to go. It's such a rush to not really understanding what the root of the issue really is. Or you get kids with behavior issues and they keep getting in trouble and instead of asking, “What's going on at home?”, it's just keep sending him home. That doesn't fix anything.

James also spoke of the need for mentors to be consistent in the relationship-building process when working with children. James discussed the importance of being a constant presence as a father-figure in the lives of children. He said, “Their dad's telling them ‘I'm gonna be there this weekend to pick you up’ and don't show up. So, guess what? When you're not showing up [as a mentor] to practice or you're not showing up to a meeting or you're not showing up to their school when you said you are, you're just like their dad.”

Paul echoed James' sentiments about being consistent in one's actions:

When Black males see that you [as the teacher] gave upon them, it only confirms what they are already used to. Disappointment is not a foreign concept in their lives. So, when a teacher says, “I'm done with you,” or their actions reflect it, the teacher has reinforced

those negative experiences.

Paul shared that teachers need to build relationships and be patient with their students. He said:

Teachers get so frustrated with young kids, but, you got to realize, they are just that: immature kids. You can't expect them to think and look at life the way you do. They don't have that experience. For you, when Johnny is talking, for you to say, "Go to the principal's office", you just elevated his problem, 'cause you didn't take time as a teacher to let Johnny know that you care about him. He's just another body passing through the door. Now you found out Johnny was talking because every night he hears his momma and daddy fighting every night. He has nobody to talk to, so when he comes to school, that's a way of acting out to get attention.

Paul reflected on patterns he saw as an educator with students who were constantly in trouble. He realized those same students had no sense of purpose. He stated:

The one thing I came to realize is that, one question I would always ask kids is, "What do you want to do when you finish high school? What do you want to be when you grow up?" What I noticed was that 90% of those that said, 'I don't know', those were the ones that stayed in trouble. Why? That's no different than you and I getting in the car, and I say "Where do you want to go? I don't know. We're just going to ride around in circles, right?" We have no purpose. These kids have no purpose. So they are coming to school, 'cause by law [they are] supposed to be [in school], but, [they] don't know where [they] want to go, so [they're] goofing off, just having a good old time. They say, "I'm cutting class, I'm smoking weed, and I'm doing whatever." There is no goal setting, no direction, and there was nobody possibly giving that to them. What ends up happening is now all of a sudden you [are] a senior and the light comes on and you say, "Uh-oh, six

months, I'm out of here man. What do I do?"

For Mark, building a relationship is taking the time and effort to get to know what motivates the individual. He stated, "You've gotta ask them, 'What is it you want?' Just because we may look the same doesn't mean we want the same thing." When a young man has a sense of purpose, he has taken the first step to heading in the right direction. Mark stated:

If you start assuming that they all have the same background, you start treating them all the same and that's gonna turn a lot of them off and not gonna allow them to get to their potential. You have to treat them differently, and to do that, you have to get to know them. You have to know what their goals are.

Discussion of Themes

Helping Others

Research participants were asked to define success as it related to their professions. Two themes emerged from their responses: the desire to help others and a hyper-awareness of how they are perceived by others. Being in a position to help others achieve greatness was a primary thread reported by the research participants. James stated:

The desire just comes from the whole concept of lifting as you climb. It's more of like a hey, my job was to, my dad and the mentors that he brought and introduced me to or that I met along the way, they sort of pulled me along and said, hey. So now it's like pay it forward. Now you gotta reach back and do what you can do and hopefully that cycle will continue.

All of the research participants demonstrated growth mindsets (Dweck 2008a), which is a belief that abilities can grow and that intellect is malleable. The research participants in this

study demonstrated this growth mindset in their lives both in college and in their professions and now share their experiences with young Black males that they mentor. Matthew mentored teens and college-aged young adults at his church and children in his role as a middle school assistant principal. James mentored teens at his church and speaks to youth groups. Paul mentored teens as a teacher, an administrative dean, and as a coordinator for a program that focuses on minority achievement within a school district. Mark mentored both teens and young adults as a high school teacher, in the military, and through his church. All four of the research participants believed that their roles as mentors would help young Black males to climb out of the cycle of brokenness and low expectations that many of them face. The participants took great pride in being able to provide guidance to others by being a positive influence.

Avoiding the Stereotype

Because all of the research participants desired to be positive influencers, they described being hyper-aware of the stereotypes surrounding Black males and the perceptions that colleagues, students, and society at-large have of them. All four research participants described their being highly conscious of the fact that others were watching their actions and the ways that they reacted to challenges.

Matthew discussed his desire to be an “example” of a Black male professional to his students. James discussed the importance of conducting himself professionally at all times and making sure that he is constantly studying his craft because reputations are built by word-of-mouth in his profession as an attorney. Paul discussed the advice he received as a young Black administrative dean not to be “pigeonholed” as the Black disciplinarian, only to see that, despite his efforts, some of his superiors saw him as just that - the Black disciplinarian. Mark discussed

his desire to be “an ambassador” of Black people; he constantly searched for opportunities to disprove the negative stereotypes of Black males portrayed in the media.

This awareness of self, juxtaposed with societal stereotypes of Black males, is considered “stereotype threat.” According to Aaronson et al. (2002), stereotype threat occurs when an individual is aware of negative stereotypes of the collective group with which they identify; when the individual is asked to perform, the individual’s performance is affected by the anxiety and fear of others’ judgment that may affirm the stereotype. The men who were interviewed for this particular study were able to deflect some of that fear and anxiety by focusing on helping others achieve rather than focusing on themselves.

The Importance of Mentorship

All of the research participants had mentors within and outside of their immediate family who helped them grow personally and professionally. The majority of the research participants discussed the importance of having a father in their lives. Both Matthew and James shared the importance of their receiving their father’s affirmations as young men. Both participants were urged to overcome setbacks, such as feelings of inadequacy (in Matthew’s case) and lack of focus (in James’ case), because they did not want to disappoint their parents, particularly their fathers. James spoke of his need to carry on the family tradition of having a college degree and having a good career. Matthew was aware of the sacrifices his parents made when his family immigrated to the US from Jamaica. He felt that he owed both his parents and himself furtherance of his education.

Matthew viewed his high school teacher, Mrs. J., and his mentor, Dr. L., as mother and father figures. Both stepped into Matthew’s life when he was about to make important decisions regarding his future. Both were educated and professional, which is exactly what Matthew

wanted to be. Matthew relied on them to advise and encourage him when he wanted to drop out of school during his first two years in college. His two mentors encouraged Matthew to be himself because they knew that whatever he decided to do, he would be successful. Though Dr. L. died a few months before Matthew's college graduation day, Matthew knew that he would have never made it to his graduation if it were not for the sage wisdom of the doctor. As for Mrs. J., Matthew still keeps in touch with her. He shared that he took pride in her knowing that he is an educated professional and a success.

Mark recalled his father's constant reminders that because Mark was a Black male, he needed to work harder than everyone else to prove himself. Though Mark respected his parents' sacrifices, he wanted to have a better life for himself. While Mark was serving in the U.S. Army and attending college classes, he often said to himself, "I'm doing this for my Momma," though he knew he was also making this sacrifice for his father and, most importantly, for himself.

Contrary to the experiences of Matthew, James, and Mark, Paul did not have a father present in his life. Mark's father was serving prison time during most of his childhood and died while incarcerated. Mark's mother was a strong motivating force in his life. His mother was honest and provided the tough love that every child needs at one time or another.

Paul had mentors who stepped in and gave him guidance to help him understand and navigate through a politically-charged corporate culture. One mentor was the assistant principal who told him how to avoid the pitfalls of being the stereotypical Black administrator who focused exclusively on discipline as a school dean and having little involvement as an instructional leader. Another mentor was the family friend who advised Paul not to sue the school district for discriminatory practices because his doing so would limit both his and his wife's career trajectories. A third mentor was the principal who offered guidance and support

and gave Paul opportunities to get involved in making data-based decisions pertaining to the school's curricula. Another important mentor in Paul's life was the professor who spent numerous hours tutoring Paul and helping him discover that he was a kinesthetic learner, which helped him to develop better study skills.

The Foundation of Faith

All of the research participants acknowledged that their faith in God played a huge role in their lives. Their belief in God reinforced their sense of purpose, their daily conduct, their understanding that mistakes can turn into lessons, and their desire to mentor others, or as James said, "...to reach as you climb."

Matthew described the ways his upbringing as a Christian and his active involvement in the church helped sustain him while he was in college. He gave credit to God for allowing his mentors to enter into his life and to play a prominent role for extended periods of time when he needed guidance. His faith also gave him a sense of purpose and the desire to open doors of opportunity for students whose socio-economic status and race might otherwise keep those doors closed. Matthew's faith motivated him to serve as a mentor to young adults both inside and outside of the church.

James was also brought up in the Christian faith and though he had his challenges while in college, he shared that he never stopped believing in God. James said that his faith helped him get through college and through tumultuous seasons in life as an adult. James' faith, like that of Matthew, propelled him to mentor young people. A believer in sharing both the mountaintops and valleys in his life, James readily shared his story with the hope that young Black males would see themselves in him and would be convinced that they could succeed in life.

Mark gave credit to God for His being in the midst of a life-altering circumstance. Mark recalled the day he out went to sell drugs, ended up in the crossfire of a shootout, survived, and came to the realization that a life in the streets was not for him. Mark's upbringing as a Christian reinforced what he later learned while serving in the Army: that he needed to conduct himself according to a higher standard as a representative of his nation and his God.

Paul cited the grace of God as the foundation on which he stood when faced with obstacles, such as the responsibility of working multiple jobs to make up the difference between the cost of college tuition and the amount his scholarship offered. He also thanked God for allowing supportive friends to remain in his life while simultaneously removing those who would eventually abort his purpose as a father, a full-time college student, and full-time professional.

Misunderstood by Educators

Each of the research participants described Black males as largely misunderstood by high school educators. Matthew stated that teachers need to be more sensitive to their students' cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and need to build relationships with their students. Matthew recalled his experience as a high school student:

Even before then, I did not have teachers that represented me growing up in high school.

I was doubted a lot. I clearly remember negative comments from teachers, comments that suggested that I would not achieve. When I got into college, I think the greatest difficulty for me is I was intelligent but didn't know it.

The school in which Matthew worked as an assistant principal served students from a wealthy community as well as those from a relatively poor community. Matthew said that teachers need to take the child's experiences into account; some of his students never left the city

or even their own neighborhoods, while some students traveled to other countries during spring and summer breaks. He stated that teachers should understand that lack of exposure to the things and ideas many middle-class people take for granted may be the equivalent of traveling to a foreign country for a student from a low socioeconomic home environment.

James' role as a school district attorney provided him a unique view from which to see how Black male students are treated in his school district. As a person who has to work with principals, the police, and other district officials, James saw the ways that teachers and administrators handled situations involving Black males. According to James, Black males were disproportionately suspended and expelled from schools in that district compared to students of all other races. James stated that educators need to be culturally sensitive and culturally responsive in their approach to working with Black males. He reviewed many cases that escalated to suspension or expulsion that could have been resolved by first understanding and then communicating with Black males in order to solve the problem rather than to escalate it.

As a former teacher, Mark heard first-hand many high school students' accounts of being misunderstood by the faculty at his school. His school created anger management groups for students in an effort to help reduce the number of referrals sent to the discipline office each day that ranged from talking back to a teacher to fighting. The same students who attended those groups stated that they didn't care about the anger management groups because the teacher did not care. "Mark reported that one student said, 'They're just there to collect a paycheck. I'm not sharing nothin'!" Other students in the anger management group also shared that the person who facilitated the group sessions never attempted to get to know the students. Mark described his own success in working with students, particularly with Black males. He said that he got to know them. He asked them about their goals in life. He inquired of his students' interests. He

also demonstrated a consistent demeanor in the presence of his students. Mark said that students often tried to annoy or upset him, but he knew that their actions were an attempt to get a reaction from him. Mark knew that losing control of his emotions would lose his students' respect. Mark responded by talking to students and offering consequences, and he was consistent in their application to all students. Mark was not going to let students get the impression that he favored some students and not others. Everyone in his classroom was treated equally and highly valued.

Paul discussed the need for teachers to build relationships with students in order to build a strong, positive culture in the classroom. He also described a unique grading policy he used when he taught high school math. He told students on the first day of school that the goal of the class was for students to master the material and that mastery was demonstrated by the results of the state mandated math assessment. He told them that if they passed the assessment, they would receive an A or B in his class, regardless of their actual performance during the school year. Students were in disbelief. Paul reiterated that if a student had a D in his class but passed the state assessment, he would change that final grade to an A or B. Paul stated, "You demonstrate mastery by passing that test." This unique grading system that was memorialized on his course syllabus piqued the interest of even the most reluctant learners. Paul stated:

[My grading system] came in handy to keep kids working. So again with the grit, there's gotta be motivation. If I tell you to work your tail off, but I don't give you any motivation to do so, chances are unless you're just some kind of alien, you're going to get exhausted. Because your efforts are going unnoticed. And that's just human beings as we are. Think about it: we're adults [and] we're like that. A child is going to be even more so like that.

All of the research participants stated that educators needed to understand their students' backgrounds, learn their interests and goals, and need to be fair and consistent in their treatment of all students.

Grit and Growth Mindset

All of the research participants demonstrated tremendous grit and a growth mindset in pursuit of their college degrees. In Matthew's case, he was a 16-year old college freshman, who looked much younger than his college peers. He thought his peers were smarter and that they belonged in college. He had to overcome this mindset to prove to himself that he also belonged. He increased his study time and went to his professors when he had questions; as a result, his grades improved as well as his self-image. Matthew demonstrated tremendous grit when he decided to go back to school to earn his master's degree. Matthew was a married father who worked full-time as a teacher when he enrolled in his master's degree program. Matthew had to balance his responsibilities at work, home, and school, which he described as no easy task. Matthew earned his master's degree in educational leadership and is now an assistant principal at an elementary school. He is still balancing time with his family and his work responsibilities.

As for Paul, he could have dropped out of college after he earned a 1.6 GPA and was placed on academic probation after his first semester. Paul took stock of his behavior, took responsibility, and then took action by studying more often and paying attention in class. Paul's family and mentors advised him to do better, but it was Paul's innate grit that ultimately set him on a path to obtain his bachelor's degree. When he started law school, Paul realized that he had to increase the amount of time studying to ensure that he would achieve the highest possible grades. Paul demonstrated a growth mindset by facing the fact that his greatest obstacle was actually himself. He then set out to stop his pattern of self-sabotage by taking on the challenge

to become diligent and attentive to his studies. He knew that in order to be a successful attorney, he needed to have a wealth of knowledge of the law and its application to a number of situations.

Mark stated that he needed to stop his pattern of self-sabotage by taking life seriously. Mark knew that he was capable of far more than he demonstrated in high school, and he set out to fulfill his potential by enrolling in college while serving in the Army. While his friends were hanging out, drinking, and playing music after duty, Mark went to college to earn his degree. Mark believed in himself and believed that with hard work, he would be an example rather than a statistic. Although Mark felt the temptation to be “one of the guys”, he chose to go to school. After leaving the military, Mark obtained full-time employment as an educator. Although he did not complete his master’s program in educational leadership, Mark moved to the Southeastern US and enrolled in a private college to complete his master’s degree program in human resources. Mark’s growth mindset urged him to grow and mature as a student and as a person. He took responsibility for his learning and earned his master’s degree.

Paul was raised by his mother because his father was imprisoned during most of his childhood. Paul knew God had a greater plan for his life. He gives glory to God for helping him to stay on the right path. The easy path would have been to withdraw from college when he realized the number of jobs he had to work to cover the difference in tuition that his scholarship did not cover. The easier path would be for Paul to give up when he was failing his engineering design course rather than to carve out time from his busy work and school schedule to get much-needed tutoring from his professor. The easier path would be for Paul to stop attending school when he transferred to a university in Florida only to find out that the school accepted only a few of his credits, which meant that he had to spend an additional two years in college. Paul persevered and earned his bachelor’s degree. Paul then decided to pursue his master’s and his

law degree. While attending graduate school full-time, Paul managed his responsibilities as a father, an educator, and student. Paul knew that having an education would open doors, and he wanted to ensure that those doors would be open for him upon earning his degrees.

Advice to Young Black Males

Matthew discussed advice he offered to young Black males in terms of not being complacent, partnering with others, and helping others. Matthew shared:

Don't rely on your exceptionalism. There are so few young Black males as professionals when compared to Whites. Often you hear people say that you will get this job or that job quickly, but the reality is young Black males are still misunderstood and still maligned because they are not viewed the same as their White peers. Continue to work twice as hard and once you learn the system, branch out and conquer your market and provide opportunities for other young Black males. Don't segregate yourself. Be responsible in partnering with non-Blacks to grow your brand. There are those that are not jaded or threatened by Black men and it is important to cross the lines of division to find common ground, always keeping in mind that the Black cause is a noble one and one worth fighting for. Lastly, satisfaction is a myth, so don't believe it. It's never enough. The same hunger for freedom that burned within slaves' lives [are] within every Black man. We must not let the complacency of things lull us to believe we have achieved or accomplished anything. Change does not mean progress and progress does not mean change. Improve the lives of your fellow man through service, but we cannot be satisfied until our success is the success of every Black man and woman.

The advice James offered to young Black males focused on being serious about one's education and learning how to take care of oneself. With regard to education, James stated:

Building [a] foundation because when you get to 10th grade and you can't read, you've already closed so many doors for what you're gonna be able to do. Get to college and you can't read, that nest is no longer there. You're getting kicked out. You're being pushed out. Or, even if it's not college, if you want to go into a trade. I have a friend that's a firefighter who didn't need to go to college. He's doing very well for himself, but he still has to read. There was still an academic component to it, if you will. So whatever it is, don't think that it has to be college this or college that, but taking it seriously and striving to be the best at it.

James mentioned the stigma about mental health within the Black community particularly as the stigma relates to Black males:

I think as Black men there's a stigma behind expressing yourself, whether that's 'I don't feel right about this' or 'This hurt my feelings. That's soft. Don't cry. Don't do this. Work hard. Don't waste work. This is what a man does.' ... You're supposed to internalize this gender stereotype and this masculinity that may not be you. It has nothing to do with your sexual preference or orientation, but just if you're more sensitive, be that. If you need to talk to someone, if you're dealing with depression or anxiety or you're struggling with something, just seeking the help and having a conversation with someone helps.

Mark stated that Black males need to have a sense of purpose and goals to help them focus on their education and to stay out of trouble, while Paul discussed the importance of learning from mistakes, studying, and developing time management skills. Paul admitted that he made many mistakes in his life, and he shared his setbacks with his sons and with the young men he mentored. Paul stated, "You've gotta admit when you're wrong. Like, 'Alright that was not

good. I need to change something up”. He discussed how difficult it was to release his sons as they grew up and became men. Paul recounted his sons’ telling him, “Dad, you're trying to control everything, you've gotta trust that you trained [us] right.” He finally came to the conclusion that he had to trust in the values he taught them to ensure that when his sons made a mistake, they would learn and grow as a result.

In addressing the importance of time management, Paul discussed having to work full-time during his college years. He said:

My first two degrees, I worked and went to school. If anybody can help that, it's not a matter of being greedy, it's just a matter of doing what is best for you. I would never recommend it. I made it by the grace of God, but I would never wanna go through that again.

Paul further believed that developing time management skills entailed setting a schedule, which included time for recreation, and adhering to it. He said:

I developed this little chart that went from 5:30 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. It had little boxes on it and I would sit there and I would pick my classes first, then I'd set my work schedule, and then I would plan. Because this is the one thing, I would plan for some recreation, I would plan for time to eat. A lot of times you've gotta do this, you gotta do this, you gotta manage your time and we forget; no, you need time to recharge.

All of the research participants in this study described challenges they experienced. These challenges resulted in opportunities to exercise grit and a growth mindset as they sought to thrive in the face of adversity.

Summary

Chapter four presented the demographic data of research participants and reported their responses to interview questions. Themes that emerged during this study were: helping others; awareness of stereotypes of Black males in society; the importance of mentorship; the foundation of faith; being misunderstood by educators; having both grit and a growth mindset in the face of adversity; and advice for educators, organizations and young, Black males. Implications of this study and suggestions for further research will be discussed in chapter five.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of the current case study was to determine factors to which Black professional males, who are historically under-represented in colleges and universities, attributed their educational perseverance in high school and college and to determine the factors to which Black professional males attributed success in their respective professions. Attribution theory provided the theoretical rationale for the study, as well as research related to growth mindset and grit. The study's intent was to describe the experiences that supported and promoted the success of these men. This chapter discusses the research questions, methods used in the study, a summary of results, implications and limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research.

The following research questions were addressed in this case study:

- Q1: How do successful Black male professionals define success as it relates to their profession?
- Q2: To what do successful Black male professionals attribute their persistence in education?
- Q3: To what do successful Black male professionals attribute success in their profession?
- Q4: What recommendations do successful Black male professionals have for educators and other professionals to encourage young Black males?

This research study employed the collective case study approach since the topic relative to the research participants' experience was bounded by a specific place and time. Four Black professional males were selected to be interviewed by the researcher to uncover the factors to which they attributed their perseverance in education and professional success.

Criteria for participation in this study included the following:

- Research participants must self-identify as African American or Black.

- Research participants are over the age of eighteen.
- Research participants have completed at least a bachelor's degree.
- Research participants are currently employed full-time.
- Research participants earn at least \$40,000 annually.

From the 10 applicants who volunteered to participate in this study, six met the criteria.

From the six participants, the researcher selected four participants because they worked with children on some level in their careers, yet their occupations differed. The research participants were employed in the areas of education, law, human resources, or the military. All of the research participants earned either a master's degree or a law degree.

The four Black male professionals were interviewed by the researcher using a semi-structured interview. All of the interviews were transcribed and validated by the participants. Analysis of the interview data included coding, identification of themes based on each research question, and overall themes.

Themes that emerged from this study were: helping others; awareness of stereotypes of Black males in society; the importance of mentors; faith in God; being misunderstood by educators; having both grit and a growth mindset in the face of adversity; and advice for educators, organizations, and young Black males. Several implications of the study emerged as a result of the interviews and the resulting themes.

Implications of the Study

Implications for Educators and Teacher Educators

Professional development for educators to become culturally sensitive and culturally responsive is still needed in education today. Although teachers have many demands placed upon them, teachers should be challenged to learn about each student's background, interests,

and aspirations. Classroom and school policies and procedures should be in place and enforced, and the educator needs to ensure that the rules and consequences are applied equally to all students. When students see that an educator is fair and consistent in classroom management and has high standards for all, students will respect the teacher and value instructional time.

Schools should provide more opportunities for students to meet successful Black male professionals and to focus on recruiting Black males to work as educators. Students should be exposed to professionals who work in careers to which they might not otherwise be exposed. When speaking to students, the professionals can share their struggle-based narratives to describe their journeys through school and in their respective professions. As Ahn, Chen, Fang, Luna-Lucero, and Lin-Siegler (2016) revealed in their study, students who studied famous scientists who struggled in life and professionally demonstrated increased interest in science and scientists increased retention of the science curriculum as measured by their test scores. Students need hope and someone to believe in them. When students are shown that even the world's greatest thinkers had to overcome tremendous obstacles, students are given the hope that they, too, can succeed and contribute to society. James stated:

All [students] hear is, [this person has been] great [their] whole life, which not to get off-topic, but I think that's what kind of feeds into this microwave-ready generation. All you see is LeBron James and winning championships. You don't see all the practice.

Teachers need professional development aimed at helping them to recognize and examine their intrinsic and extrinsic biases and to learn ways to compartmentalize them when working with students. Teachers need to build relationships with their students, especially those who have academic or disciplinary problems. Understanding students' backgrounds and experiences are exceptional tools for working with all students.

When confronted with a student's anger or frustration, a culturally responsive educator seeks to understand the underlying factors that may cause the student to act out. With training and self-reflection, teachers can become more culturally sensitive and culturally responsive; they can evaluate and adapt their policies, particularly in terms of school-wide discipline and its impact on student achievement. The methods of teaching cultural responsiveness should be included in all pre-service teacher education and university-level professional development programs.

Cultural responsiveness and the ability to build trusting relationships with Black males are vital tools to mentor Black males. All of the research participants in the current study discussed the importance of having mentors in their lives. Their mentors were committed to helping the research participants succeed and proved their commitment by providing much-needed advice, consistency, direction, guidance, and patience. The mentors also understood that their role required an investment of time to work with these young men. Educators at the elementary and secondary levels should intentionally create partnerships with their respective communities to provide mentorship opportunities with Black males.

The Pygmalion Effect, or Self-Fulfilling Prophecy, occurs when teachers adapt their attitudes and expectations toward students based upon expectations of behavior and achievement; this phenomenon often results in students who unwittingly perform according to teacher expectations (Brophy, 1983). In the case of the one high school student who participated in McGee and Pearman's (2015) study, the student performed well academically in spite of his teacher's ignorant comments. The research participants in McGee and Pearman's (2015) study attributed their positive outcomes to an internal locus of control, which was operationalized as effort. According to Kennedy (2011), teachers can promote student achievement by establishing

a good rapport with students, maintaining high standards for all, and treating students as citizens within the classroom community. Strong classroom management skills help to promote an environment in which students can grow and flourish both academically and interpersonally.

The findings of this dissertation study support those of Howard (2013) who found that the presence of mentors in the lives of Black male high school students positively impacted the students' academic achievement. Howard (2013) reported, "It was especially noteworthy that students continued to feel that their trusting relationships with teachers in high school allowed them to have more successful academic and social experiences in college" (p. 61).

Furthermore, professional development for teachers is needed to assist them to implement classroom structures that develop a growth mindset and grit. Children need to have opportunities to develop both grit and a growth mindset to develop resilience at a young age. One of the key ways that teachers (and parents) can develop a growth mindset among children and youth is to emphasize and praise effort and perseverance when faced with challenging problems in math or any other subject matter rather than praising intelligence (Dweck, 2008). This simple teaching strategy can be easily applied in any classroom by any classroom teacher to make a huge difference in the students' motivation to push through challenging problems, lessons, and curricula.

Implications for Post-Secondary Educators

The results of the current study have implications for college faculty and administrators with regard to the recruitment and retention of Black male students. Each of this study's research participants discussed their need to develop study and time management habits in college as well as the frequent lack of a network of peers to assist them. The research participants, through sheer determination, found mentors who encouraged them to stay in school

and to work harder. Colleges and universities should develop strong, consistent mentoring programs that include the college's faculty, staff, community members, and volunteers from community organizations. Empirical research has demonstrated the importance of mentors in the lives of college students (Southwick et al., 2006; Wesely et al., 2017; Watson, Washington, & Stepteau-Watson, 2015; Hurd, Varner, & Rowley, 2013; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2014). Post-secondary schools should partner with organizations within and outside the community to provide mentoring support and career guidance to Black male students. Today's technologies make virtual mentoring a reality and can extend the numbers of mentors to benefit college students immensely.

Post-secondary schools should also focus on hiring and retaining qualified Black male faculty, staff, and administrators. The study's research participants discussed the importance of being an example of a Black male professional to their community. Black male college students need to see examples of Black males who hold responsible positions. In this study, Matthew discussed the importance of his minority students' having a positive role model in an influential position. Echoing Matthew's thoughts, James stated that Black males need to have mentors with whom college students can relate. Each of the research participants discussed the importance of educators who built relationships and provided support and encouragement to their Black male students.

To provide additional assistance to Black males as they matriculate to the post-secondary level, colleges should offer courses that help students develop strong study and time management skills. All of the research participants described themselves as very smart in high school and often did not need to study to earn good grades. However, when these men went to college, everyone was just as smart and talented. If a student has the desire to learn, but does not have

the necessary tools, he or she will find it difficult to persevere in education. Paul reflected on what he learned in terms of studying when he attended college:

[College] was [the] first time that I actually had to study. I never really studied.

Everything came very easy to me. Some things easier than others. But it came relatively easy for me. I didn't know how to study, so I had to teach myself to study.

Implications for the Workplace

All of the research participants described the importance of having mentors in the workplace. Their mentors were those who provided encouragement, advice, opportunities for growth, and who shared pitfalls to avoid as these professionals navigated through the organizations' spoken and unspoken culture. The majority of the subjects' professional mentors were Black males and in the case of Matthew, a Black female. Mentors were honest, supportive, and approachable, and the research participants were able to express their concerns and struggles without fear of retaliation or embarrassment in the workplace.

Organizational leaders need to be cognizant of their hiring practices and their training and development of employees in order to retain qualified Black males. Organizations need to look inward at their corporate culture to determine areas that promote a diverse, cooperative work environment for minorities. Mentors should have a strong desire to help others succeed and to build relationships; in addition, mentors should be selected for their expertise in the field and their ability to develop others' potential. Promoting a positive work environment will help Black male professionals to avoid potential pitfalls and enable them to thrive in the workplace.

Implications for Young, Black Males

All of the research participants described experiences in which they had to make a decision either to focus on their social or economic status or to focus on improving their work

and study habits in order to thrive academically. Participants described their having an individualistic mindset in which they had to set themselves apart from friends and colleagues who were negative influences. Research participants also discussed the need for mentors in their lives who helped to shape their sense-of-purpose and to provide much needed advice. Mentors should not be shy about sharing their own personal or professional struggles as ways to connect with mentees and to influence positive responses to adversity.

Young, Black males need to have positive role models who support their endeavors to succeed to help young men to have a sense-of-purpose strong enough to overcome temptation to get involved in activities that impede their goals in life.

Limitations

Reflexivity, or one's consciousness of "the biases, values, and experiences that [the researcher] brings to the qualitative research study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 252) is an important factor influencing the ways that the researcher interprets data acquired from research participants. The current research study's results may be limited by the researcher's personal experiences as a Black female. To guard against this limitation, the researcher used precautions in gathering, analyzing, and disaggregating data; methods used to reduce bias included peer review, member checking, and thick, rich descriptions of each research participants' experience as recommended by Creswell (2013).

The second limitation of this study was the number of research participants. Although research participants provided valuable information regarding their experiences as students and as professionals, the small sample size made the results of this study more difficult to generalize to the population of Black males.

Another limitation of this study was that the research depended solely upon the self-reported responses to interview questions of the research participants. In the event that participants did not fully recall or chose to reframe their responses, the study's results and implications would be affected. Because the consent form for the study guaranteed anonymity, the researcher believes that the participants in this study answered honestly and with candor.

Recommendations for Future Research

Conceptualized by attribution theory, this study used grit and growth mindset research to explore the experiences of Black males who were college graduates and who had achieved success in their careers. For future research, the sample size of research participants should be increased in order to increase generalizability to the general population.

A second recommendation for further research is to conduct a similar, longitudinal study. Following research participants from high school through college and into their careers would provide a rich, in-depth perspective from which to view Black male experiences and attributions of success in education and their professions.

Another suggestion for further research is to examine and compare Black males' attributions of success in college and career based on the types of secondary schools they attended. Data could be collected from students enrolled in magnet programs, schools for gifted students, public schools in predominantly Black communities, public schools in predominantly White communities, and private and charter schools in order to study the factors within each school's culture that served to promote Black male student achievement and success. The research results would provide educational leaders the frameworks from which to develop school climate and educational programs specifically targeted to close the achievement gap and to promote minority enrollment in the nation's colleges and universities. At the post-secondary

level, researchers can compare Black males who attended public, private, Ivy League, and private for-profit colleges to discern whether any differences exist regarding the factors to which they attribute their success in education and career.

To delve deeper into grit and growth mindset among professional Black males, further research should include larger sample sizes to increase the generalizability of results. Additional studies could compare Black males with other subgroups in terms of systems and factors that support success in secondary and post-secondary education and in the professions. Further research could compare grit and growth mindset of Black males who were raised in single-parent households with those who were raised by two parents. Future research studies could also compare the grit and growth mindset of Black males who earned a post-secondary degree with those who dropped out of college.

This study could also be expanded to include Black females to determine the factors to which they attribute their success in college and career, as well as comparisons of grit and growth mindset in Black females and Black males in relation to earning their post-secondary degree and succeeding in career.

Finally, research should be conducted to examine elementary, secondary, and post-secondary programs designed to mentor Black males in an effort to find the common features within these programs that help Black males to thrive academically, personally, and socially. Research should also be conducted to measure organizational systems and programs designed to recruit, mentor, and retain Black male professionals in the workplace. The research results will make important contributions to educational policy makers and leaders in an effort to adapt mentoring models to replicate in their schools and organizations.

Conclusion

This study explored factors that influenced Black males, who are historically under-represented in colleges and universities, to graduate from both high school and college and to experience success within their respective professions. Educational policymakers and organizational leaders require both empirical and qualitative research studies involving Black males' attributions of success at the collegiate level and in the workplace in order to create academic and professional environments where historically underrepresented populations can thrive.

Participants in this study discussed the challenges they faced in college and in the workplace and the factors that attributed to their ultimate success. These men had to overcome feelings of inadequacy, lack of study skills, and lack of support systems to help them to continue their studies. They spoke of the importance of their families, primarily their fathers, to help them grow as men. The research participants had mentors who advised them when they had to make life-altering decisions in pursuit of college and career success. Each participant discussed the importance of their belief in God and His grace. In response to God's grace, each participant sought to mentor other young Black males to offer advice that will help young men succeed in college and career.

In conclusion, important themes were uncovered in this study. First, all of the research participants demonstrated both grit and a growth mindset throughout their progression through school and in their respective careers. They were determined to succeed and to be an example to other Black males. The participants inventoried themselves; when they realized their areas of shortcoming, they took actions to improve. The men in this study spoke of learning from their

mistakes and the importance of sharing their struggle-based experiences with the next generation of young people. Each participant had a sense of purpose due, in large part, to their faith in God; during times of hardship, they understood that their purpose and destiny was greater than any obstacle they encountered. The attributions of success discussed in this study provide important models for instructing and mentoring the next generation of young Black males to achieve their ultimate potential.

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Appendix A

LinkedIn Recruitment Announcement

Are you willing to help a doctoral student with her research? Are you a Black professional male? I am seeking Black professional males to participate in my doctoral research study entitled, “A Study of Black Male Professionals' Attribution of Education, Career, and Success”. The purpose of this study is to explore the factors to which Black male professionals attribute their persistence in education and professional success.

Prospective participants should (be):

- At least 18 years of age
- Self-identify as African American or Black
- Have at least a bachelor's degree
- Employed full-time
- Earn an annual salary of at least \$40,000
- Willing to be interviewed for approximately 1.5 hours, either face to face or virtually.

Interview questions relate to biographical information, motivation to persist in education, success in professional life, and suggestions for mentoring the next generation of Black male professionals.

All information obtained in the interviews will be transcribed, coded, and reported using pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality of participants.

This research study is supervised by Drs. Patty LeBlanc, Janet Deck, and Kevin Weaver, faculty at Southeastern University. Any questions or comments may be addressed to the Chair of my dissertation committee and Principal Investigator, Dr. Patty LeBlanc at pbleblanc@seu.edu. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Southeastern University, which oversees research involving human subjects at the university to ensure that research is conducted ethically and responsibly.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

TITLE OF STUDY

A Study of Black Male Professionals' Attribution of Education, Career, and Success

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Patty LeBlanc, Ph.D.
Southeastern University
1000 Longfellow Boulevard
Lakeland, FL 33801
pbleblanc@seu.edu

STUDENT INVESTIGATOR

Kamille N. Leptz
knleptz@seu.edu

PURPOSE OF STUDY

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors to which Black male professionals attribute their persistence in education and professional success.

STUDY PROCEDURES

Once you give consent to participating in this study, I will contact you to schedule an interview. The interview may be conducted in person, via Skype, Facetime, or telephone. The interview will be audio recorded and I will be taking notes. Any information that can specifically identify you will be kept confidential. I will use a pseudonym or code in place of your real name when I compile, analyze, and report the results of your interview. The purpose of the audio recording is to get an accurate account of our conversation for developing a transcript. This information will be kept in a secure area to which only I have access. You also may be asked to perform a follow-up interview for the purpose of gaining additional information.

The following is the average amount of time that you will dedicate to this research process:

Initial Survey Form – 20 minutes

Interview – 1.5 hours

Follow-up Interview – 1 hour (if necessary)

RISKS

Because of the sensitive nature of this study, you may experience discomfort, anxiety and/or distress. You may also experience inconvenience, as your participation will require approximately twenty minutes to complete the initial survey and approximately an hour and a half to complete the interview. You may also be asked to participate in a follow-up interview that may last up to one hour.

You may decline to answer any or all questions and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.

BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, I hope that the information obtained from this study may add to the body of knowledge about persistence in education and career in society.

CONFIDENTIALITY

For the purposes of this research study, your comments will be anonymous. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes, analyses, reports, and documents.
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher.

Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and/or suicide risk.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions about this study, first contact the doctoral student investigator, Ms. Kamille Leptz at knleptz@seu.edu . If you are willing to participate in the study, please return this signed document to Ms. Leptz at knleptz@seu.edu. You will be contacted by Ms. Leptz to arrange a date and time for interviews.

If you have further questions at any time about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact Dr. Patty LeBlanc, the Responsible Principal Investigator, at (863) 667-5097 or via email at pbleblanc@seu.edu

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You should decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form.

I certify that I am at 18 years of age or older and voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Appendix C

Participant Eligibility Questionnaire

Q1: What is your name (First and Last)?

Q2: What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

Q3: Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one)

- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ White or Caucasian
- ☐ Other (Please specify)

Q4: What is your age?

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-29
- ☐ 30-44
- ☐ 45-59
- ☐ 60+

Q5: With whom did you live with as a child? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Father
- ☐ Mother
- ☐ Grandfather
- ☐ Grandmother
- ☐ Stepfather
- ☐ Stepmother
- ☐ Other relative
- ☐ Other guardian

Q6: In what city and state do you currently reside?

Q7: Which of the following best describes the principal industry of your organization?

- ☐ Advertising & Marketing
- ☐ Agriculture
- ☐ Airlines & Aerospace (including Defense)
- ☐ Automotive
- ☐ Business Support & Logistics
- ☐ Construction, Machinery, and Homes
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Entertainment & Leisure
- ☐ Finance & Financial Services
- ☐ Food & Beverages
- ☐ Government
- ☐ Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals
- ☐ Insurance
- ☐ Manufacturing
- ☐ Nonprofit
- ☐ Retail & Consumer Durables
- ☐ Real Estate
- ☐ Telecommunications, Technology, Internet & Electronics
- ☐ Transportation & Delivery
- ☐ Utilities, Energy, and Extraction
- ☐ I am currently not employed

Q8: What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ☐ Graduated from high school
- ☐ 1 year of college
- ☐ 2 years of college
- ☐ 3 years of college
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Some graduate school
- ☐ Master's degree

- ☐ Ph.D., Ed.D., or Juris Doctor

Q9: From which college or university did you receive your highest degree?

Q10: How much money did YOU personally earn in 2016?

- ☐ \$0 - \$9,999
- ☐ \$10,000 - \$19,999
- ☐ \$20,000 - \$29,999
- ☐ \$30,000 - \$39,999
- ☐ \$40,000 - \$49,999
- ☐ \$50,000 - \$59,999
- ☐ \$60,000 - \$69,999
- ☐ \$70,000 - \$79,999
- ☐ \$80,000 - \$89,999
- ☐ \$90,000 - \$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000 or More

Appendix D

Interview Protocols

Opening: My name is Kamille Leptz and I'm a doctoral candidate working on my dissertation. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. During the course of this interview I will ask you questions about your background, particularly during high school, college, and after you graduated from college. I will also ask questions about your career. It is my desire to learn about the experiences you had that helped you to persevere in college in both college and career. Do I have your permission to record the interview?

Interview Questions

1. How do you define success as it relates to your profession?
2. To what do you attribute their persistence in high school and college?
3. To what do you attribute success in your profession?

What recommendations do you have for educators and other professionals, such as organizational leaders to encourage young Black males?

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Printed name of Participant _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Printed Name of Investigator _____