

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN
AMERICAN MALES THAT GRADUATED FROM FAITH-BASED PRIVATE
SCHOOLS IN VIRGINIA

by

Rhonda Turner

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based schools in Virginia. At this stage in the research, faith-based schools will be generally defined as educational institutions that are “guided by missions that are informed and motivated by their faith convictions”. The theory guiding this study is Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory as it explores four environmental levels and how they each uniquely impact the development of an individual. The central question for this research is What are the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based private K-12 schools or high schools in Virginia? The participants included African American males who attended a faith-based private school from at minimum grades 10-12 and graduated from said school. Data was collected using face-to-face or online interviews, online focus groups, and reflective journal. As per Moustakas’ modified approach the data analysis will be conducted through coding, peer review, and enriched description. This research sought to reveal relevant information that can be utilized by educators and administrators in both private and public schools to improve the academic achievement of African American males. The experiences shared by the participants from this study will prove to be relevant to parents of African American males as they make educational decisions for their children by providing insight into their viewpoints of faith-based private schools.

Keywords: Ecological Systems Theory, achievement gap, Social Constructivism, Ontology, faith-based private school

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family as they supported me through this journey. My children, Chase and Tyler, were the inspiration for the topic of this study. I hope the time I spent on this journey encourages both of you to follow your dreams. To my mother for her continuous encouragement to further my education. Your influence was a prominent reason for pursuing my doctoral degree. Thank you for lovingly pushing me to continue my educational journey. To my husband for his continued support throughout this journey. This journey was not easy, I could not have done this without you. I love you for taking this journey with me through the challenges and now the rainbow.

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I began this journey with Dr. Clay who reached the finish line well ahead of me but never stopped looking back to make sure I followed behind her. I appreciate the text messages and phone calls checking in, offering support and nudging me along.

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List of Abbreviations

Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED Talk)

General Educational Development Test (GED)

Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP)

Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP)

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Research has indicated that African American students are performing academically at a higher rate in faith-based private schools than public schools (Jeynes, 2014; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009; Shorakii, 1997). Faith-based schools have been successful in significantly decreasing the achievement gap that exists between African American students and their Caucasian counterparts (Jeynes, 2014; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009; Shorakii, 1997). This study will focus of the experiences of African American males that graduate from faith-based private schools.

The historical influences of segregation and the achievement gap will be highlighted. The social concepts of faith, religion and the black church, along with a theoretical overview of public schools, private schools, and the achievement gap will be detailed. The problem that drives this research will be identified followed by the purpose and significance of the study. The Ecological System Theory will guide this study as it explores the relationships and influences between a child and his or her environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The guiding central question and sub questions give focus to the study and indicate that direction of this research is also included, along with pertinent definitions and a chapter summary.

Background

There has been a persistent inequality in the educational experiences of African American students dating back to times of segregation. The achievement gap is an example of this disparity. The influences of faith seem to have a positive impact for African American students. Faith-based schools have proven to be more successful than public schools in improving the academic performance for African American students (Jeynes, 2014; O’Keefe & Scheopner,

2009; Shorakii, 1997). With that in mind, it is important to understand the factors that contribute to the success of these schools. Understanding the experiences of students who have graduated from faith-based schools can provide a unique opportunity to gain a student's insight into factors that contributed to their success. Using the Ecological Systems Theory as a lens, this study seeks to explore this concept further.

Historical

Dating back to 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the court ruled that "separate but equal" schools were in violation of 14th amendment and state driven segregation was unconstitutional (Brown v. Board of Educ., 1954; Gutek, 2011). From the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, there was a decline in segregation of African American students in the south (Orfield, Schley, Glass, & Reardon, 1994). From 1988 to 1991, segregation in the south and segregation of African American students across the United States increased substantially (Orfield et al., 1994). "Segregated schools were grossly underfunded and under-resourced, which certainly impacted student outcomes" (Pellegrino, Mann, & Russell, 2013, p. 357).

In Virginia, there were a series of notable events that unfolded as a reaction to Brown v. Board of Education. Virginia Governor Lindsay Almond, Jr. closed two schools in Charlottesville to block desegregation efforts in 1958 (Magness, Carden, & Geloso, 2019). The following year, the courts found Governor Almond's order illegal (Magness et al., 2019). While some schools began to desegregate, there were calculated efforts to keep schools segregated (Magness et al., 2019). In 1965, New Kent County ignored the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and continued to keep the schools in their district segregated (Allen & Daugherty, 2006; Brown v. Board of Educ., 1954). This was a way of life for residents of New Kent County during that time period where segregation was present in schools, churches,

business, and even cemeteries (Allen & Daugherty, 2006). The Virginia State NAACP legally challenged the continued segregation of the George W. Watkins School for African American students and the New Kent School for Caucasian students (Allen & Daugherty, 2006). The ruling of the Supreme Court in the case of *Charles C. Green v. School Board of New Kent County* (1968) forced compliance of the Brown decision (Allen & Daugherty, 2006; Green v. School Board of New Kent County, 1968).

Four years after the courts ruled that segregation was unconstitutional, the courts in Norfolk, Virginia decided to close schools rather than integrate (Meldrum & Eaton, 1994). This remained in effect until 1972 when a plan was implemented to desegregate schools (Meldrum & Eaton, 1994). In 1975, Norfolk schools were granted the right to create a unitary school system, meaning having black schools and white schools (Meldrum & Eaton, 1994). This led to the trend of white flight in Norfolk. Eventually, the schools were integrated however, the racial balance was never established in the Norfolk schools. African American students were affected the most from poor educational environments, larger classes, poor performance academically and on standardized tests (Meldrum & Eaton, 1994). These lasting effects of segregation and white flight had a negative impact on education for African American students. Logan, Zhang, and Oakley (2017) suggested that school segregation is currently operating at a high level where there are extreme inequalities in poverty and academic performance exists between schools attend by Caucasian students and those attend by African American and Hispanic students.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision resulted in the integration of public schools. In spite of the court's decision, equal education opportunities for all African American students have yet to be realized. Over the next 50 years, a trend would develop in the academic achievement between African American students and their Caucasian counterparts in public

schools showing a gap leaving African American students behind in academic performance (Camera, 2016; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Public schools have been unsuccessful in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students which have led parents to seek alternative educational opportunities for their children (Teasley, Crutchfield, Williams Jennings, Clayton, & Okilwa, 2016). In 2008, President Bush's White House Summit publicized evidence that faith-based private schools reduced the achievement gap for African American students by 25% (Jeynes, 2014).

Social

Much of the conversations on education reform and school choice have typically focused on socioeconomically disadvantaged urban African American communities (Teasley et al., 2016). Naturally, the discussion on these topics typically includes the achievement gap. This can be described as the difference in standardized test scores of Caucasian and African American students whereas, Caucasian students perform markedly higher than African American students (Jeynes, 2015; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Teasley et al., 2016). The educational variances in academic performance between African American students and their Caucasian peers are represented in standardized tests, grade point averages, academic progression, and the drop-out rate (Aldana, 2014; Jeynes, 2015). Statistics have shown that African American students are 1.6 times more likely to drop out of school than Caucasian students (Snyder & Dillow, 2012; Suzzio et al., 2015). Research has indicated that faith-based private schools are successfully reducing the achievement gap by 25% (Jeynes, 2014). Catholic schools have experienced similar successes by reducing the achievement gap by one-third (O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2009). There should be some focus on the effects of religion on educating African American children.

Jordan and Wilson (2017) found the following:

Influence of religion and faith is overlooked in much of the literature concerning students' learning, school curricula, educational motivation, and academic performance, yet many youth's actions and motivations are heavily influenced by their spiritual beliefs and participation in religious fellowship. (p. 98)

The literature supporting the fact that churches or places of worship provide social capital in the area of academics has increased (Holland, 2016, p. 307; Jordan & Wilson, 2017).

Angervall, Gustafsson, and Silfver (2017) defined social capital as “having access to resources...how people acquire resources jointly through their relationship” (p.1096). Nahapiet and Ghosal (1998) define social capital as “the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit” (p.243). Coleman (1988) emphasizes that social capital exists in relations among people and also extends to schools. Norms that exist are transferred between children, their parents, and teachers and linked to student achievement (Coleman, 1988; Dufur, Parcel, Hoffman, & Braudt, 2016). Dufur et al. (2016) concluded that “Family and school environments characterized by low levels of social capital are insufficient to transmit necessary information and knowledge to children, leading to lower levels of achievement” (p.29). African American churches have been advocates for quality schools in their neighborhoods and against academic, organizational, and structural injustices in schools in their communities (Holland, 2016; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Minority children who attend Catholic schools often perform better academically and experience fewer behavioral issues (Setari & Setari, 2016). African American students are considered to benefit most from attending Catholic schools, as they have been shown to have higher grades than Caucasian students in Catholic school and their African American counterparts in public schools (Setari & Setari, 2016). This gives a strong indication

that faith-based schools have certain factors that are providing a different experience for African American students leading to positive outcomes.

Theoretical

Land, Mixon, Butcher, and Harris (2014) asserted “African American males need an array of internal resources in addition to supportive families and communities to avoid the risk of not being successful and achieving the will to survive and become productive members of society” (p. 143). The theory guiding this study is Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory as it explores four environmental levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem, and how they each uniquely impact the development of an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The microsystem is the immediate environment for the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Places such as home, day care, or community of the child are examples of this level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paquette & Ryan, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Interactions on the microsystem level are typically between family members, teachers, classmates, and others and can affect the development of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paquette & Ryan, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, 2013). The mesosystem is next level consisting of the interrelations amid two or more settings that the child participates in (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Paquette & Ryan, 2001). The interactions at the mesosystem level are typically the bridges between family and school, family and friends, or other immediate groups such as church and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem level is considered a system of microsystems because it is primarily linked to the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The third level is the exosystem which is consists of “one or more settings that do not involve the developing persons as an active participant” but can affect them (Bronfenbrenner, 19179, p. 25). The parent’s community of

friends or issues at the parent's workplace that may influence a parent's demeanor at home are examples of this system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paquette & Ryan, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, 2013).

The fourth system is the macrosystem, which refers to the collection people or places that have an effect the child such as their culture, values, faith or belief, socioeconomic status, or political influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paquette & Ryan, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, 2013).

The ecological systems theory will be utilized as a lens to understand the participant's experiences in the context of multiple environments that contributed to their graduation from a faith-based private school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Exploring the varying environmental levels identified in this theory and applying them to experiences of African American males that graduated from these schools will assist the researcher discovering possible factors that contributed to their success.

Situation to Self

As an educator for the past 20 years, I have witnessed the disparities in the quality of education and educational outcomes for African American students. Being an African American female, I have observed the plight of African American males through the eyes of my father, brother, husband, and now my own children. As a parent, I am interested in the plight of African American boys through their educational journeys. It is extremely important to me that my children do not experience the effects of the achievement gaps as many other African American students do. I have chosen to opt-out of public-school education for my children and select a faith-based school. There are many factors that contributed to my decision such as the faith-based teachings, the curriculum, and the school community in faith-based schools. My motivation for this study is to determine the factors that contribute to the success of African American males that attend faith-based schools. My hope is that this study provides insight from

the perspective of the graduates on the benefits and challenges in attending a faith-based private school. Not only will this information personally assist with guiding my decisions on my children's educational future, it can also be useful for other parents of African American children in making educational decisions for their children. As a public-school educator, I would like to be able to share this information with my colleagues and other public schools in hopes that it will assist them with closing the achievement gap for their African American students.

Philosophical assumptions are crucial to understand the perspective of the research design, goals, and outcome (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Krauss, 2005). The four philosophical assumptions used in qualitative research are ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological (Creswell & Poth, 2015). An ontological assumption is used when the researcher focuses on the nature of reality and embraces the idea of multiple realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An epistemological approach is used when researcher is present in the field where the participants live or work (Creswell & Poth, 2015; Schwandt, 2015). The researcher uses observations to gain firsthand experiences for their study (Creswell & Poth, 2015; Schwandt, 2015). When an axiological assumption is used in qualitative research, the biases, beliefs, and values of the researcher are expressed in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2015). A methodological assumption is one where the researcher's experience in the process can shape or guide the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2015).

In this study, an ontological assumption will be used because the study will focus on the participants reality of their experiences at faith-based schools. As the researcher, I will report the lived experiences of the participants as they describe it. While each participant would have matriculated from a faith-based school, their experiences will naturally be different, thus giving them different perspectives. Capturing the realities of the participants is important to identifying

accurate themes from their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the researcher, it will be my role to accurately share the multiple views of these experiences. I will be sure to express their realities without imposing my own as a parent of children who attend a faith-based school. My personal assumption is that the school culture, religious focus, and school community are prevalent contributing factors to their experiences. However, as the researcher, I will ensure that I forgo imposing my personal beliefs into their reality.

The previously mentioned philosophical assumptions are typically applied within an interpretive framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interpretive frameworks are the beliefs, theories, or paradigms that the researcher uses to guide the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, an ontological assumption will be applied within the social constructivism framework. Under a social constructivism framework, it is important to depend on the views of the participants as they describe their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). The focus will be on the multiple realities of the participants lived experiences as African American males in faith-based schools. The critical race theory will also be considered whereas the focus of this research is African American males. One of the goals of this interpretive framework is to focus on differences based on race, gender, economic status, and other inequalities that one may experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since my personal background as an African American female, mother of African American males, and public school educator can shape my interpretations, it will be important to position myself in the research in a manner in which acknowledges the influence of my personal viewpoints and experiences on my interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Problem Statement

The academic achievement gap is described as the differences found between the

standardized achievement test scores of African American students and white students, indicating white students perform distinctly higher than African American students as a whole (Bell, 2014; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Teasley et al., 2016). The achievement gap for socioeconomic and racial groups has continued to plague public schools for the past 50 years (Jeynes, 2014). This gap exists in practically every measure of educational progress such as grade point average, standardized tests, the drop-out rate, and the extents to which students are left back a grade (Jeynes, 2015; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). By the time an African American student reaches eighth grade, the achievement gap has typically extended to two years (Jeynes, 2015). In 2008, President Bush held a summit to address this issue which resulting in data that indicated faith-based schools were successfully decreasing the achievement gap for African American and Latino students by 25% or more in comparison to those educated in public schools (Jeynes, 2014). For African American students that attend Catholic schools, similar results were reported indicating that the achievement gap was reduced by one-third in comparison to public schools (O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2009; Setari & Setari, 2016). Shorakii (1997) indicated that students who attend Catholic schools, especially minority students, perform substantially higher on standardized tests than students in public schools. Due to the inability of public schools closing the achievement gap, African American parents have increasingly begun to select alternative methods and curriculum to educate their children (Teasley et al., 2016).

The current research on faith-based private schools fails to document the experiences of African American male students and attributes of successful students (Land et. al, 2014). It also fails to identify the nonacademic factors that contribute to the success of African American males (Bell, 2014). The problem this study will attempt to discover the unknown factors that contribute to the success of African American males in faith-based schools.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based schools in Virginia. At this stage in the research, faith-based schools will be generally defined as educational institutions that are “guided by missions that are informed and motivated by their faith convictions” (Daniels & Gustafson, 2016, p. 91). The theory guiding this study is Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory as it explores four environmental levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem, and how they each uniquely impact the development of an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The researcher will interview African American male graduates of faith-based private schools. This research seeks reveal relevant information that can be utilized by educators and administrators in both private and public schools to improve the academic achievement of African American males. It may also prove to be relevant to parents as they make educational decisions for their children.

Significance of the Study

African American students underperform in comparison to their Caucasian counterparts in public school settings (Bell, 2014; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Teasley et al., 2016). Faith-based schools have proven to have better outcomes in minimizing the achievement gap than public schools (Jeynes, 2014; Setari & Setari, 2016). This study seeks to provide relevant insight into the practices of faith-based schools that contribute to their success. This study can prove to be beneficial to many stakeholders such as parents and educators.

Empirical

This study may add to the literature by providing insight to the benefits of attending faith-based private schools from the perspective of African American male graduates. Research has

indicated that African American students that attend faith-based private schools experience a reduction in the achievement gap (Jeynes, 2014; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009; Shorakii, 1997). The outcomes of this study may provide details from the experiences of the participants that can prove to be beneficial to improving educational and academic experiences for other African American males. If the researcher is able to identify themes of factors that contributed to the success of these students, then this research could potentially be duplicated in other schools. This could prove to be significant in addressing the achievement gap for African American students in public schools. This research is relevant for public and private school educators, faith-based school educators, parents of African American male students, African American male students, and any other persons that are stakeholders in the education of African American male students.

Theoretical

This study will utilize Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological systems theory as a lens to understand the participant’s experiences in the context of multiple environments that contributed to their graduation from a faith-based private school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The Ecological Social Theory explores the evolving connections and interactions between a person and the environment of the person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It explains the influence that these interactions have on the growth and development can have on a child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paquette & Ryan, 2001). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model is based on four environmental levels that uniquely impact the development of an individual (Onwuegbuzie, 2013). They consist of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Paquette & Ryan, 2001).

Applying this theory that utilizes four environmental levels and their connections to the growth and development of the participants will provide a lens to interpret the experiences of

African American males that graduated from these schools. This will assist the researcher discovering understanding the factors that contributed to their success. It will enable the researcher to determine if the factors were from the influences of school, faith, community, family, or other potential influences. This information is important to educators, families, and other stakeholders such as community leaders, church leaders, and school board members that contribute to the education of African American male students to determine appropriate supports, school environments, and other pertinent influences that can contribute to their success.

Practical

This study may reveal relevant information that can be utilized by educators and administrators in both private and public schools to improve the academic achievement and educational experiences of African American male students. In my experiences, there is limited communication between private schools and public schools. This may provide the opportunity to establish open communication between both entities allowing them to take a more collaborative approach to understanding the needs of their students. There is an increase in the number of African American parents that are seeking alternatives to public schools for their children (Ray, 2015). The results of this study may also prove to be relevant to parents of African American male students as they make educational decisions for their children. Public school and private school educators may also find the results of the study beneficial for improving instructional practices, the culture, and various learning environments in their schools.

Research Questions

Research has indicated that the achievement gap is reduced for African American students who attend faith-based private schools (Jeynes, 2014; O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2009; Shorakii, 1997). There is minimal research that documents the experiences of African American

male students and attributes of successful students (Land et. al, 2014). The current research also fails to identify the nonacademic factors that contribute to the success of African American males in faith-based schools (Bell, 2014). This study seeks to further investigate the experiences of African American males who have graduated from faith-based private schools.

CQ: What are the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based private K-12 schools or high schools in Virginia?

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model is based on four environmental levels that uniquely impact the development of an individual (Onwuegbuzie, 2013). This theory will be used to guide this study therefore the subsequent sub questions will be framed around the four environmental levels.

The first level, the microsystem, consists of the immediate environment that an individual interacts such as home, classroom, neighborhood, or church (Onwuegbuzie, 2013). The first sub question will focus on influences from the microsystem for the participants. Microsystem interactions include personal relationships with family, peers, teachers, and other immediate influences in the participant's life and those the child has influence in as well (Bronfenner, 1979)

SQ1: How do the participants describe the influences in their immediate environment in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?

The second level is the mesosystem which is the "interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates" (Bronfenner, 1979, p. 25). The second question will explore the connections between the identified factors in the microsystem and their influences. Interactions in the mesosystem typically consists of bridges between home and school, friends and family, or other immediate groups and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

SQ2: How do the participants describe the impact of the relationships and connections between their immediate environment and school environment?

The third level, the exosystem, refers to “one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). This may consist of the parent of the participant’s place of employment or an older sibling’s experiences in a class at school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

SQ3: How do the participants describe outside factors such as the experiences of family members or other events in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?

The fourth level, the macrosystem, “involves the larger cultural context surrounding the person that includes societal belief systems, cultural norms, ideologies...Members of a cultural group share a common identity, heritage, and values” (Onwuegbuzie, 2013, p. 5). The macrosystems develop over time (Onwuegbuzie, 2013). The third sub question ties together the cultural and belief systems that surround the participants.

SQ4: How do the participants describe religious or cultural influences in their personal life and in school in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?

Definitions

1. *Achievement Gap* - the differences found between the standardized achievement test scores of African American students and white students, indicating white students perform distinctly higher than African American students as a whole (Jordan & Wilson, 2017).

2. *Ecological System Theory* - explores four environmental levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem, and how they each uniquely impact the development of an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
3. *Exosystem*- The third level of the ecological system model which refers to “one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25).
4. *Faith-based schools*- educational institutions that are “guided by missions that are informed and motivated by their faith convictions” (Daniels & Gustafson, 2016, p. 91).
5. *Macrosystem*- The fourth level of the ecological system model which “involves the larger cultural context surrounding the person that includes societal belief systems, cultural norms, ideologies” (Onwuegbuzie, 2013, p. 5).
6. *Mesosystem*- The second level of the ecological system model which deals with the “interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates” (Bronfenner, 1979, p. 25).
7. *Microsystem*- The first level of the ecological system model consists of the immediate environment that an individual interacts such as home, classroom, neighborhood, or church (Onwuegbuzie, 2013).
8. *Ontology or Ontological Assumption*- a type of philosophical assumption; relates to the nature of the reality; reality is seen through various perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

9. *Social Constructivism*- a type of interpretive framework; a paradigm or worldview that is used in qualitative research to understand or interpret an individual's experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

The current problem is that there is no research that attempts to understand the experiences of African American males who graduate from faith-based private schools in Virginia. This transcendental phenomenological study will describe the experiences of African American students who graduate from faith-based schools in Virginia. Using the Ecological systems theory as a lens to further understand the role that relationships, family, school, church and other influences have on their experiences in faith-based K-12 schools. This study can possibly provide insight for educators, schools, and parents on how faith-based schools have been able to reduce this gap through their practices.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based k-12 private schools. Since previous research has indicated that faith-based private schools have been successful in reducing the achievement gap for African American students, this study seeks to discover the experiences of African American males that have graduated from such schools (Jeynes, 2014; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). This chapter will identify the problem based on the literature. The outcome of this process will support the purpose for this research.

Chapter Two contains a theoretical framework and related literature relevant to this study. Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory will be the theoretical framework. The ecological social theory discovers the evolving connections and interactions between a person and the environment of the person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The related literature will include discussion of the African American male, institutions of faith, the impact of the relationship between churches or institutions of faith and African Americans, achievement gap, and the difference in African American students' performance in public schools versus private schools.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides the foundation for a research study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The framework guides and provides structure for the work throughout the research (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory will be used as the theoretical framework guiding this qualitative study. The four environmental levels of the ecological systems theory will be detailed in this section along with further explanation and examples. The application of the ecological systems theory reveals how this theory served as the

framework for a study conducted by Yok-Fong Paat (2013) on immigrant children and potential application in this study.

Ecological System Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides the theoretical framework for this study. It explores four environmental levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem, and how they each distinctively impact the development of an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The first level is the microsystem. It consists of the immediate environment for the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Places such as home, day care, or community of the child are examples of this level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Paquette & Ryan, 2001). Interactions on the microsystem level are typically between family members, teachers, classmates, and others and can affect the development of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Paquette & Ryan, 2001). The mesosystem is second level consisting of the interrelations between two or more settings that the child interacts with (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Paquette & Ryan, 2001). The interactions at the mesosystem level are typically connections between family and school, family and friends, or other immediate groups such as church and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem level is considered a system of microsystems because it is primarily linked to the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The third level is the exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It consists of one or more settings that do not directly involve the individual but can have an effect on them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The fourth system is the macrosystem, which refers to the collection people or places that have an effect the child such as their culture, values, faith or belief, socioeconomic status, or political influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paquette & Ryan, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, 2013).

This study seeks to learn more about the experiences of African American males who graduate from faith-based k-12 schools. It will seek to determine the factors that contribute to their academic success. Using the lens of the ecological systems theory will assist with categorizing the factors within the four environmental levels. This will also assist the researcher in discovering possible factors that contributed to the success of the African American male participants in this study.

Application of the Ecological System Model

Yok-Fong Paat (2013) researched working with immigrant families and their children. Paat (2013) used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a lens to understand immigrant children through their childhood. Not all microsystems are the same nor do they have the same influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, Collins, & Frels, 2013; Paat, 2013). For example, the influence of a parent may outweigh the influence of a peer at school or relationships at school may negatively or positively impact a child's interactions with their parents at home (Onwuegbuzie, Collins, & Frels, 2013; Paat, 2013). As a child ages, their number of microsystems will increase (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, Collins, & Frels, 2013; Paat, 2013). As children begin school their microsystem may increase from being just their immediate family to adding school, peers, and teachers. The mesosystem will define the connections between the microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paat, 2013). In this study, the connections may include family and school, family and peers, or peers and school.

The exosystem level includes settings that have an indirect effect on the student. Neighborhoods are an example of an exosystem (Onwuegbuzie, Collins, & Frels, 2013). In the study conducted by Paat (2013), the immigrant children's exosystem included their neighborhood and support system (Paat, 2013). Socioeconomic statuses may establish differences

in the types of exosystems that are established (Paat, 2013). This research study may possibly include neighborhoods and a few others as well. The next level is the macrosystem. The immigrant children from Paat (2013) study and the potential participants in this study may have similar overarching examples such as social values, religious beliefs, cultural beliefs, and traditions.

Using the ecological systems theory allows the researcher to explore the influences of the ecological factors that surround the participant (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, Collins, & Frels, 2013; Paat, 2013). Application of this theory illustrates how the participants relationships connects with other ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, Collins, & Frels, 2013; Paat, 2013). Using the ecological systems theory will provide a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the success of African American males who graduated from faith-based schools.

Related Literature

There are many relevant areas of literature that provide background, understanding, and further explanation of the circumstances leading to the academic performance outcomes of African American males in faith-based schools. The achievement gap is the starting point that starts to explain the importance of this area of research (Jeynes, 2014; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Teasley et al., 2016). The existence and unfound solution of the achievement gap has been a prominent topic in the literature on African American students' educational performance (Jeynes, 2014; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Teasley et al., 2016). There are disparities between the work of public schools and faith-based schools in closing this gap in academics for African American students (Jeynes, 2014; Setari & Setari, 2016).

Religion also plays a role in the lives of individuals (Holland, 2016). The impact of faith, religion, and institutions of faith have a significant impact on education outcomes and paths of African American students and their family's school (Holland, 2016; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). This review seeks to further explore the influences in said areas. Lastly, African American males' plight in education is often significantly different than that of their Caucasian counterparts (Gordon, Nichter, & Henriksen, 2013). Understanding these differences with assist in shaping direction of this study.

Achievement Gap

Jordan and Wilson (2017) defined the achievement gap as the "significant disparities found between the standardized achievement test scores of African American and White students, whereby Caucasian students perform markedly higher than African American students" (p. 93). The educational differences in academic performance between African American students and their Caucasian counterparts are exemplified in standardized tests, grade point averages, academic progression, drop-out rate, and lower enrollment in post-secondary education (Aldana, 2014; Dowling, 2020; Jeynes, 2015; Taylor, Kyere, & King, 2018). African American students perform lower on average than the Caucasian counterparts (Aldana, 2014; Jeynes, 2015; Taylor et al., 2018). Thus, naturally leading to lower grades in class and lower grade point averages.

The effects of this gap are exemplified in African American students, especially males, underperformance in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics referred to as STEM related courses (Taylor et al., 2018). Minority students who live in urban areas typically graduate at a rate 25% less than Caucasian students (Teasley et al., 2016). Other statistics indicate that African American students are 1.6 times more likely to drop out of school than Caucasian

students (Snyder & Dillow, 2012; Suzzio et al., 2015). African American students are placed on lower ability educational paths, experience overrepresentation in special education placements, and experience a higher frequency of disciplinary actions (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Medelson, 2017; Dowling, 2020; Taylor et al., 2018)

The achievement gap increases from elementary school to secondary school (Jeynes, 2015). African American third grade students are half as likely to be enrolled in gifted education programs as their Caucasian counterparts (Dowling, 2020). This disparity is even greater for Hispanic students (Dowling, 2020). By the time African American students enter eighth grade, the achievement gap has typically increased by two years (Jeynes, 2015). Colleges, universities, and other higher education institutions are experiencing the effects of the achievement gap as well. As they look to increase the diversity at their schools, they were challenged in finding minority students from public schools that were properly prepared for college (Setari & Setari, 2016). Diversity of student population and faculty also has an impact on the achievement gap (Dowling, 2020). Schools with a majority of Caucasian students and educators can expect that the African American students will experience an achievement gap (Dowling, 2020). This can be attributed to the lack of diverse curriculum, teachers fear of African American students' expressions and behaviors, lack of diversity in school staff and administration, and other cultural mismatches (Dowling, 2020).

Wealth and income, typically identified as socioeconomic status, can also impact the test scores and the academic achievement of students (Lynch & Oakford, 2014). African American and Hispanic students are more likely to come from low income and poor families than Caucasian students (Lynch & Oakford, 2014). Students who come from wealthy and higher income families tend to score higher on tests than those from low income and poor families

(Lynch & Oakford, 2014). Lynch and Oakford (2014) found that the differences in the academic performance of students from wealthy and poor families are due to the opportunities that are available to wealthy families. Students from wealthy families are typically exposed to more enrichment activities that positively attribute to academic achievement (Lynch & Oakford, 2014). Activities may consist of attending summer camps and or being provided the opportunity to travel (Lynch & Oakford, 2014).

Differences have also been recognized in language processing and vocabulary acquisition between students from wealthy families and students from poor families (Lynch & Oakford, 2014). These disparities can affect math and reading scores for poor students (Lynch & Oakford, 2014; Taylor et al., 2018). Whereas students from poor families typically score lower in both subjects than their wealthier counterparts (Lynch & Oakford, 2014). While this study may not focus directly on the socioeconomic status of the African American male participants, it is important to be aware of the impact that income and wealth can have on a student's academic performance.

Failure to access high-quality instructors and thereby instruction, low teacher expectations, lack of school resources, and the absence of inclusive practices in school curricula, pedagogy, and other areas are considered contributing factors to the achievement gap (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Taylor et al., 2018). Darling-Hammond (2010) refers to circumstances of this nature regarding African American students not merely just achievement gaps but also resource and opportunity gaps (Taylor et al., 2018). Lynch and Oakford (2014) listed income, proper access to child care, lack of access to preschool programs, community, family structures, the differences in quality of instruction, environmental factors, educational attainment, and the differences in the quality in schools as factors that contribute to the achievement gap.

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in order to hold public schools accountable for student academic performance through state standardized testing requirements and adequate yearly progress goals (O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2009). The accountability standard requires public schools to adequate progress in improving their practices and success measured by the outcomes of student performance on state standardized testing (O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2009). The government has tied funding to public schools based upon their ability to improving test scores and meet state testing goals. Public schools that fail to meet these requirements face sanctions, state takeovers, and may be required to allow students to transfer to more successful schools (O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2009). If schools fail to address the achievement gaps that exist in public schools, then they will be unable to meet the standardized test score goals placed upon them based upon this act.

When achievement gaps persist throughout the academic career of a student it can cause them to also experience social problems as well (McKown, 2013). The outcome of continued academic achievement gaps can limit the types of jobs and income students will be able to secure upon completion of their academic careers (McKown, 2013). This can lead to a cycle of racial inequalities that feed the gaps in socioeconomic status for African American adults and families (McKown, 2013). Understanding the achievement gap in relation to public and faith-based schools adds this research in better understanding the educational outcome differences for African American students and the academic challenges they face.

African American Males

Understanding the plight of the African American male is essential to understanding the importance of bridging the achievement gap. The systematic problems that haunt African American males extend far beyond educational disparities. In his book *Still Invisible*, Dowling

(2020) wrote that “systemic racism, poverty, crime and lack of opportunity have all colluded together to effectively stymie the ability of black males in America to beat the odds stacked against them” (p.42). African American males often face challenges solely based on their race and gender (Dowling, 2020; Fenzel & Richardson, 2019; Gordon, Nichter, & Henriksen, 2013). Land, Mixon, Butcher, and Harris (2014) expressed that African American males are plagued with social issues such as “low high school retention rates, incarceration, suspension or expulsion, negative media perceptions, adverse health conditions, drug and alcohol abuse, and stereotype threats” (p.142). Issues with higher unemployment rates, lower graduation rates, and lower labor force participation rates are also prevalent (Fenzel & Richardson, 2019; Wynn, 1992).

The experiences African American males have with the judicial system, crime and incarceration are concerning. The school-to-prison or preschool-to-prison pipeline has been attributed to zero-tolerance policies in schools, the outcome of living in unsafe and violent neighborhoods, and the system failing them in so many other ways (Dowling, 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 2019). In comparison to Caucasian students, African American students from elementary to high schools are suspended or expelled at a three times higher rate (Dowling, 2020; Fenzel & Richardson, 2019). In Alice Goffman’s TED Talk (2015), she pointed out that poor kids are the target of the school-to-prison pipeline. She goes on to state that prison is a great barrier between young African Americans and the American Dream (Goffman, 2015). This demise is then perpetuated in the form of court fees, probation, parole restrictions, house arrest, life in halfway houses which dims future possibilities at a promising future (Goffman, 2015). The statistics on African Americans males confirm these concerns. When considering all races and gender, African American males rank first in incarceration rates (Wynn, 1992). They represent 49% of

the prison inmate population (Wynn, 1992). There are three times more African American men in jail or prison between the ages of 18 to 64 than all men of the same age range represented in jail or prison (U.S. Department of Justice, 2013). At the end of 2017, United States African American male residents were imprisoned at rate six times higher than Caucasian male residents of the U.S. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Thirty-four percent of all working-age African American males are ex-offenders, meaning previously convicted of a felony, in comparison to 12% of all men in the same age bracket (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013). Wealthy African American kids are more likely to be incarcerated than poor Caucasian kids (Ehrenfreund, 2016). Validating his statement that race takes precedent over economic class when it comes to incarceration (Ehrenfreund, 2016). African American males rank first as victims of homicide (Wynn, 1992). Homicide is the leading cause of death for African American males between ages 15 and 24 (Wynn, 1992). Each of these issues are compounding and significantly impact African American males in negative ways.

Statistics on the African American household make-up is an important factor to include in this research. Twenty-seven percent of African American households are married (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Twenty-seven percent of African American females are head of household in comparison to only 6% of African American males (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). It is estimated that 5% of African American households have grandparents living with them (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). While 40.6% of grandchildren live with their grandparents who are considered their sole caretakers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). African American males growing up in single parent homes where the mother is the head of the household tend to face additional financial challenges (Land et al., 2014).

African American children who reside in poor, predominately African American neighborhoods are especially susceptible to the effects of racial and socioeconomic disparities (Taylor et al., 2018). They are often plagued with limited resources and opportunities which can prevent their inability to envision a positive future (Taylor et al., 2018). Education is a creditable means to overcome the oppressive circumstances in which many are subjected (Taylor et al., 2018). However, stereotypes and inherent problems often follow African American children to school. African American boys are innately considered a threat to other races (Dowling, 2020). Land, Mixon, Butcher, and Harris (2014) indicated that teachers and administrators often assume that African American males are uninterested in education. This can lead to these students not receiving the additional supports they may require to be successful (Land et al., 2014).

As early as preschool, African American males are more likely to be disciplined in school (Dowling, 2020; Fenzel & Richardson, 2019). While African American students account for 16% of public school enrollment, they represent 42% of students with multiple suspensions (Fitzgerald, Miles & Ledbetter, 2019). In contrast, Caucasian students make up 51% of public school enrollment but only account for 31% of students with multiple suspensions (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). This disproportionate representation of multiple suspension in relation to the population representation is disturbing.

The educational statistics for African American males are alarming. Statistics have indicated that African American males are failing academically, not achieving at the same rate as their peers, and are more likely to withdraw from school before graduation (Bell, 2014). The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that around 12% of fourth grade African American students are reading on an advanced or proficient reading level and 37% are below basic level in mathematics (Kunjufu, 2011; Land et al., 2014). African American males are

disproportionally represented in special education. Eighty percent are in special education and 53% will leave school before graduating (Kunjufu, 2011). African American males are graduating from high school at a much lower rate than their Caucasian counterparts (Bell, 2014; Kunjufu, 2011). Sixteen percent of African American males ages 25 and older do not have a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Thirty-six percent have either a high school diploma or equivalent such as a GED or alternative credential (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Most research fails to indicate the nonacademic factors that contribute to concerns with African American males' academic performance and graduation rate (Bell, 2014).

The challenges tend to continue to higher education. Fifty percent of African American males 25 and older attended college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). However, over two-thirds of African American males who enter college never graduate (Land et al., 2014). According to Land, Mixon, Butcher, and Harris (2014), eight percent of African American males under the age of 29 are graduates from college. The number of African American males age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree has increased as of 12% in 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). However, this is 2% less than African American females and 8% less than all males in the same age bracket (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Only 6% of African American males age 25 and older have obtained a graduate or professional degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Lower educational achievement can result in lower lifetime earnings, narrower career options, increased potential for teen pregnancy, welfare, criminal activity, and drug abuse (Taylor et al., 2018).

With all of the challenges that African American males face in and out of school, there are many relationships and other factors that have a positive impact on their lives. In a study conducted by Gordon, Nichter, and Henriksen (2013), it was noted that African American males are positively influenced by "church, grandparents, and extended family members played in their

thought formation regarding education, male role models, and success” (p. 158). Those who reside in urban or impoverished communities require increased supports greater than other students (Land et al., 2014). The same study also noted that a relationship with God positively impacted African American males (Gordon, Nichter, & Henriksen, 2013). Each of these factors contributed to successful development of the African American male (Gordon, Nichter, & Henriksen, 2013).

Land, Mixon, Butcher, and Harris (2014) conducted a study on African American male students who successfully completed high school in public education. The participants indicated that they relied on their faith, prayer and guidance from God as supports in challenging times (Land et al., 2014). Successful African American males have indicated that their faith was a key factor to their accomplishments (Land et al., 2014). Understanding the plight, statistical facts and religious influences of African American males provides foundational information relevant to the study of the impacts on African American male students’ level of academic achievement.

Faith and Religious Influence

Often researchers have tried to distinguish between religion and spirituality but to no avail, a consensus has yet to be established (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). For this research study, religion and spirituality will focus on specific interpretations. Religion is referred to observing customs, rituals, and a set of religious beliefs (Astin et al., 2011; Paredes-Collins & Collins, 2011). While spirituality refers to ones’ experiences relative to their inspiration, perception, creativity, and relationship with the world and those in it (Astin et al., 2011). Spirituality has also been explained as one’s quest for purpose, value, meaning and truth (Paredes-Collins & Collins, 2011). Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) state that spirituality combines a person’s internal awareness and outward focus.

Taylor, Chatters, Lincoln, and Woodward (2017) state that African Americans have historically displayed higher levels of religious participation in comparison to other races. A strong connection exists between African American families, faith, and church (Taylor et al., 2017). The church community provides emotional, social and spiritual support for African American families (Taylor et al., 2017). Research has indicated that the religious and spiritual beliefs of African American students have a positive impact on their academic success and engagement in school (Holland, 2016; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Incorporating spiritual conversations in both public and private higher educational institutions would be valuable to students (Bunnell, Yocum, Koyzis, & Stohmyer, 2018). It has also been proven that African American students' affiliations with others who share the same religious beliefs have a positive impact on their academic achievement (Holland, 2016). The biggest influence is revealed in communities in urban or impoverished areas (Holland, 2016).

The Black Church has been an important figure in the African American community. The Black Church has historically been instrumental in founding primary schools, secondary schools, and higher educational institutions in response to the exclusion of African Americans from said institutions (Holland, 2016). African American church leaders and members have been strong advocates for quality schools in their communities over the years (Holland, 2016). They have also been vocal against the injustices that plague schools in the areas of academics, structure, and organization (Holland, 2016). Black churches are able to provide assistance and support to provide motivational support in the areas of academic achievement and academic success for African American students who attend public schools (Jordan & Wilson, 2017). The relationship with churches and places of worship provide affirmation, a sense of belonging, trust, and love for African American families especially in low-income communities (Jordan & Wilson, 2017).

Unofficial partnerships exist between churches or other places of worship and public schools. These partnerships benefit students and school staff. Religion, faith, faith-based schools, family factors, and curriculum were identified as potential variables that can contribute to decreasing the achievement gap (Jeynes, 2015; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Places of worship have proven to provide social capital for students academically when they provide supports such as “after-school tutoring, scholarships, books, school supplies, transportation, child care services, and college preparatory activities” (Holland, 2016, p. 307).

Jordan and Wilson (2017) indicate that further research and exploration is needed on the role of churches and faith-based institutions influences on African American student’s academic performance. Since the research has indicated that churches can be positive influences on African American students, it can prove to be important and beneficial to build upon these relationships. Public schools and churches do not have official partnership. There are no laws that mandate that these types of relationships exist. However, based on the research collaboration between the two may positively impact the educational performance of African American students. Churches and religious organizations are an underutilized community resource for educational improvement and student learning (Jordan & Wilson, 2017). The role of church including the Black Church is important to the research because it can contribute to the understanding the influence of religion, faith, and places of worship to the African American community and African American families.

The Black Church is not the only influential religious institution on African American students. Catholic churches and Catholic schools have had a substantial impact as well. Even though many Catholic schools continue to close, many parents and community leaders feel that Catholic schools provide students with a better educational experience than public schools

(O'Keefe & Aubrey, 2009; Setari & Setari, 2016; Shokraii, 1997). Catholic schools have continuously provided better educational outcomes for minorities students, especially African American students who are believed to experience the highest benefit (Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Setari & Setari, 2016; Shokraii, 1997). According to Aldana (2014), African American students who attend Catholic schools outperform Caucasian students who attend Catholic schools and African American students who attend public schools in regards to their grades. They also experience fewer behavioral issues in Catholic schools (Setari & Setari, 2016).

The success that African American students experience in Catholic schools continues to be expressed in their performance in higher education institutions (Setari & Setari, 2016). African American students are considered to be better prepared from the rigorous college preparatory coursework provided in Catholic schools (Setari & Setari, 2016). Furthermore, they typically have a stronger belief that they will graduate and succeed at reaching that goal than African American students who attend public schools (Aldana, 2014; Setari & Setari, 2016). As mentioned previously, higher education institutions have experienced challenges in finding minority students who are properly prepared for the rigor of college level coursework (Aldana, 2014). African American students who attend public schools not only have challenges with graduating from high school but also with being successful in higher education institutions (Aldana, 2014).

Wood and Palmer (2014) indicated that African American males who attend community colleges have the lowest grade point averages of all male students in attendance. However, Catholic schools were known for producing African American students who were better prepared for higher education than those graduating from public schools (Setari & Setari, 2016; Shokraii, 1997). Research has indicated that Catholic school's ability to bridge the achievement gaps are

attributed to their “focused missions, high expectations, inclusion of non-minority and minority children, safe and orderly environment, flexible principal leadership and school-based management, relevant curriculum, high levels of parental involvement, and dedicated staff” (O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009, p. 20).

African American students who attend Catholic schools experience higher instances of academic success in standardized testing, graduation rates, and graduating from a higher education institution (Setari & Setari, 2016). Typically, lower socioeconomic status may hinder such results but for those who attend Catholic schools, income does not have an effect on their academic performance (Setari & Setari, 2016). This is another instance of faith-based schools providing better educational outcomes for African American schools than public schools.

Research conducted by Koubek (1984) concluded that a positive correlation exists between academic performance and religious commitment of a student. Jeynes (2014) also had the same findings for urban students. These correlations align with previously stated research. Mervyn Whiting and Jing Liu (2009) found in their study that religious commitment for students who attend Christian schools was higher for female students than male students. Whiting and Liu (2009) suggested that Christian schools implement activities such as “missions’ trips, vacation Bible school, community service, spiritual retreats, student government, chapel services, teacher mentors, and prayer meetings” can be used to improve commitment for both male and female students (p. 65). Understanding that religion and faith have such a strong influence on the academic performance of African American students support the reason for further exploration into the experiences of African American males in faith-based schools.

Faith Institutions and the African American family

Research has shown that religion has a positive impact on families (Bunnell et al., 2018).

The Black Church and other places of worship play an important role in the African American family and community (Holland, 2016). Churches are considered meeting and inspirational centers for African American families (Jordan & Wilson, 2017). In general, positive relationships have been established between African Americans, religiosity, spirituality, and educational objectives and involvements (Holland, 2016). The outcome of the relationship between the church and African American families in particular students indicates it can enhance a student's educational outlook and skills (Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Jordan and Wilson (2017) indicate that African American students who are supported by the Black Church and other collaborations between public schools and Black churches will experience an increase in their academic success.

There is a lack of research on the relationship between religion and faith effects on a student's "learning, school curricula, educational motivation, and academic performance" regardless of the definite influence that it has on a student's actions (Jordan & White, 2017, p. 98). African American students who reside in urban communities and impoverished communities typically benefit the most from relationships with religious institutions (Holland, 2016; Jaynes, 2015). In spite of knowledge of the impact of the relationships between Black Churches and African American students, there has been minimal efforts in public education to formally develop partnerships between them (Holland, 2016).

Parental involvement in the education of their children has long been deemed as imperative to a child's academic success (Al-Fadhi & Kerson, 2010; Bunnell et al., 2018). A research study conducted by SuiChu and Williams (1996) with a group of eighth grade students found that the academic performance of their children was positively influenced by increased parental involvement (Al-Fadhi & Kersen, 2010). Religious communities such as the Judeo-

Christians and evangelicals view parental involvement in religious education to be just as important (Bunnell et al., 2018). Al-Fadhi and Kersen (2010) indicated in their research that family and religion produce a social capital for children that can be transferred to human capital gains. Religion, church attendance, and extra-curricular activities have a positive influence on a student's academic achievement and future academic goals (Al-Fadhi & Kerson, 2010).

School Choice

Prior to 1874, most high school students attended privately run schools (Jeynes, 2014). Horace Mann was the Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837 (Guttek, 2011). He supported public education and was noted as a leader in the common school movement (Guttek, 2011). Mann supported state funding for public schools that made education available to all children (Guttek, 2011). He also desired for the public school to offer a better education than private schools (Guttek, 2011). The public school movement picked up steam after the 1874 Kalamazoo Court Case making it legal for state taxes to be used to support public school whether families utilized them or not (Jeynes, 2014). The Kalamazoo ruling led to a shift in the majority of students being educated in private school to the majority of students being educated in public schools (Jeynes, 2014).

While public education was available to all students and funded through taxes, schools were segregated by race (Guttek, 2011). Those in support of segregation felt students were receiving an equal education just separately (Guttek, 2011). Those in support of integration felt that African American students were suffering psychologically and socially as a result of segregation (Guttek, 2011; Pellegrino et al., 2013). Segregated schools were under-resourced and underfunded. Both of which had a negative impact on African American students' academic achievement (Pellegrino et al., 2013). The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* court

case decision ruled that “separate but equal” schools were in violation of 14th amendment and state driven segregation was unconstitutional (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954; Gutek, 2011). As a result, public schools were integrated. This important movement did not however translate into equal education opportunities for all African-American students.

Over the next 50 years, a trend developed in the academic achievement between African-American students and their Caucasian counterparts in public schools showing a gap leaving African-American behind in academic performance (Camera, 2016). Due to the educational differences, African American communities located in urban low-income areas are at center of the education reform and school choice debates (Teasley et al., 2016). An argument could be made that equality is not enough; schools must also support equity in education. This concern of equity in educational experiences and academic outcomes for African American students have led their parents to seek alternative methods and curriculum to teach their children (Teasley et al., 2016). Those alternative options include charter schools, non-faith-based private schools, parochial or faith-based private schools, Afrocentric schools, and homeschooling. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act enabled parents of students in underperforming and violent schools to be provided the option of School Choice (Teasley et al., 2016)

School choice is one of the newest options under public school education reform (Teasley et al., 2016). School choice provides alternatives to public school education for children through public education funds (Grube & Anderson, 2018; Teasley et al., 2016; Wolf, Kisida, Gutman, Puma, Eissa, & Rizzo, 2013). Individual states and the District of Columbia have implemented alternative educational options to public school under the school choice initiative (Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, & Walters, 2018; Grube & Anderson, 2018; Wolf et al., 2013). The District of Columbia School Choice Act was signed into law by President George W. Bush in

2004 (Wolf et al., 2013). This was the first federally funded voucher program in the United States was established under this law (Wolf et al., 2013). Well before this law was in place, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) was created in 1990 (Grube & Anderson, 2018). At that time Milwaukee had a 29 % high poverty rate and was considered the most segregated city in the United States (Grube & Anderson, 2018). African-Americans make up 40% of the population in Milwaukee but represent 49% of those living in poverty in comparison to only 12% of Caucasian families (Grube & Anderson, 2018). MPCP was developed by a Wisconsin state legislator and the Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent who believe parents should have the right to choose where their children were educated (Grube & Anderson, 2018). Families have been able to use vouchers from the MPCP to provide their children an education at faith-based schools and various charter schools in Milwaukee (Grube & Anderson, 2018). Eighty percent of the alternative school options that accept vouchers from the MPCP are faith-based schools (Grube & Anderson, 2018).

The Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP) is a school choice program that provides disadvantaged students attending low-performing schools in Louisiana with vouchers to attend private schools (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018). The program started in New Orleans, Louisiana in 2008 but was expanded across the state in 2012 under the direction of Governor Bobby Jindal (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018). Students that meet the qualification are able to apply to LSP which allows them to attend a private school (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018). LSP students must have a C average or below in public schools and their household incomes must fall below the federal poverty line (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018). The majority of the students participating LSP program are minorities living below the poverty line (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018). Eighty-one percent of African American families with LSP students live in these below poverty households

in comparison to only 13 % of Caucasian families (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018). Researchers believe that racial segregation is apparent in both the Milwaukee and Louisiana Public School systems however, for schools that participate in MPCP only 17% racially homogenous while LSP schools were found to be racially neutral (Grube & Anderson, 2018).

Between 2009 and 2015, the number of students participating in school voucher programs across the United States increased by 130 % (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018). As of 2015, there were 45 school choice programs in 23 states and the District of Columbia (Egalite & Wolf, 2016). Grube and Anderson (2018) shared the results of a study based on school choice programs in New York, Washington, D.C., and Dayton, Ohio in which the results indicated that students participating in school choice programs either had no effect or positive effects on their academic performance from participation. In another study, Carlson, Cowen and Fleming (2013) found that students returning to a public school after utilizing a school voucher to attend private school, experience varying levels of academic performance. Wolf et al., (2013) indicated that the school voucher program in Washington, D. C. proved to have a positive impact on high school graduation rates. While there is variation in the actual educational outcomes for students participating in school choice programs, none of these three studies reported negative outcomes (Carlson et al., 2013; Grube & Anderson, 2018; Wolf et al., 2013).

One of the alternatives to public school education is charter schools. Teasley et al. (2016) describes public charter schools as publicly funded independent schools that can provide more flexibility and innovations in the areas of leadership, instruction, and educational opportunities than in traditional public schools (Paino, Boylan, & Renuzulli, 2017). They are funded by tax monies through state and local public school districts but operate independent of them (Teasley et al., 2016). Charter schools can either be non-profit or for-profit schools (Grube & Anderson,

2018; Teasley et. al, 2016). Any person or organization can open a charter school once they have gone through the application process determined by the school district or authorize agency in which the school will reside (Grube & Anderson, 2018). Charter schools must provide accountability of performance which if unsuccessful can lead to their closure (Paino et al., 2017).

The increase in the demand and number of charter schools is directly related to parents growing frustration with the performance in public schools (Teasley et al., 2016). As of 2015, there are 2.5 million children attending the 6,400 charter schools in the United States (CREDO, 2015). African American students make up 28.7 % of the students enrolled in charter schools in comparison to representing 15.8 % of the student population in public schools (NCES, 2015; Paino et al., 2017). There have been inconclusive results to indicate if the academic performance of students who attend charter schools is better than those publicly educated (Teasley et al., 2016). A study of Florida charter schools indicated that charter school students performed lower on standardized test than public school students (Teasley et al., 2016). Some researchers believe that the further development of charter schools encourages racial and ethnic segregation within public schools (Paino et al., 2017; Teasley et al., 2016). Biased selection criteria based on indicators that African Americans tend to perform poorly in the admission requirements which in furthers this theory of segregation in charter (Teasley et al., 2016). In 2006, Vanderbilt University conducted a study that indicated that charter schools in Idaho appeal to students who were high performing which created a less diverse population in comparison to the public schools in the same district (Teasley et al, 2016). Despite these concerns, charter schools provide African American students a better educational opportunity than attending low performing public schools (Paino et al., 2017).

Private schools, whether faith-based or non-religious, are viable alternatives to public school education under the School Choice initiative. Prior to school choice options, public schools had a monopoly over public funds for education (DeAnglis & Wolf, 2019). DeAnglis and Wolf (2019) felt that this monopoly held by public schools reduced their drive to provide a quality education. Thus, leaving private schools and other alternatives to public education to compete with a free education (DeAnglis & Wolf, 2019). In several states, school voucher programs provide the opportunity to attend private schools with little to no cost to families as an alternative to public school (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018; Carlson et al., 2013; Egalite & Wolf, 2016; Grube & Anderson, 2018; Wolf et al., 2013). These up-front funds are made available to families through private school vouchers, educational savings accounts (ESA), and tax-credit-funded scholarships (Egalite & Wolf, 2016). Empirical research has found that students attending private schools receive many benefits including in the area of educational attainment (Egalite & Wolf, 2016). Research has indicated that religious based private schools have been successful in reducing the achievement gap for African American students and economically disadvantaged students (Jeynes, 2014). These students have been reported to experience a 25 % reduction in the achievement gap (Jeynes, 2014).

Egalite and Wolf (2016) conducted a review of empirical research studies in which they found most reported that African American students attending private schools through a school voucher program showed positive effects in comparison to subgroup of other races. Of the 13 studies reviewed the results indicated in one or more that African American students in private school voucher programs showed increases in math and reading test scores, increases in overall academic achievement for those who previously attending failing public schools, increase in

graduation rates and college enrollment (Egalite & Wolf, 2016). As the data shows, private school vouchers are a viable alternative to public school education through school choice.

Knight-Manuel and Marciano (2018) described a culturally relevant education as an educational framework that realizes the significance of incorporating a students' experiences, interest, and cultural background into their educational experience. Providing a culturally relevant education can prove to be vital to improving students of color academic achievement, success, engagement and educational future (Knight-Manuel & Marciano, 2018). An Afrocentric world view theory incorporates African traditions, culture, and cultural values with current African American culture (Graves & Aston, 2017). Research has found that there is a positive relationship between Afrocentric values and elementary-aged students' beliefs in their ability to succeed academically (Graves & Aston, 2017). In a study conducted by Grills, Cooke, Douglas, Subica, Villanueva, and Hudson (2016), it was found that Afrocentric values also have a positive effect on youth development outcomes and academic engagement (Graves & Aston, 2017). Similar studies revealed a significant relationship between Afrocentric values and a students' perception in their own academic abilities (Graves & Aston, 2017; Williams & Chung, 2013). Graves and Aston (2017) stated that Afrocentric values provide an array of positive benefits for African American children. They also believed that incorporating these values into interventions could reduce negative educational outcomes for African American boys (Graves & Aston, 2017).

Afrocentric schools are also called African-centered schools or Africentric schools (Teasley et al., 2016). The educational focus is to infuse traditional African language, customs, dance, and rituals with traditional course content (Teasley et. Al., 2016). Afrocentric school have an African centered theme (Teasley et al., 2016). From 1993 to 1999, the number of Afrocentric schools increased from 20 to 400 (Teasley et al., 2016). In certain urban communities,

Afrocentric charter schools have increased in popularity but in the broad sense, there is minimal awareness in black communities about the option to attend Afrocentric schools (Teasley et al., 2016). Student academic performance at Afrocentric charter schools has yet to be determined (Teasley et al., 2016). Implementation of standardized testing would provide data-based evidence of the academic performance for African American students at these schools (Teasley et al., 2016). In a study conducted by Teasley et al., (2016), only 34 % of Afrocentric schools met the standards for AYP. Overall, Afrocentric schools must work harder to demonstrate an accurate depiction of student academic performance (Teasley et al., 2016).

Ray (2015) defines homeschooling as a form of private education that is led by parents at home which does not depend on public or private schools for the child's education.

Homeschooling is the fastest growing sector of education which has expanded to the African American community (Cheng & Donnelly, 2019; Lundy & Mazama, 2013). Ten percent of home-schooled children are African American students. (Lundy & Mazama, 2013). From 1999 to 2012, the number of African American families homeschooling their children almost doubled (Ray, 2015). African American children comprised about 8% of the roughly 2.04 million K–12 students homeschool students in the spring of 2010 (Cheng & Donnelly, 2019; Ray, 2015).

During his research Ray (2015) found that African American families choose to home school for two main reasons that include the perception that public schools are having a negative effect on their children through the non-supportive learning environment for African American students and for religious reason or sense of God's purpose to homeschool. Additional reasons for African American parents' choice to homeschool over public and private school options include concerns with school environment, academic instruction, option to impart faith and moral based education to their children, and for ethnocentric reasons (Cheng & Donnelly, 2019;

Lundy & Mazama, 2013). Through further research Ray (2015) found that families in Washington D. C. and Atlanta felt that their poor experiences with public schools were their motivation to home school. These experiences were identified as plight of the black boy, psychology of safety, positive opportunities in home education, imparting African American culture, and seeking a global perspective (Ray, 2015). Studies focused on the academic achievement of home-schooled students along with state departments of education have reported that home-schooled students score in the 65th to 80th percentile on state standardized tests (Ray, 2015). Home schooled students generally perform well as students who attend public and private schools into their adulthood (Ray, 2015). In a study conducted by Ray (2015), found that African American home-schooled students performed equally or higher than the national average of all public school students while African American students in public schools tend to score far below average.

Understanding school choice and the alternative educational options to public school education are important to this research. African American students have consistently performed below their Caucasian counterparts in public schools leaving their parents to seek alternative educational options. A better understanding of the options that are available is relevant to this research.

African American student performance in Public Schools vs. Faith-based Schools

Over the years African American students struggle to experience the same success in public schools as their Caucasian counterparts. The achievement gap for socioeconomic and racial groups has continued to plague public schools for the past fifty years (Jeynes, 2014). For every academic achievement indicator, African American students in the public school system experience unequivocally deficit (Taylor et al., 2018). These include standardized test scores,

graduation rates, drop-out rates, and advancement to higher education programs (Aldana, 2014; Jeynes, 2015; Taylor et al., 2018). Public schools that are in high-poverty areas, African American students are faced with disproportionate challenges such as inexperienced and unqualified teachers, low expectations, resource disparities (Taylor et al., 2018). Alternative education options have become more acceptable due to the inability of public schools to close the achievement gap for African American students (Teasley et al., 2016). There has been an increase in the number of African American families who are looking for other educational options for their children instead of public schools (Ray, 2015).

Private faith-based schools services the lowest socioeconomic status quartile the most (Jeynes, 2014). African American students in faith-based schools perform better academically than African American students who attend public schools (Jeynes, 2012). In 2008, President Bush held a summit to address this issue which resulting in data that showed faith-based schools were successfully decreasing the achievement gap for African-American and Latino students by 25% or more in comparison to those educated in public schools (Jeynes, 2014). Catholic schools have been able to reduce the achievement gap by one-third for African American students (Setari & Setari, 2016). Catholic schools are structured to focus on the academic, religious and moral development of a student (Shokraii, 1997). They are characterized as building a strong community and setting high expectations through order, discipline, and high academic standards (Shokraii, 1997).

Similar benefits are evident for the lowest socioeconomic groups of students who attend faith-based schools instead of public schools (Jeynes, 2014). The research also noted that the reduction in the achievement gap exist across all content or subject areas with only science showing an insignificant deviation slightly lower the 25% (Jeynes, 2014). African American

students in southern areas attending high minority private schools are have been found to perform lower in math and science according to their third-grade test scores (Johnson, 2014). The research indicated that African-American and Latino students who are religious and live in two parent households do not experience an achievement gap at all (Jeynes, 2014). For those students who are religious or considered believers of God and come from two-parent households, the achievement gap is non-existent (Jeynes, 2014). According to Jeynes (2014), African American students who are from single parent homes and are religious or considered believers of God, the achievement gap is reduced by 50 %.

The differences in the achievement gap between public and faith-based schools is substantial. It provides a purpose for further research to determine the differences in the educational experience for African American students in public versus faith-based schools. Since is not common practice for public schools and faith-based schools to develop partnerships and work collaboratively in educating the youth, continuing to research the differences may be a way to bridge the gaps. For this study, understanding the differences in public and faith-based schools in relation to the achievement gap can serve as one of the reasons leading to the importance of this research.

Summary

This literature review provides a theoretical framework for this study. Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is the theoretical framework for this study. It provides the lens to use to describe the lived experiences of the participants from the context of multiple environments. The four environmental levels consist of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The influences of the relationships in the four level environmental levels will provide insight to determining contributing factors lending

to the academic success of the selected African American males for this study. Based on previous research revealed that family, school, peer, and religious influences contribute to the academic achievement for students. Similar influences also shape the educational paths and academic performance for African American students.

The related literature will be used to support the problem and purpose of this study. The key points included the achievement gap, African American males, faith and religion, school choice, public school outcomes for African American students, faith-based schools versus public schools, and religious influence on African American students and families. Research has indicated that the achievement gap is a continued problem that plagues African American students (Jeynes, 2014; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Teasley et al., 2016). Public schools have been historically unable to close the achievement gap (Jeynes, 2014; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Teasley et al., 2016).

The introduction of School Choice has provided alternative options to public education for families (Grube & Anderson, 2018; Teasley et al., 2016; Wolf, Kisida, Gutman, Puma, Eissa, & Rizzo, 2013). Many African American families have sought alternative education options to public school due to equity and academic achievement concerns (Teasley et al., 2016). In contrary to public school educational outcomes, faith-based schools including Catholic schools have experienced success in reducing the achievement gap for African American students (Jeynes, 2014; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2009; Setari & Setari, 2016; Teasley et al., 2016).

The differences in the academic performance between public schools and faith-based private schools is an important factor in this study. African American families including their children are strongly influenced by their faith and religious institutions including the Black

Church (Holland, 2016; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Understandably faith-based schools have a prevalent religious presence in their practices, teaching, and curriculum. Therefore, understanding the significance of faith and religion to African American families and students is imperative. Lastly, the plight of the African American male must be noted. African American males face challenges unique to them based solely on their race and gender. While there are many stereotypes and social issues that African American males must overcome, there are also several positive influences and support systems that assist them to be successful socially and academically.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The nature and purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of African American students who graduated from faith-based schools in Virginia. In this chapter, the research design, site, participants, procedures, data collection and data analysis were detailed. This research study used a transcendental phenomenological research design to explore the lived experience of the participants. The sites consisted of faith-based schools located in Central Virginia. Participants must have attended one of the selected sites for 10th through 12th grade and graduated. Data collection methods consisted of interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals or aesthetic expressions. Data analysis was conducted utilizing Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Van Kaam Method of analysis. The chapter concludes with an explanation of how trustworthiness will be ensured and the ethical considerations.

Design

This qualitative study used a transcendental phenomenological research design. The study was considered qualitative because it sought to interpret the experiences of its participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding that uses assumptions and theoretical frameworks to guide the study of research problems addressing individuals or groups that attribute to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2013). This type of research shares the voices of the participants, a description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature (Creswell, 2013). This study sought to give a voice to the graduates of faith-based private schools to better understand their experiences that contributed to each of them obtaining their high school diploma.

The design for this qualitative study was phenomenology. A phenomenological study provides understanding of a phenomenon from the perspectives of those who experienced it

(Creswell, 2013). The researcher collects data from participants who have shared the same phenomena and develops a combined account of the themes generated from the experience of all (Creswell, 2013). This study sought to describe the lived experiences of African American male graduates of faith-based private schools. This study gave the participants an opportunity to share their perspectives. Therefore, a phenomenological research design best aligned with this research.

Edmund Husserl is considered a pioneer of phenomenology (Moran, 2000; Moustakas, 1994). His work later led to the development of transcendental phenomenology (Moran, 2000; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl suggests to completely withdraw into one's self when looking to gain knowledge through studies of experiences and reflection of self (Moustakas, 1994).

Transcendental phenomenology is where the researcher brackets out his or her own views and experiences to take a fresh perspective towards the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Since the study concentrated on the describing the lived experiences of African American male graduates of faith-based private schools where all aspects are to be perceived with a fresh eye, as if for the first time, it necessitated the use of the Epoch process, or bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher, I bracketed my own experiences in order to look at the phenomenon with fresh eyes through reflection and reflective journaling (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

CQ: What are the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based private K-12 schools or high schools in Virginia?

SQ1: How do the participants describe the influences in their immediate environment in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?

SQ2: How do the participants describe the impact of the relationships and connections between their immediate environment and school environment?

SQ3: How do the participants describe outside factors such as the experiences of family member or other events in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?

SQ4: How do the participants describe religious or cultural influences in their personal life and in school in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?

Site

The potential sites were selected based on their location, faith-based affiliation, enrollment of African American students and grade levels that are offered. The sites consisted of faith-based private school located in Virginia. The schools must have had African American student population of more than 10%. The schools had at minimum grade levels 10-12. However, at least one of the sites was a k-12 school. The sites and participants were from a variety of religious backgrounds. Many of the faith-based schools did not require a religious affiliation to attend. Therefore, the participants may or may not have been students of faith. The participants also came from a range of socioeconomic statuses. I hoped to include students who received financial assistance in the selected participants.

For this study, faith-based private schools located in Central Virginia were selected. There were four schools that were potential sites for this research. The first potential site was Metro Episcopal School (pseudo name) which had approximately 500 students. The current percentage of African American students enrolled was under 20%. This school had a prominent college preparation and sports program. The second location was Central Christian Academy (pseudo name). This was a smaller k-12 school with a student body of 210 students. The school population was 84% African American. The third site was St. Paul's Catholic School (pseudo

name). The school was an all-male Pk-12 school with a student population of 940 students. The school population consisted of 10% African American. The fourth site was Saints College Preparatory (pseudo name). The school was an all-male school serving grades 9-12. The student population of just over 250 students consisted of 12% African-American.

Participants

This study used two forms of sampling to select the sites and participants. The first was purposeful sampling. The researcher “intentionally sampled a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 148). The second was snowball sampling in which “initial respondents were used to recruit additional respondents” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 279). The researcher asked participants identified using the purposeful sampling process to share contact information former classmates that may be interested in participating in this study. It was vital that all participants have experienced the identified phenomenon when conducting a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013).

By the time an African American student reaches eighth grade, the achievement gap has typically extended to two years (Jeynes, 2015). Research indicates that “one would expect to see better ninth-grade outcomes for students who attend the same school for eighth and ninth grade than for those who transition to a new school” (Neild, 2009, p. 59). These points were taken into consideration for the variety in shared experiences of the participants. Since this research focused on graduates, the participants must have matriculated from a faith-based private school in which they at minimum attended grades 10th through 12th grades. I sought to have variety in the enrollment history of the participants such as graduates who attended faith-based private schools for k-12 grades, 6-12 grades, and 9-12 grades but the minimum experience needed to be at least 10-12 grades. The researcher sought to find participants who have graduated from one of the

selected schools prior to 2018. This allowed time for participants to potentially complete a 2-year or 4-year higher education program or establish a career. The participants should have been matured from their high school experience and capable of reflecting upon their overall experiences during their time in school. The ages of the participants should have been over 18 years old and graduated from high school prior to 2018.

Once IRB approval was obtained, the researcher contacted alumni groups or online school affiliated groups from each school to request permission to post a recruit flyer on their social media pages. After permission has been granted, then a flyer will be posted to begin the recruitment process. The researcher contacted the potential participants that met the criteria to extend an invitation to participate. Potential participants were provided informed consent documents. The sample size needed to be 10 participants therefore; the research sought to obtain 10-15 participants to ensure that the minimum was met or until data saturation was met.

Procedures

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to proceeding with the study. First the dissertation chair and committee members received a draft of the proposal. Once they approved the proposal, it was submitted to the research consultant. The chair who also served as the research consultant then advised me if the proposal was ready for submission. Once the proposal was accepted then it was submitted to the Institutional Review Board for approval. Once approved, I began the process of selecting participants through purposeful and snowball sampling. I contacted the alumni associations, groups and individuals from the selected sites through social media. Potential participants were able to contact by me through email if they were interested in participating. Potential participants were screen using the screen survey. Participants that agreed to participate and met the criteria for participants were sent an informed

consent form (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The informed consent notified the participants that they will be the subjects of the research, the nature and purpose of the study, associated risks and benefits of participating in the study, and indicated that they have the right to withdraw from the study (Schwandt, 2015). I then narrowed the participants to 10-15 ensuring the minimum number of 10 participants was met. I conducted virtual individual interviews. Participants were requested to participate in an online focus group after all virtual interviews were conducted. Once the interviews and focus group were completed, participants were asked to create a reflective journal about their experiences. As the sources of data are being collected, I will start the data analysis process. To ensure that data was trustworthy, I utilized processes such as member checking, peer debriefing, audit trails, and use of thick rich descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Schwandt, 2015). The data analysis processes included transcribing the interviews and dialogue from the focus groups, coding, and developing themes. I used transcribing software to prepare typed transcripts of the interviews. I also ensured that data was stored in a locked cabinet, electronic data is password protected, and pseudo names were used for sites and participants.

The Researcher's Role

I was responsible for conducting all aspects of this research which included but was not limited to obtaining IRB approval, identifying participants, collecting data, interviewing participants, analyzing data, and reporting findings. I had no professional or personal affiliations with the schools identified for this study. I worked in education as a middle school teacher, middle school administrator, and an instructional specialist in the public school system for the past 18 years. I have two children, both of which are African American males. Both of my children attend a faith-based private school.

African American males are faced with multiple challenges beyond educational challenges or the achievement gap (Gordon, Nichter, & Henriksen, 2013). In my opinion, a proper education is one defense that African American males have to combat these challenges. The achievement gap has led to the belief that public schools are unable to provide an equitable education for all students (Aldana, 2014; Jeynes, 2015; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Faith-based schools have been able show success in reducing this gap for African-American students (Jeynes, 2014; Setari & Setari, 2016). As a parent of African American boys, my goal was to provide the best opportunities for them to prepare them for the many challenges they will face. This study provided information about features of faith-based private schools that aid in the success of African American male students. Thus, enabling me to help my own children along with other parents of African American boys.

I did not have a personal nor professional relationship with the participants of this study. Since my children attend a faith-based school, I did not use their school site nor graduates of their school for this study. The sites selected were not selected based on personal or professional relationships. They were selected based on location, minority enrollment, and because they provided the minimum of grades 9-12 in their program.

Data Collection

The data collection methods for this study consisted of virtual interviews, online focus group discussion, and a reflective journal (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Schwandt, 2015). Triangulation is “a procedure used to establish the fact that the criterion of validity has been met” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 307). Creswell and Poth (2018) described triangulation as, “researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence for validating the accuracy of their study” (p. 328). Data

triangulation is utilized to verify the integrity of the data source. I will apply data triangulation by implementing three different data collection methods. Participants took part in virtual interviews with the researcher leading with pre-written interview questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Schwandt, 2015). Focus groups were conducted online with the researcher moderating the discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Schwandt, 2015). Reflective journals were used as a culminating activity for the participants which will provide another opportunity to share their experiences in a different format without the presence of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Schwandt, 2015).

Data will be collected in the following order: virtual interviews, focus group, and reflective journals. The initial data collection was the virtual interviews which were held online using Google Meet. This gave the researcher an opportunity to meet the participant and hear about their experiences. Once all interviews were completed then, an online focus group was held. This form of data collection provided the opportunity for a rich dialogue about their experiences graduating from a faith-based private school. This method was implemented after the individual interviews in order to allow participants an opportunity to share beyond the interview questions. Also, the focus group provided the opportunity for social interaction amongst the participants which provided the platform for discussions that led to meaningful data (Gill & Braille, 2018). Lastly, participants were asked to complete reflective activity in the form of a reflective journal. Again, another opportunity to collect data from the participants on their experience beyond interview or focus group questions. I collected data from reflective journals last. After the participants engaged in interviews and possibly focus group discussions, they may have had additional memories, reflections, or feedback about their experiences that they did not

have an opportunity to share. This form of data collection allowed them to share on a personal level in a less structured format.

Interviews

The purpose of the interviews was to obtain a “comprehensive account of the participant’s experience of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 115). According to Moustakas (1994), a phenomenological interview consists of “informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (p. 114). For this study, the interview were semi-structured. According to Barrett and Twycross (2018), a semi-structured interview allows the researcher to solely pose the questions during the interview while still allowing the participant to incorporate their personal views and personality in the conversation. It also allows the opportunity to ask follow-up questions based on the participants responses while also providing participants the chance to share their individual expressions (Hanna, Pietila, Johnson, & Docent, 2016). For my study, using a semi-structured interview allowed me to learn about the participants experiences and include additional questions based on their responses to gain further insight. This lent to creating a rich dialogue between myself and the participants.

The interviews took place online via Google Meet. Each Google Meet interview was scheduled with a calendar invite sent to the participant. Each interview session lasted for 1-2 hours. The individual interviews held via Google Meet were recorded using the software’s recording application. A hand-held recording device was used as a back-up device in case there was a malfunction with the Google Meet recording feature. The interviews were transcribed by through a transcription application and reviewed by the researcher. Prior to interviewing the participants, a pilot interview was conducted with non-participants posing the same questions

below. The pilot interview was used to identify problems or areas of concerns so that I was able address them prior to the official interviews.

The following questions were posed during the interview:

Moustakas (1994) suggest that many phenomenological interviews begin with creating a climate that is trusting and relaxing so that the participant will respond openly and honestly. This can be accomplished by starting with social conversation or a meditative activity (Moustakas, 1994).

The first set of questions developed for this interview consisted of icebreaker kind of questions in an attempt to establish a relaxing and trusting atmosphere. Then led to basic background information about the participant.

Icebreaker Questions

1. Please introduce yourself.
2. Tell me about the school you attended.
3. When did you graduate from high school?
4. What path did you take after graduation? (school or workforce)
5. What is your occupation?

Brofenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory begins with the microsystem which includes the immediate environment of an individual. The next group of questions sought answer the following research question:

SQ1: How do the participants describe the influences in their immediate environment in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?

6. Describe your family and life growing up.
7. Describe your family's involvement in your educational journey.
8. What factors or people had the most influence during educational journey?

9. Where their other influences from your immediate environment that had an impact or influence on your educational journey? (such as church, clubs, etc.)
10. Tell me about your overall experiences attending “name of school”.
11. Which teachers do you consider the most influential? Why? (only asked if not mentioned in question #6)

The mesosystem was the second level of the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The questions involved the relationship between the identified microsystems. This set of questions was posed to answer the following research question:

SQ2: How do the participants describe the impact of the relationship and connections between their immediate environment and school environment?

12. How active was your family with your school? Describe the extent of the interactions.
13. Describe your parents’ relationship with your teachers?
14. How did either of those relationships (from questions 9 & 10) impact your educational experience?
15. Additional questions will include the relationship between the other identified influences from their immediate environment (from question #6) that had an impact their educational experiences.

The third level was the exosystem which included settings that do not directly involve the individual but may have an indirect affect (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This interview question was posed to answer the following research question:

SQ3: How do the participants describe outside factors such as experiences of family members or other events in relation to the impact on their education experiences?

16. Describe any significant events that involved your parents or siblings that had an indirect impact on you or your educational experience.

The fourth level was the macrosystem which involved the influences of individual's culture and belief systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This interview questions were posed to answer the following research question:

SQ4: How do the participants describe religious or cultural influences in their personal life and in school in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?

17. How did your culture and race influence your perception of school?

18. Describe your religious background and experiences.

19. What role did your faith play in your education?

20. What were your experiences being involved in the religious aspects of “name of school”?

21. What do think the benefits are in attending a faith-based private school?

22. Tell me about life after your high school graduation.

23. What were your reasons for choosing that path after graduation?

24. Who were the major influencers for your chosen path after graduation?

25. Please share any other significant experiences or relationships from your time at “name of school” that you have not had chance to.

Focus Groups

Focus groups was the second method of data collection. These groups were brought together to discuss a particular topic or related issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2015). Focus groups consist of forum moderated by the researcher in which thoughtfully prepared questions and discussion provide the opportunity to obtain additional data that may not emerge

during the other data collection methods during this study (Flynn, Albrecht, & Scott, 2018; Schwandt, 2015). The purpose of this focus group was to provide the opportunity for a rich dialogue among 5-7 participants about their experiences graduating from a faith-based private school (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2015).

Upon the completion of the interviews with the participants, I brought the participants together so they can collectively share their experiences in a group discussion. Each of the participants from the interviews will be invited to participate be a part of the focus group. The goal was to have at least one, no more than two participants from each school site in the focus group. Since this occurred online, the conversation was recorded through the device that was used to conduct the forum. The focus group discussion lasted 1-2 hours. The group consisted of at least 50% of the participants. Where there were similarities in the experiences or missing components from the face-to-face interviews, then those topics were included in the discussion for the focus groups.

Focus groups reveal individual perspectives on a particular topic while also revealing a group consensus (Cyr, 2015). Questions posed during a focus group can concentrate on one specific topic or several topics (Cyr, 2015). For this study, the focus group questions were based on the following research questions:

SQ2: How do the participants describe the impact of the relationship and connections between their immediate environment and school environment?

SQ4: How do the participants describe religious or cultural influences in their personal life and in school in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to the group and share which school you attended.

2. Describe the level of support of your educational journey from your immediate family?
3. How do you attribute their support or lack thereof a factor in your level of academic success?
4. Describe your connection to your school. What do you think created that connection or disconnection?
5. What is your religious affiliation? Was it the same or different religion as the school's religious affiliation?
6. For those who had the same religious affiliation, describe your interaction, attendance, and/or relationship with your home church.
7. For those who had a different affiliation, how was that experiences? What were the noticeable differences? What impact if any did that have on you?
8. Describe how religion, spirituality, or faith played a role in your academic performance.
9. Taking all things into consideration what were the biggest the influences that contributed to where you are now?
10. How do each of you feel about what has been shared thus far? Can you relate to any of these experiences? How so?

Reflective Journal

The third method of data collection consisted of a reflective activity. Participants were asked to write a reflective journal about their experiences in the faith-based private school. They wrote about how their chosen form of expression describes their experience. A reflective journal consists of participants writing about their experiences. Bashan and Holsblat (2017) believe that

reflective journals provide a significant perspective that is not typically revealed in other data collection methods. Using this form of data collection last provided participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences after their interviews and focus group may have helped them recall key aspects or important events. The participants were asked to provide at least 1-2 reflective journal entries. Writing prompt options included to share positive or negative events or influences from your school experiences, share how your faith was influenced during your time at school, or share a reflection from your interview questions or topics of discussion during the focus group.

Data Analysis

Clark Moustakas (1994) is the primary resource for phenomenological research methods. This study will follow the processes he has developed for data analysis in a transcendental phenomenological study. The data collection stage is followed by data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). The steps for data analysis based on Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Van Kaam Method of analysis involve seven steps. The first step is to develop a list of every significant statement or expression (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Moustakas, 1994). This process is called horizontalization which is which consists of unlimited experiences and providing a presence to every experience giving it equal worth (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Moustakas, 1994). In this step, I listed all of the significant statements made by the participants from the interviews, focus group discussion, and reflective journals.

The next step was the process of reduction and elimination (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994) in this step, two questions must be answered to determine the invariant constituents, which are the horizons or units. The first questions focus on determining if the experience is necessary to understand (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Moustakas, 1994). I had to

determine the worth of each statement. Then, I needed to eliminate any statements that are vague, repetitive, or overlapping (Moustakas, 1994). The third step involves clustering and creating themes for the invariant constituents (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Moustakas, 1994). I had to take the statements and begin to group them into themes. This process also removes repetition as it creates clusters (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Next, the themes are compared to the participants' direct account to provide validation (Moustakas, 1994). I compared the themes generated from the previous steps to the actual participants' experiences to ensure they represent their stories as told. Once the invariant constituents and themes were validated, then an individual textural description was created for each participant (Moustakas, 1994). Individual textural descriptions are direct quotes and excerpts from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). In this step, I referenced and quoted statements made by each participant directly from his interview, focus group discussion, or reflective journal.

Based upon the individual textural description and the imaginative variation, individual structural description was developed (Moustakas, 1994). The structural descriptions identify the social, emotional, and cultural connections of the participants statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Sullivan & Bhattachyra, 2017). This was the first attempt to interpret the data by forming these connections. Lastly, I developed a textural-structural description for each participant on the meaning and core of the experience including the themes and invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994). The individual textural-structural description merges the textural descriptions and structural descriptions to create a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of each participant (Sullivan & Bhattachyra, 2017). Once this process is complete then, composite textural descriptions, composite structural descriptions will be developed to outline and examine all of the individual experiences to identify themes (Sullivan & Bhattachyra, 2017). Then both

composites were merged to begin synthesizing the data and create a composite textural-structural description (Moustakas, 1994, Sullivan & Bhattacharya, 2017).

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness was imperative to my study because I wanted this work to be considered valid and legitimate amongst my peers, other researchers, educators, and the public. Schwandt (2015) defines trustworthiness as “that quality of an investigation and its findings that made it noteworthy to audiences” (p. 308). Lincoln and Guba (1985) go on to further establish that trustworthiness can be used to persuade readers that the researchers’ findings are worthy of their attention. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability make up the criteria used to determine trustworthiness (Schwandt, 2015). This criterion was introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a means to echo the conventional qualitative assessment criteria of validity and reliability.

Credibility

Credibility “addresses the issue of the inquirer providing assurances of the fit between the respondents’ views of their life ways and the inquirer’s reconstruction and representation of the same” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 309). Member checking and peer debriefing can be used to ensure credibility (Schwandt, 2015). Member checking provides validation that the researcher’s findings are accurate because of the verification from the participant that the information documented is accurate (Schwandt, 2015). To ensure credibility, participants were afforded the opportunity review their individual transcripts from the interviews and focus groups prior to the development of the written findings. Peer debriefing consist of the researcher sharing with a trusted and knowledgeable colleague in order to achieve a form of consensual validation (Schwandt, 2015).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability focused on “the process of the inquiry and the inquirer’s responsibility for ensuring that the process was logical, traceable, and documented” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 309). Auditing and providing an audit trail, a systematically maintained documentation system, ensures the dependability of the information (Schwandt, 2015, p.10). Confirmability addresses establishing “the fact that the data and interpretations of an inquiry were not merely figments of the inquirer’s imagination” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 309). The audit trail also provides confirmability of the information (Schwandt, 2015).

Transferability

Transferability addresses the issue of generalization (Schwandt, 2015). Providing rich, thick descriptions provided the details necessary for transferability (Creswell, 2013). It “can be accomplished if the inquirer provides sufficient detail about the circumstances of the situation or case that was so that readers can engage in reasonable but modest speculation about whether findings are applicable to other cases with similar circumstances” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 129).

Ethical Considerations

The research gained IRB approval (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Schwandt, 2015). Once that was obtained then, each participant signed informed consent letters (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Schwandt, 2015). Participants were provided a clear understanding of the purpose of the study. Debriefing was used to inform participants on the outcome and implication of the study as a mutual benefit for both the participants and researcher (Creswell, 2013). Participant anonymity was protected through use of pseudonyms for the schools and participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Schwandt, 2015). Since this was a voluntary study, participants had the right to withdraw at any time (Creswell & Poth,

2018). All data was secured through use of password protection for electronic data and use of locked filing cabinets for hard copies of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Schwandt, 2015).

Summary

This chapter contained the methodology of this qualitative study with transcendental phenomenological design. A description and justification for the selection of this type of study and design was indicated. The research question and sub central questions were restated as the site, participants, and participant selection processes was disclosed. The procedures and role of the researcher was provided indicating revealing potential personal biases. The data collection methods and data analysis that are appropriate for a phenomenological design were outlined in detail. Finally, the ethical consideration and methods to ensure trustworthiness were indicated.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This study was conducted to better understand the experiences of the participants and gain insight into factors that contributed to their success. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based schools in Virginia. This chapter will present the findings of this transcendental phenomenological study that will answer the following research questions developed around Brofenbrenner's ecological systems model to understand the four environmental levels that distinctively influence the development of an individual (Onwuegbuzie, 2013):

CQ: What are the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based private K-12 schools or high schools in Virginia?

SQ1: How do the participants describe the influences in their immediate environment in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?

SQ2: How do the participants describe the impact of the relationships and connections between their immediate environment and school environment?

SQ3: How do the participants describe outside factors such as the experiences of family member or other events in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?

SQ4: How do the participants describe religious or cultural influences in their personal life and in school in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?

Furthermore, this chapter will provide a portrait of each participant along with the data from the interviews, focus group and journal reflection in the form of themes based on the findings of the study.

Participants

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned for data coding and to present the findings of the study. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), participant anonymity should be protected through use of pseudonyms for the schools and participants. Participant numbers were assigned in no particular order to ensure there was no identifying attribute. All of the participants graduated from a faith-based private school in Virginia in which they attended from at least tenth through twelfth grade which qualified them to participate in the study. The brief profile of each participant below will provide some basic background information about their school affiliation, year graduated, family, religion and postsecondary path.

Omar

Omar attended St. Paul's Catholic School from sixth grade through his senior year. He graduated from St. Paul's Catholic School in 2011. He was raised in a two-parent household with two siblings. His parents were immigrants. Omar grew up around his extended family which also lived in the area. He was raised in the Denomination B religion which he classified as Charismatic Christian.

Upon graduation from St. Paul's, Omar attended Duke University. He majored in engineering for undergrad and then went on to get his masters. During that time in school, he transitioned to business and currently works as a business analyst.

Isaiah

Isaiah attended St. Paul's Catholic School from seventh grade through his senior year. He graduated from St. Paul's in 1990. At the age of eight, his parents separated. From there, He lived with his mother and one sibling. His father was still involved in his life. His mother was an

educator and his father was a sports instructor. His extended family which included grandparents and cousins lived in the area as well. He was raised Baptist.

Isaiah played sports at St. Paul's Catholic School. His family was very involved with school. Upon graduation, he attended VSU and majored in Geology. He currently works in education and coaches.

Cornelius

Cornelius attended St. Paul's Catholic School from sixth grade through twelfth grade. He attended public school for elementary school. He graduated from St. Paul's in 2006. Phillip grew up in a single-parent household with his mother and one sibling. He lived in a housing project in the city while attending St. Paul's Catholic School on a scholarship. After his mother lost her job at a local factory, they fell on hard times. She began domestic work to support the family. Her clients assisted with getting him into St. Paul's Catholic School. His dad was not involved in his life growing up. He did not clearly indicate his exact religious affiliation however; he did describe himself as spiritual.

Cornelius played sports in school and through college. His mother's interactions with school were limited due to the demands of a single-parent. Upon graduation, he attended Randolph Macon for a year and a half and then transferred to LSU. After graduating from LSU, he moved back to the area and currently works as a contractor.

Phillip

Phillip attended Saints College Preparatory from ninth to twelfth grade. He graduated from Saints College Preparatory in 2012. He was raised in a two-parent household as the oldest of three siblings He was raised Southern Baptist. Prior to Saints College Preparatory, he attended public schools. He played sports during his time at Saints College Preparatory. He went on to

play in college then professionally for two years. Phillip attended Virginia Tech University with a degree in Economic Management. He currently works in wealth management and coaches at Saints College Preparatory.

Ronald

Ronald graduated from Saints College Preparatory in 1987. He attended from ninth to twelfth grade. He was raised in a two-parent household with a large close-knit extended family. Catholicism was the primary religion of the family. He attended catholic schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade. After graduating from Saints College Preparatory, Ronald attended Howard University and majored in business. After furthering his education, he became an optician and opened his own practice.

Steven

Steven attended Saints College Preparatory from ninth grade to twelfth grade. He graduated in 1989. Sam was raised by a single mother. He also had a supportive extended family. During his school years, they practiced the Catholic faith. After graduating from Saints College Preparatory, Steven attended Newbury College on a basketball scholarship. He currently coaches high school basketball and works as a residency compliance officer.

Kevin

Kevin graduated from Saints College Preparatory in 2018. He attended from ninth through twelfth grade. He grew up in a two-parent household with two siblings. One his siblings lives out of state so they were not raised in the same household. He considered his family Christian but they did not attend church regularly. After graduating from Saints College Preparatory, he continued to play basketball at Ferrum College. He is majoring in the medical field.

Josiah

Josiah attended Metro Episcopal School Forum from ninth to twelfth grade. He graduated in 2018. He was raised in a two-parent household with one sibling. Josiah was raised Christian. His family attended church every Sunday when he was younger but not as much now. He is currently in college majoring in Biology and is on the premed track.

Dwayne

Dwayne attended Saints College Preparatory from ninth grade to twelfth grade. He graduated from Saints College Preparatory in 2016. They were raised in a two-parent household with two siblings. His family was Southern Baptist. Ian played sports during his time there and in college. Dwayne did not have a positive experience at Saints College Preparatory outside of sports. Upon graduation, he attended Norfolk State University on a football scholarship. Currently, Dwayne is working on his master's degree at the same school.

Thomas

Thomas attending Flagship Christian School Christian School from fifth grade to twelfth grade. He graduated in 2015. He was raised in a two-parent household with two siblings. His family were Christians and very active in the church. After graduating from Flagship Christian School, Thomas attending VMI. He is currently a pilot with the Air Force.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	School	Year Graduated	College Graduate	Family Household	Religion
Omar	St. Paul's	2011	Yes	Two-parents	Denomination B or Charismatic Christian
Isaiah	St. Paul's	1990	Yes	Single parent (mom)	Baptist
Cornelius	St. Paul's	2006	Yes	Single parent (mom)	Spiritual
Phillip	Saints College Preparatory	2012	Yes	Two-parents	Southern Baptist
Ronald	Saints College Preparatory	1987	Yes	Two-parents	Catholic
Steven	Saints College Preparatory	1989	Yes	Single parent (mom)	Catholic
Kevin	Saints College Preparatory	2018	Currently enrolled	Two-parents	Christian
Josiah	Metro Episcopal School	2018	Currently enrolled	Two-parents	Christian
Dwayne	Saints College Preparatory	2016	Yes	Two-parents	Southern Baptist
Thomas	Flagship Christian School	2015	Yes	Two-parents	Christian

Note. This table provides a demographic overview for each participant.

Results

Theme Development

Individual interviews, focus group interviews and reflective journal essays were used to understand the phenomenon. The individual interview consisted of 24 questions framed around the research questions. Each participant had an individual interview which ranged from 25-53 minutes, based on the participants' responses. Omar, Cornelius, Phillip, Ronald and Thomas participated in the focus group interview which lasted approximately 63 minutes. The focus group interview consisted of ten questions posed to each person in the group. Each interview was recorded using Google Meet and then transcribed verbatim. To ensure credibility, participants were emailed their individual transcripts from the interviews and focus groups prior to the start

of the data analysis. This type of member checking provides validation that the researcher's findings are correct because of the confirmation from the participant that the information documented is accurate (Schwandt, 2015). All of the participants were asked to complete a reflective journal essay. Responses were provided by eight of the ten participants.

Following the data collection, Moustakas (1994) modification of the van Kaam Method was used for data analysis. The steps included the horizontalization process of identifying every significant expression from the data from the interview, focus group discussion and reflective journals (Moustakas, 1994). In this step, the Quirkos online coding program to highlight every significant expression from all collected data. In the next step of the Van Kaam Method, I went through the process of reduction and elimination by removing vague, repetitive and overlapping statements (Moustakas, 1994). During this step, 394 significant expressions were highlighted (see Figure 1). Most repetition and overlapping statements were made between the individual interviews and the focus group discussion. During this process, I had to determine if the expression was essential and had value (Moustakas, 1994). I used the Quirkos program to then to review all highlighted statements and applied those questions. In this step the number of significant expressions was further reduced to 228 (see Figure 1). The third step involved clustering and creating themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Moustakas, 1994). The remaining statements were then put into clusters which developed into themes. This process of data analysis helped develop the essence of the phenomenon, which is the experiences of the participants in faith-based private schools (Moustakas, 1994). In this last step, five themes and 13 sub-themes were created (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Theme Development



Note. Visual representation of the theme development process following Moustakas (1994) modification of the Van Kaam Method of analysis.

Theme 1 – Parental Support of Education

The first identified theme from the individual and focus group interviews was the influence of parental support of education. There was a shared feeling from the participants that some aspect their parents’ influence shaped their education journey. This theme led to the creation of the following sub-themes: parental expectations, parental involvement with school and parental financial support.

Parental Involvement with School. A key sub-theme that surfaced from the data was parental involvement with school. Parental support of the participants education in the form of parental involvement was a consistent experience shared during the individual and group interviews. All of the participants indicated that their parents communicated with teachers in

some format whether formally such as parent-teacher conferences or informally through meetings or phone calls.

All of the participants, with the exception of Cornelius, expressed that their parents attended parent teacher conferences. Phillip shared that his parents were very involved with the school. He recalled:

My parents are fairly heavily involved, especially with getting acclimated with culture because same thing for them, they hadn't been around the school as much. They hadn't really known too much about it before I got into the school. They were all at all school events, especially earlier on, like parent teacher conferences or PTA meetings or helping out with being readily available whenever they need help from parent involvement. So, they had a pretty good relationship with all the other parents in the school, at least in my class as well as in the teachers as well.

For Kevin, Saints College Preparatory was a new experience for his family. His parents wanted to make sure they met his teachers and familiarized themselves with the school. He explained the experience during his interview, sharing that:

at Saints College Preparatory, they didn't know anybody. So, they were going up there to the parent teacher conferences, doing things like that... They would go in there and talk to them and see the kind of person they are. And that would kind of be like it.

Isaiah, briefly shared his parents' involvement during his individual interview. He stated:

They participated in everything...sports events, school related events, as far back as it goes. . .they were there.

Not every experience was a positive memory, Dwayne recalled having a negative experience with his parent's interactions with his teachers. He shared:

Yeah, they always take the teacher side...But yeah, as far as parent teacher conference. Yeah, I didn't like those.

The extent of the parental involvement reached beyond just parent-teacher conferences for some of the participants. Josiah explained that his mother's level of involvement was respected by his teachers and evidently memorable to him. During his interview he shared that:

In particular, because my mom handles school work. My mom was always involved with the teachers, and the teachers admired her level of involvement with my grades and how well I was performing in the classroom. And the teachers could respect the level of involvement that a parent would show in regards to their kids.

Steven described his mother's involvement, stating:

She was a don't play mom. I didn't have no problem with teachers calling her because I knew how the end game could have been. So, she was very open and she's like, hey, this is my number. Have any problems, give me a call and we can take care of it right then and there no problem. We didn't have any problem. No teachers had to call home. But she was definitely involved in engaged without question. It wasn't you fending for yourself, you on your own. But she knew that. And I knew if I wanted to continue to play sports, this, that and the other, I had to take care of business. But she was there when I needed, so I wasn't on my own on that part.

Thomas's parents were also involved with the school by serving in several capacities such as room mother, classroom teacher and bible class teacher. With three children at the school, Thomas's mother rotated serving as room mom between them. His father routinely served as the instructor for bible class. He recalled both instances during his interview, stating:

Okay, so my family was incredibly active with school. Like I said, through the interview process. Of course, you don't have a choice but to be active. But even after that. So, my mom teaches at school now, to give you an idea of how much they love it. But even before that, my mom was always a room mom. Whether it be for my class, it switched out every year. She'd be a room mom for my class and my sister's class and my brother's class. I don't know how exactly it worked, but she was always somebody's room mom.

He continued:

But it was like a Wednesday group where instead of every individual grade having their own Bible classes, it was like all the lower school, all middle school, all of high school gathered and had, like, a big one together. And my dad taught that every couple of weeks or something like that, so very much involved in that regard.

Ronald and Thomas shared that their parents ensured that learning continued at home and through the summer. Ronald's parents ensured that an extension of learning and support was available for him through tutoring and summer school. He recalled:

They were very on top of it for the most part. So, it was good. My dad, he wasn't like, the big tutor type guy, but he was like, I was like you doing alright, how's it going. So sometimes all you need from your parent. My mom was more of the

help you get it done. But then they would always find tutors for us. Summer school, I did summer school every year, so they were always on top of us, meaning like, we have a weakness here. So, we're always be in summer school, working at weakness or whatever it was that we're working on. It was never like, well, you going through on your own or kind of like some kid parents.

Thomas shared similar experiences in his interview. Throughout his educational experiences, learning did not cease during the summer. He stated:

My mom, I remember she was adamant about we would go to, like, the learning store or something, and they're always, like, prep books for the next grade. So, if we just finished fifth grade, my mom would make us do the entire prep book for 6th grade, and that continued. I want to say that continued for me until I was in high school, like, junior. I want to say junior probably like, freshman, sophomore year range.

Parental Expectations. Another sub-theme that was identified from the Parent Support of Education theme was Parental Expectations. Most of the study participants shared an account of their parents expressing their educational expectations of them. This often included stressing the importance of an education. In Omar's individual interview, he shared:

I would say the general expectation and desire of my family that I would not only do well in school but be able to go to a highly ranked College afterwards.

Josiah echoed the same expectations, as he shared:

Mom and dad both heavily pushed me to excel in school, and I have no other option to succeed.

Thomas recalled his family expressing the importance, he stated:

If I'm being honest, my family, as I already said, was really serious about academics. And at times when I wasn't really about it, my parents made it very clear that, okay, you need to be.

Josiah shared the standard that was set by his mother, he shared:

I guess the level of motivation, I guess, the level of motivation that I was held to the standards I was held to from the family. My mom always says to this day growing up, my mom always says our bar is here. Don't lower your bar for somebody else or something else. Our bar is here. So, I guess the standards that I've always been held to have just pushed me through high school.

Kevin recalled his parents and grandmother's expectations, he stated:

My parents, my grandma. I say those three definitely my biggest influencers.

They told me I was going to college too, so it wasn't much of an option, even if I didn't want to go. So, I was going to study something.

In the focus group interview, Phillip shared that his mother wanted to ensure education was not overshadowed by sports. He stated:

I'll say for me, my mom played a big factor because my mom has been a high school teacher for some time now. She taught inner city at George Wythe. A lot of her teaching on me was in part out of fear of kind of seeing how some of her students have turned out as well, so she was always hard on me academically. I was good at sports at a young age, but she didn't want me to be a dumb jock. That was her biggest fear. Growing up, right after going to practice, I would be in the band or something like that, or going to SAT prep.

In contrast to some of the experiences shared during the focus group interview, Cornelius noticed that his experience with his mother was different. He felt weight of being a single mother did not afford the time for his mother to push the same level academic expectations as the others. He shared:

That's funny. I'm not going to lie. I wish there were more. But now, being an adult and understand, this life was supposed to be done with two people. I can't put the onus on my mother for not being there because she needed to provide. Looking back on it, I remember when I was looking at colleges to go to, and I was kind of like, hey, ma, what do you think? She was kind of like, well, I don't know just kind of figure it out. It was kind of discouraging, and I haven't forgotten that. But in hindsight, I understand her position where she was at that time. It was just kind of like, hey, you've gone this far. Just go ahead and carry it on. God, I'll take you through. I do wish I had a little more.

Parental Financial Support. A third sub-theme that was identified during the interviews, Parental Financial Support. A few of the participants shared that their parents support extended to covering the financial obligation of attending a private school. Even with scholarships in some instances the financial responsibility on their parents was evident.

Omar shared his family's experience with meeting the financial obligations of St. Paul's, he shared in both the individual and group interviews about their challenges. He stated:

I'll just add that my family supported me, particularly financially. St. Paul's Catholic School is not cheap, I'm sure as Cornelius knows. My parents moved hell and high water to make sure that I could go to the school and school fees being paid when I could have just gone to public school, been a lot cheaper.

He continued, stating:

I would say generally struggling with money, especially to pay for school fees. So that was always a stressor. And then I would say. Just parents arguing at home. So just generally raising the stress levels in the house.

Ronald stated:

The financial part can be a burden. When I was going up, it was a lot cheaper than it is now.

Cornelius recalled his memories of his mother meeting the financial obligations, he shared:

school was pretty expensive, but we just made do with what we had. It was just me and my mom, so she just provided, everything else God gave me and school provided. It was a blessing.

Dwayne shared how the financial obligations of Saints College Preparatory negatively impacted his transition to college, he stated:

My dad paid for school. Well, when I first got to college, I was on three-fourths of a scholarship. My dad paid for my school and he paid for my high school, although, like, some of the payments will come in kind of late. He paid for my high school, too. I actually didn't really receive my diploma until maybe towards the end of my freshman year in college from high school because my high school wouldn't give me a diploma because my dues weren't fully paid off yet. I said if I hadn't got a football scholarship, I might not have been able to go to college immediately because I didn't get my college paperwork. I didn't get my high school paperwork for so long. When you assign a scholarship, pretty much you're

given a piece of paper that hands you over some money while inducting you into the program, essentially. I know there's more that, but I know there's a way around it because they know I graduated from high school.

Theme 2 Religious Influences

Part of the shared experience of the participants was attending a faith-based private school. The school sites consisted of one Catholic school, two Episcopalian schools and a Christian school. Only two of the participants shared the same religion of their school which were Ronald and Steven, which is Catholic. The other participants represented the following religions in no particular order: Denomination B which is also known as Charismatic Christian, Christian and Southern Baptist (see Table 1).

While there were disparities on the connection to the religion of their individual schools, Spirituality and a connection to religion was a consistent theme among all of the participants. The sub-themes that were identified during the coding process were personal religion and faith along with religious influences from school.

Personal Religion and Faith. The conversation of religion was woven into all aspects of the data collected. The participants readily shared their personal religion and faith to include their journeys during school and beyond graduation.

Thomas was raised in an active Christian household. He shared:

So, my religious background grew up in a Christian family. My family was very active in the Church. Growing up, we were the type of family to be there Sundays. We would be there Wednesday night for service, and then if there were any weekend events, of course, we'd be there for that, too. You asked what was my religious background upbringing? That's the way that it always has been for me

and my family. My dad was always really adamant about us being in Church. And of course, so was my mom. But I remember my dad vocalizing it more than anybody else. So, yeah, it was not even a question. Are we going to Church? Unless there was some sort of groundbreaking, like, if there was a tournament, like in another city that we were going to, that would be the only excuse that we were missing Church.

Ronald shared about his upbringing during his interview, stating:

I'm Catholic, born and raised Catholic. Saints College Preparatory is a Catholic school. Like I said, I think I said before my mom wanted to raise us Catholic. That was like the agreement my dad and her had. All my brothers, siblings grew up Catholic. Faith-wise, it's cool. It's kind of ritualistic things. You grow up going through the confirmations and the baptisms and all kinds of stuff. It's good to go to. But I started going to my dad's Church, the Baptist church, because I couldn't really relate to a priest who never had sex before.

Omar shared his religious background during the group interview. He also shared his connection to the religious aspect of school. He stated:

I grew up Charismatic, non-denominational, so Protestant. St. Paul's is Episcopal, so Protestant matching up there. But I would say that the school was more focused on ritual, so we would have Chapel three times a week, have a little message, sing hymns, and I think in the non-denominational church setting, there was much more of an emphasis on personal faith and personal relationships with the Lord. And so that was very important to me. I really appreciated singing the hymns and going to Chapel and all of those things and discussions of the Bible in

school. But sometimes there also felt like there was a disconnect between how important and personal it was for me versus for a lot of the rest of the student body, its kind of just seemed like an activity that was just part of the school day, and wasn't necessarily very important or personal to them. I really appreciated all of it, but then just had to recognize that everybody else may not be taking it as seriously as I was.

During the group interview, Cornelius's reflected on the opportunity to attend St. Paul's felt like a blessing to him. He shared:

Honestly, it's been God. Sometimes I look back and I'm like, "How did you do this whole little St. Paul's scenario? If I knew what I do now, there is no way I could have done that. You know what I'm saying? But that was a blessing. You know what I mean? Like the blissful ignorance. But just going to school every day, do your thing, played a little sport, whatever, whatever. You know what I mean? It just was hell. And you look back on as to where I am now, like I said, without those things and keeping me on a straighter path.

Thomas circled back with a statement about his faith during the group interview, sharing:

I think like both of the gentleman before me said, I think the number one thing was definitely my relationship with the Lord. And I think looking back on a lot of things that ended up happening in my life, there were things that I prayed for, didn't know that they would necessarily happen, and they ended up happening. And I got a lot more out of it than I would have if I had done it the way that I thought initially I would get there.

Kevin briefly shared about his religious background in his individual interview, stating:

I'd say all of us are Christian. We don't attend Church that much. Not that much. Not at all anymore. But I went to a Catholic high school and Catholic, I forgot what it was, preschool.

In his individual interview, Josiah shared family's religious practices. He shared:

The thing is, I guess just time, not nothing bad or anything, but we haven't. I don't know when the last time I've actually been into a Church, my mom said to this day, we need to get ya'll back in Church. But yeah, we used to go to Church every Sunday when we were younger kids a long time ago. And I guess just life happened, school. It's just life. I would say that's a transition we had, but my religious beliefs and the family's beliefs have never changed. Christian same beliefs just haven't gone to Church as much as we used to.

Steven shared the religious transitions growing up with his mother. He stated:

We did a little back and forth thing. In first grade all the way through 12th grade, we were Catholic first, and of course, prior to that, we're Baptist. Then once I started going to Catholic school, we were Catholic. And then there was that thing when I go away to college and then come back home and we're still going to St. Elizabeth Catholic Church.

In the individual interview, Dwayne shared his religious background and faith. He shared:

I try to be very religious. I pray every day. I grew up in Moore Street Missionary Baptist Church. The high school I went to was a Catholic high school. That's where I became more cognizant of my religion in high school, even though I'm a Baptist. I say every, like, hardship I've had, I've prayed over. That's gotten me

where I've been today, definitely. It helped me persevere. I applied my competitive edge to academics. I've really seen what I can do in the situation I've prayed over. And then I turn around and just witness what I've done. I've seen what I could do, and I've seen how prayer can help me not only get through something, but for the best work.

Religious Influences from School. The differences and similarities in their personal religion and the school religion was highlighted in this sub-theme.

Thomas shared the religious practices of his school and the similarities to his church. He stated:

And Flagship Christian School in my mind, they did praise and worship for the student body every single morning. And I saw a lot of that reflected in the same type of songs, the same things that they would talk about in those gatherings would be the same things that I would see at church. I always kind of felt like it was pretty universal. Everything felt pretty much the same. I never learned something from school, like Bible class and then went to Church and was like, "That doesn't seem to check in my mind."

In the group interview, Phillip shared his experiences with the religious aspects of his school in comparison to his personal religious experiences. He stated:

I can kind of piggyback off of that. I grew up in the Baptist Church, grandfather was a pastor and everything. Saints College Preparatory is Catholic, like David said. But when I got to Saints College Preparatory, after being in the Catholic Church once or twice every week, I just didn't really connect with the rules, I guess. It seems like it's more rule-based religion, almost, just like with the

confessions, going to the priest, and it's a lot more ritualistic. I did appreciate it, though, from the standpoint, just learning about the theology of the Bible and everything. But since then, I think that I've grown towards more non-denominational, just kind of like learning for myself and getting more attached to my faith through that which I think Saints College Preparatory opened me up to. I think just going from the Baptist Church, which felt more like a community, to Catholic Church, which felt more like rules, I think non-denominational lets you go through that process on your own and find that relationship by yourself.

Cornelius followed up on a comment made by Omar in the group interview. He stated:

Yeah, I agree with Omar. There's something I thought about, well, first of all, Christ is my Lord and Savior, always has been, always will be. I'm just a human trying to do my thing. He saved me, so I'm trying to walk the best walk I can. That being said, I do want to agree with Omar. But the way I believe St. Paul's Catholic School did it, the Chapel was more of a structure and a discipline scenario to put in a lifestyle. As we grew into men, that's something that if you put that in your lifestyle, it could potentially most likely make your lifestyle better. People didn't really take it seriously. It was just more of a chore or whatever it was. But they were more for the fellowship and the discipline and the structure mechanism out of that. But, yeah, my faith has grown. It's taken me places that I thought I'd never be, always walking toward Him. That's what I got. He continued:

That whole honor thing, that's character building. You know what I mean? What you going to do when there isn't nobody watching? Them things that I can

honestly say with God in my heart, that was always there anyway. But then they just doubled down on it. You know what I mean? It just really made you like, "You know what? I'm not ever going to do that. I just take deep. Screw it." You know what I mean? Whatever. But as for I wanted to say something that I use from St. Paul's Catholic School to bring my faith closer, when I had questions about my faith.

He went on to share:

The fundamental education that I received from St. Paul's Catholic School, it helped me answer a lot of those questions that I don't think I would have been able to come to those realizations without some of the silly stuff. I mean, this author, that author, but it all connects. But just that little bit of experience that I had with it allowed me to further dig into it, to further find God. Further find more to truth and really answer questions about the Bible, not just like, "Oh, I'm just going to believe and pray when I need you." You really did make this jump. You really are that. You know what I mean? You prove yourself time and time again. That fundamental education was key.

Phillip added:

I'll say the same thing with Saints College Preparatory. Just going to the actual Catholic Church does seem very ritualistic. It's a lot different from Baptist Church. Honestly, for myself, I never really understood what the priests might be saying in the sermons and everything. But I would say I appreciated the Theology classes at Saints College Preparatory that we had every day. It really taught me how to read the Bible and how to interpret that for myself. I think I started reading

it more just from being at Saints College Preparatory when I got to college because that same book that we read every day in the Bible, is the same book they used to enslave us. That made me want to read into it a lot more. And I have my own interpretation, build my own relationship with the Word. And I'll say just in doing that, my faith and my path had grown. I would say it helped with my mental health a lot throughout school, just knowing that it's not my plan, it's God's plan and everything, and that what's for me will be. That's the biggest thing I learned from being in school, just how to read and how to learn the Bible for myself.

In his individual interview, Omar shared his thoughts on the religious facets of his school.

He shared:

I think for the specific school I went to, there was a connection with both Christian tradition and then how Christian ethics flowed into a personal code of ethics and a corporate or communal code of ethics. I think that would vary depending on the type of school. So, the school was Episcopal versus if you had more of an evangelical school, there might be some differences there in terms of how much faith is emphasized in the school. I think what's hard is there is also a conflation often times between the academic excellence of the school and the religious aspect. And so, the school I went to was very good academically, but it's sort of hard to unwind that from the faith-based part.

Kevin shared what he gained from his school, he stated:

I got to understand more about faith and reasoning. So, this happened and it's a reason behind it and things have deeper meaning. Sometimes I can say that

probably would have some relation. I got to understand more about life and why things are because of religion and whatnot.

Steven shared his experience and lessons learned from the religious practices from school. He stated:

The monks, they were the religion teachers and they were definitely strict, but they provided good messages. They were stern and they gave good messages that we can adjust and adapt in life lessons. They gave those type of lessons.

Experiences, you know we continue to have Communion. And like you said, the Chapel, whether you're a Catholic or not, you still have to be a part of that. And that was a part of going to a catholic school. And like I said, if it was somebody who hadn't gone to a Catholic school prior to Saints College Preparatory, then I would be something completely new for them. But if it's a Catholic, going into another Catholic school, it's just like a transition and a continuation of what you already been doing.

He continued stating:

Well, structure once again, and you're able to learn about yourself, faith based. You're learning about yourself. You're learning about how you can learn about other people. You're learning about the word of God. You're learning about how the word of God can relate to you in everyday life. And those are things you're definitely not going to be able to get in a public school. So yeah, that definitely is a key right there. Being able to put those things and how you can put those things into your life practice.

Theme 3 Cultural Impact

Cultural Impact is the third theme that was identified from the coding process. This theme contained the third largest number of coded experiences. The sub-themes under this theme include: Socio-Economic Differences, School Culture Influences and Racially Based Experiences.

Socio-Economic Differences. Collectively the private schools that the participants attended had students from varying socio-economic backgrounds. The participants found that the differences were a notable part of their educational experience.

Due to a change in their financial situation, Cornelius found himself moving from suburban living to a home in a city housing project. He shared the story during the group interview. He recalled:

We live in Gilpin Court at the same time as I went to St. Paul's Catholic School. So, yeah, it definitely was a culture shock. I guess the path that led me to Saint Christopher specifically. We lived in Chesterfield, we lived in the suburbs, and my mom lost her job, and we ended up moving to Gilpin Court. And during that time, she had started up cleaning business, and she was cleaning some houses around, saying, Christophers and I will go and help her and just kind of hang out with her from time to time. And some of the people that were around were kind of like, hey, let's try to see if we can get them in the St. Paul's and I took the test and got in, and so happened to be other black kids. They were trying to let in as well at the same time, and it just made it work.

He went on to share:

The teachers didn't know what to do with me. You know what I mean? I wasn't really comfortable in their environment either. You know what I mean? But they just meshed out. I'm glad they did, because it made me a hybrid. I lived in the hood. I live upper-echelon elitist lifestyle. You know what I'm saying? I think that's the biggest problem with the white boy. They hated on you all. It's elitism.

"How do you do that, and I can't?" "It don't even matter. I did it. Peace."

Another part of the socio-economic differences that the participants noted was the generational aspect of the student body. Omar stated:

I would say that St. Paul's is a predominantly white, old money sort of generational school. So, the type of place where I think the school has been around for over 100 years at this point. So maybe let's say, like a grandfather went there and then went and got married and then moved back to town and then since his son there. And then he went and got married, maybe to a woman who went to a nearby school and then moved back. And then now you're on the third generation of students or boys going to that same school. So, you see a lot of the same families, a lot of the same sort of wealth. And it's more old money rather than new money.

He went on to share:

Nothing necessarily wrong with that. But if you're not trying to do that or if you don't have those opportunities available to you, then you definitely feel that difference.

Kevin noticed a general socio-economical difference between the races. He stated:

The people at private school, I don't really like them that much. They felt more entitled to things. I didn't feel like we were the same. So, I kind of was in my own world. I didn't really mesh well with some of the other kids. It seemed like all the other black kids, they came from, what's the word, like lower income homes. I was with them a lot of the time because I could understand them more. Plus, they're black and I understood them better. Because we were all going through the same things.

On the other hand, Ronald, noticed the difference but found a positive aspect. He shared:

St. Paul's, they all got these kids that own businesses, so it's good to be exposed to them.

Dwayne recollection of his experiences relative to the socio-economic differences highlighted reasons for his disconnect from the school. He stated:

There's definitely a disconnect. I feel like high school is really where I saw how money can really conduct people's situations and relationship. They say money can't buy everything. But sometimes I'd say in high school, I definitely could argue that. I know people at the end of the day will always have the problems. I was just thinking the other day we say that anybody could become President, and then you find out later in life that it depends on your crowd and who you got around you and who motivates you and stuff like that. I'm a firm believer in the product of your environment. So, I was like, if somebody has a bad environment, that's not necessarily true, but then you have Donald Trump, who got to be President. So, then I started believing anybody could become President who has money? That's my take on it. Even though we weren't the richest private school, I

still saw it there. And people already had their crowds from because I went to private school, coming out of public school. So, I went to public elementary and middle school. Then I went to a private high school. I really saw, like, how relationships were already formed around some people, and then it was just different. The personality, the personalities are different. Granted, I'm the person I can say that could fit in any crowd. I didn't really mesh well.

School Culture Influences. Under this sub-theme, school culture influences are inclusive of the beliefs, values, practices, norms, expectations, and demographics of the school. Several of the participants had positive memories and experiences from their school's culture.

Omar appreciated the demographics of his all-male private school. He stated:

I really appreciate the all-boys aspect of St. Paul's. I think, especially in the middle school and early high school years, it makes them so much easier to focus, to get your head on right, to not have, I don't want to say the distraction of women there, but it's definitely easier to focus when the environment all day, every day is just guys.

In his individual interview, Phillip shared a similar appreciation, stating:

Makes you little more focused, I would say, also being around all boys throughout the day, too. There's less distractions as well.

The impact of morals, beliefs and values in the school were also key point shared by the participants. Omar stated:

I think one of the things that I underappreciated until I got to college was the impact that not only my Christian faith, but specifically the expression that they emphasized at St. Paul's actually formed me in a positive way. There was an

honor code. There was this huge emphasis on integrity and the importance of personal honor. And when I got to college, I had spent all of this time learning that and understanding that your integrity is more important than a grade. And so cheating is totally out of the question.

Thomas noted the same about the school he attended, he shared:

I think one of the biggest benefits for Flagship Christian School was that instilled Christian discipline of, like, okay, you're here to get an education, but we also teach you, I won't say teach you to do the right thing, but we're going to teach you morals and stuff like that. And I really think that helped me when I got to college.

In his reflective journal writing, Thomas added:

That being said, Flagship Christian School often did feel like a bubble. It was easy for students to do the “right thing” in the eyes of classmates and teachers because it was expected of them, not necessarily because Godly desires were cemented in their hearts. The lack of true cementing showed itself mostly with the decisions students made outside of school and the actions many alumni make after graduating. I felt that in some cases, Flagship Christian School did not address some of the more serious issues men and women deal with as Christian youth, and attacking topics like Christianity and marriage, pornography, sex, etc., would have helped the greater population succeed.

Kevin attending Saints College Preparatory, the military cultural of the school was less favorable for him. He recalled:

I didn't like the military part. The rules were like, it was like they choose to follow this, not this. And it wasn't evenly distributed throughout the school. Like, for

example, like, hair length or whatever. Like, my hair now is way past military length. But at the time, it was a lot shorter and some people get away with it. It was kind of biased. Yeah. At the time, I really despised the school. I didn't have a good experience.

In contrary, Ronald and Steven found the structure of the same school to be a positive aspect that had value after graduation. Ronald briefly stated in his reflective journal writing:

Another positive was the structure of my education prepared me for college.

In his individual interview, Steven stated:

Because one is the structure part, because of the appearances, the structure and the military aspect of it, that's what they don't have. So, it's a combination of the military where it's teaching you structure. And then there's, like you said, the faith-based part, it's all in one school. Other schools, they can wear uniform. But is it the structural part? As I said, the structure. I keep saying that word but that was a big word and how it at Saints College Preparatory. The faith basis, I guess it was just all part of the school part of your experiences.

Josiah found that the school motto reflected his overall experience at Metro Episcopal School. He shared:

Overall experience, I would say it was great. I loved it. It's not your regular high school. It's more of, like a college based high school to the point where you can basically, like, the Metro Episcopal School motto is "discover your path". So, I feel like I discovered my path at Metro Episcopal School.

Racially Based Experiences. As African American males at faith-based private schools, part of their shared experiences had racial overtones. Most were a part of a clear minority in the

racial make-up of the school. Others were the first or second African American student during their time at their respective schools. This dynamic lead to negatively rooted recounts of their collective experiences.

The dialogue amongst the participants during the group interview allowed them to share the similarities in their experiences. Omar started off by stating:

I think the negatives and why I'm less connected to the school, similarly, not many Black folks. I think I came to the school in sixth grade, and there were no Black folks in my class until the sixth grade, so younger than that, there weren't any, and I think there were only a few of us starting from that point.

Thomas followed by sharing:

I was the first Black kid. Excuse me. I was the first Black male in the class. There was a Black female.

Being a part of the minority, Ronald shared his experiences recalling:

But the negative was you realize what you're dealing with. White folks, they're cool with you, yeah, they kind of tokenism a little bit. And hey, I know they still rocking the Trump stuff and it's still that kind of tokenism vibe, like "I got a Black friend" sometimes. You get that. And my woke side says, "Okay, I'll play that game and maintain and stuff," but on the inside, I understand, it's good to know them. I met some great friends from Saints College Preparatory that I'm cool with now, but it's still got your little racist overtones that were negative.

Omar expanded on the conversation by adding:

I think I definitely also experienced some racial undertones, but frankly, overtones as well in that around my senior year, applying to schools, a lot of name

brand schools, got into a bunch of them, and I heard at least on one or two occasions folks saying that the reason I got into those schools was not because I was smart enough or gifted enough to get in, but because of affirmative action.

Thomas shared a specific incident where he experienced discrimination based on his race.

He stated:

To just give an example, every school has their prom, right? And everybody at Flagship Christian School went to prom because the school was so small. And you didn't go in a serious relationship. You just took whoever your best friend of the opposite gender was. I asked this young lady to go, and her dad said no, because he wasn't in favor of interracial couples. And I was like, "I'm not asking to marry your daughter here. I'm literally asking to go; it's going to be a group event. We just show up at the same time." And talking, too, about the whole affirmative action thought process, because, of course, applying for colleges, and I remember physically pulling out my resume at that point. I knew, based off of what I brought to the table that on paper, anybody would be happy to have their daughter go to prom with me or something like that. And this one guy's making a big ruckus out of it because I'm Black. I was like, that doesn't make sense to me at all.

In his individual interview and reflective journal, Omar shared his experiences with the racial disparities of his school. He recalled:

The major downside of attending my school was the ever-present feeling of being an outsider both economically and ethnically. Although my family was upper middle class, it was clear that many of my classmates were in a different class.

One example that sticks out is the assumption that nearly everyone was a member of a local country club. From an ethnic standpoint, there were few Black students at my school, and the school had undertones of Southern Pride - not outright racist, but there was an admiration of Southern culture that did not seem to grapple with past racism and how that affected both the past and present. As a result, I felt blackness was less valued and perhaps even looked down upon. It was not the majority of people at the school; however, there was enough to make things occasionally uncomfortable.

He continued with:

I think race wise, there was an implicit sense, although no one at the school would tell you would say this. There was an implicit sense that being black meant you are academically inferior, however. And so, there is less expectations for you. However, my family being West African immigrants and both my parents being professionals, had an expectation of academic and career excellence and so that counterbalance to some degree that expectation from a racial lens.

In his individual interview, Phillip noted the racial demographics of his school. He stated:

I was a clear minority coming from a Richmond public school, going to Saints College Preparatory, where it was only about 260 kids at the time. I was a minority; it was about 10% African American students. So, that was an adjustment time.

Being the minority at Flagship Christian School, motivated Thomas to excel. He shared his experiences stating:

I was one of a few African Americans at the school. I'm not going to say it made me upset or anything like that because I wasn't necessarily mad that they're one of their black kids. But the fact that I was a minority made me desire to want to be the best that much more. You know what I'm saying? Because in, like, middle school, of course, kids always make jokes and stuff like that about your race and stuff and whatnot. And being the competitor that I was and wanting it to be a thing of. Okay. Yeah, we can agree. People, look at my people and they expect you to be the fastest kid in this class, or they expect you to be the strongest kid. I'm like, well, you all don't expect me to be the valedictorian. Y'all don't expect me to be head of the drama team. You don't expect me to be the class President as well. So, in terms of my education, like being a minority and that knowledge of OK, I am a minority in this school did push me to work harder than what I thought everybody else was. Because everybody else like, oh, yeah, we're coming to school we're having a good time and go home. For me, it was a job. Okay. I'm here to get this done. So that way, no matter what, I can wear that title, I was the best. No matter what anybody looks like, no matter what anybody thinks of me, like, on paper, you can't just do this.

Steven shared his experiences with the racial differences from a positive lens. He stated:

I would say at that time, I think my class probably had the most blacks. So, I guess from 89 on down, we probably had the most blacks in the class. We were able to stick together for the most part, and not to say that we were very clique-ish, but we stuck together. But you still ventured out and you had to relate to other races obviously. Like I said, they were also within that pot of races that you have,

those that have those in different feelings on how you view things. But nobody ever approached me in that manner. It was a racial not like a race intensity, but it was a race pot that I was able to relate to all. You can put me, you know how if somebody who hadn't experienced being around or white people, they don't know how to relate or interact with, you can put me in any of those environments, and I'll be fine. You know, some people are just used to being around just black folks.

In his reflective journal, Steven went on to share:

... as I mentioned at Saints College Preparatory, I was able to form a bond a brotherhood with different races as we are still tight to this day.

Josiah did not share the same experiences at Metro Episcopal School. He was the only participant who attend there. He shared:

I didn't really feel like any race difference. There were no really race differences in Metro Episcopal School, at least emotionally. I was never outcasted or singled out or anything like that. Now, obviously, I know those private schools. It's not going to be many of us. And I know that, but I don't feel like me going through Metro Episcopal School, my race or anything had really any impact on my progression through Metro Episcopal School.

Theme 4 Influences of their Personal Community

The influencers that guided and support the participants educational experience were not limited to their immediate families. The participants found support from their personal communities which consisted of extended family, teachers, friends and community. The sub-themes are support of extended family, teacher support and influence and the influence of peers and mentors.

Support of Extended Family. Ronald and Steven specifically shared how the support of their extended family helped shape their educational journey. The extension of their immediate family to include grandparents, uncles and aunts provide a larger support system for their parents while also influencing their view of education.

Ronald had a large extended family led by their matriarch, his grandmother, who lived beyond 100 years old. He shared that the success of his family in business and politics set the tone of a higher expectation for the younger generations. He recalled:

That was always the motivation. And then my grandmother, she was amazing. She was always on land and real estate. And she taught me at a young age, don't worry about real estate, buy land. And I've always followed her path. But completely all the after success, I would attest to them that. But it was more the motivation. . . Everybody was really doing something entrepreneurial. My grandmother was a catering business. All my uncles and everybody was doing something independent-type businesswise. So that was always the motivation growing up, you saw all your uncles had some kind of a business. My dad always said, "Well, you can't fire me." When I got fired a couple of times, I lost a job, I'm like, "Yeah, I want to do what you're doing."

He went on to share:

Everybody was like, school or bus type thing. I went to high school, I went to college, and it was like a common thing. Everybody was the same theme, like with school are you going to go to, very education-oriented family and, you know, success. And we were like, as growing up, we were kind of always worried about coming to our family because we didn't want to be messed up because they would

call you out, and sometimes it would be necessary. But it was constructive criticism. So, you always like, I'm not going to mess up. I'm going to get my grades, right, because I'm not going around my uncles or aunts and be the one, they're going to call out and stuff. But that was kind of the whole mantra.

Steven recalled the consist support his family displayed throughout his youth. He stated:

And the rest of my family, they were very active in being whatever I was doing. They were very supportive. You would always see there was never a time in any basketball game or football game that somebody from my family wasn't there. So, they were very supportive, whether it be directly or indirectly, they were always supportive.

Teacher Support and Influence. The second sub-theme is experiences with teachers. For the majority of the participants, their experiences with their teachers were impactful. There were teachers that displayed varying methods of support ranging from classroom influence to outside of the classroom interaction that made their educational experience memorable.

Omar recalled his experiences at Saints College Preparatory, he stated:

In terms of other people that impacted me, I would say my middle school and high school chaplains and a few of my teachers. So, a few English teachers and then also sports coaches. the chaplains were influential in that they took time to know me as a person. And would often spend time with me in their offices talking about whether it was theology or just things with life. And so, they very much made me feel known. I would say the English teachers were influential because they not only showed me how to engage with literature, but also challenged me to

dive deep, explore nuance. And so that was I would say, more of an academic influence that has sparked a love for those sorts of things even now.

Kevin remembered the connections that went beyond the classroom. He shared:

My English teacher hasn't been to a high school basketball game in, like, 20 years, and he came out because he wanted to watch me and this other guy play. It didn't mean a lot to me, because it was like another guy in the stands. But to him, it was a lot. It indirectly meant a lot to me because it was like he hasn't been to a game in a while. My journalism teacher. He's always check up on me, ask me if I needed help on my other classes. And I think he did the best preparing me for the future because he looked out long term, I respect that.

Phillip shared about three teachers that impact lasted beyond the classroom. He stated:

Probably the most influential. I think on top of my head was my English teacher. He just forced me to think, focus on little details, and he was a tough grader. So, he made you want to shoot for the best of yourself and then probably my art teacher. I still stay in contact with her to this day. Kind of the same thing forces us to think outside the box, was really hands on, and everything. She made of readily available to us whenever we needed her. So those probably two teachers I see the most. I spent the most time with both of those.

He continued:

I'll probably one of the biggest influences of my high school football coach. He's also headed admission at the school at the time. That's one person I still talk to every day to this day, we coach together now. He's a big reason why I made decision to go to college. I did at the time, also. He always emphasized academics

for anything. And when we go to school, where he was in line with what I wanted to do, where I want to be at the school beyond football. He was always made available in school even after school. This first person I reached out to whenever I came back home. Also, because he was head of admissions, he was one guy I talked to since I was in middle school. So, his first point of contact in school and still one of the people that's still consistently there. Probably say one other person at the time, he's not there anymore. I think that he at Huguenot now. He was a big influence at the time, especially for the minority community there, Sargent Major Rogers. he also has the military program there at the time, I think we had a lot of kids coming because the Saints College Preparatory is a lot of kids come from parochial schools. So, they already know each other. But for most minorities there, they come from all over the city, even Chesterfield and Henrico, some kids, Varina. Sgt. Rogers kind of brought us all in together and kind of kept us all so we're not button heads, make sure we're on the same path and working together. Just so we're not the ones knocking each other down in the time we are there. I see it's probably one of the biggest influences just keeping us on page, being a big advocate, such for African American kids at school as well.

Josiah reflected on the influences his teachers had, stating:

I would say factors that have the most influence from school in particular, I would say, is the connections I was able to build with the teachers that I had while at Metro Episcopal School. The connections. It allowed me to become close with the teachers and actually build a relationship that carried on outside of the classroom.

And I feel like that's essential. Or it can be beneficial to help somebody progress in life.

So definitely the relationships I built with the teachers. It definitely motivated me, most definitely. More than I feel like I would have been motivated if I didn't have that aspect. All because the teachers there wanted to see me succeed. And I know you got the standard, oh yeah, teachers always want to see their students do well. But for me, I feel like that statement really held true given the relationships I was able to build. They really wanted to see me succeed in life.

Ronald shared:

I would say, Coach Arthur, he's an English teacher. He was good. A couple of guys I had good memories of, but he's still there now. I mean, he's been there forever, but he was an English teacher, so he got on me a lot. But I knew that after going through his class, it made me competitive and want to work harder.

Steven mentioned the same teacher, stating:

And then I would also let me see another coach, Coach Arthur. He was an algebra teacher. He was a really good guy, definitely a positive influence.

Cornelius told the story of a teachers that had a significant impact on him. He recalled:

So that's something that I have to shout this guy out. A brother named Bill Jones. He was the head of middle. When he first got there, he was just like an English teacher, but he ended up becoming a head of middle school. And when I first got to middle school at St. Paul's, I was having problems, not behavioral problems. Everybody loved me, everybody. That's probably the reason why I stayed. Because how our grade kind of jelled. But academically, I wasn't doing any work.

In my 7th grade year, he came, and he really started to put a fire under me to make me want more than make me want more for myself than what these other people want for me. He came from Baltimore. So, he was kind of Baltimore inner city. So, he was already kind of hip to how to deal with situations. I think the rest of the teachers at St. Paul's were kind of like, what are we doing here? He thoroughly got it at me. He would motivate me. Hey, you just get all Bs on your report, I will reward you. Something my mom may or may not have been able to afford. She was just doing what she could to do. But he took me to a UVA basketball game in middle school. I needed glasses. Him and his wife went and got me glasses; and a blazer of when I needed one to wear to Chapel and stuff. Actually, before he left Richmond, I got to tell him all of this. I got to tell him how pivotal he was for me, being successful and getting out St. Paul's.

Dwayne shared multiple teachers that were influential during his time in school. He stated:

So, I had a coach named Coach Brian Hill, who I used to be my wrestling partner, and I used to beat up on him in practice. Coach Little really the think about the future into my mind. Cause I was kind of a person who lived day by day. It was like, you got to know that there is tomorrow, too. It's not guaranteed, but you still got a plan for it to an extent. I had a coach named Coach Craig. He helped me with everything else as far as competition, sports in general. He helped me develop. I got injured my junior, sophomore, and freshman year of high school, so I didn't really have much to work off of to get a full scholarship, but I managed to get one in football in my senior year, so that's pretty hard to do off one year, but I

was able to do it. In the classroom, Mr. Fern helped me. He just helped me with real conversation. And then I say I had an art teacher who I enjoyed. She wasn't bad. I just like being in her class, really. I felt like that was like a getaway from everything else going on in that school. I feel like there's one other person in there, Coach Arthur. He was a hard teacher. Honestly, if I saw him in public, I don't know if I talked to him again, but I appreciate his class because it gave me the writing ability I have today, the clarity, the way to approach it, the way to give my work more of an emotional appeal. Just help me with that. I wouldn't talk to him if I saw him, probably. He was a good dude, though.

Influence of Peers and Mentors. The third sub-theme that was identified under the influences of their personal community theme was influence from others. Outside of family and teachers, participants shared individuals that had an influence on their educational journey. Participants noted relationships with their peers, parents of their peers and mentors that were significant.

During the group interviews, Omar shared the influence of his peers. He shared:

I would say, even at St. Paul's, specifically, the group of guys I hung around with, so they tended to be the highest achieving group in my grade. And in hindsight, I think that not only gave me the drive and some of the competition to do well academically, but then also some of the curiosity academically rubbed off on me from them, learning from their families, and then even thinking that going to prestigious schools or even having that as being in my option set of things that could happen in my future, I think were part of being with that specific group of guys versus if I had been with a different set of guys who may not have cared as

much, may have had some more of that family to fall back on in terms of what they're going to do jobwise after school, I may not have ended up in the same place.

Thomas shared the influences of his peers as well. He recalled:

Also, interestingly enough, there was a guy in my high school named Will Wolf. We were in the same class together. He really pushed me. So obviously, growing up a family where excellence is demanded. You need competition, right? Right. Competition for me. So, I was Valedictorian. He was salutatorian the difference in our GPAs went back to our freshman year, one class. I had taken an honors class, and he had taken, like, a standard class. But if you hadn't included that, we would have been the exact same straight A's from the beginning through all the way to graduating. So having somebody like him working at the same goal, we knew that we were competing against each other for the title of Valedictorian, and he said he didn't care as much as I did. Not going to lie, I cared. But he was like, oh, yeah, whatever.

Ronald shared:

And a lot of my friends from Saints College Preparatory, their families and the businesses they had. I didn't know they had businesses. And you realize later on, like, wow, friend of mine best Buddy's dad owns all the Arby's in Richmond, and they own the Wood lumber and stuff like that. Anyway, so that was great influence. But you realize that Saints College Preparatory, they had a lot of people that had a lot of local influence. So, they were all cool. We were all good friends. And then we had many respecting me because of who we were.

Cornelius identified his friend's father as an influential person. He stated:

To be completely honest, the majority of black males that came around me. So, for instance, when I was younger, I had this best friend. We hung out from preschool, probably until I went to St. Paul's. Every single week I went to his house. I learned a lot of things from his father, seeing the way his father moves, et cetera, et cetera. Once I got to St. Paul's Catholic School buddies that were in my class. Their fathers were successful. Black guys, really kind of trailblaze in the path of how to get it done properly. I'm into wisdom. So, I look at other people's mistakes and other people's success and try to fit and mold that to myself. So, I'm perpetually doing that.

He continued remembering another influential connection:

I'm not lying. A lot of these things just happen. There was nobody really steering. I did have one, buddy, this guy . . . I love him to death. He came to St. Paul's junior year, but the thing about him was his parents had money, but he was from up north where it's a little different. He would kind of be flashy with his money. But down here in the south turn people off a little bit to that. Let us just know you have money. Don't do it like that. But me and him just hit it off. And they weren't even about the money. We just hit it off. You know what I mean? We kicked it hard all junior and senior year. So, I mean to the point, school went on a Europe trip, and the school took 70 kids from our school went on this Europe trip. So, like, a few weeks later, Ted was like, hey, man, you want to go to Europe? I'm like, I don't got the money for no damn Europe trip. He was like; let me ask my dad, cool. And it was mini-mester. So next thing I know, I'm on a plane with him,

and his parents are going to spend, like, three weeks in Europe. But his dad was like, he was savvy if that makes sense. So, he would put us up on game. But, like, proper game. You know what I mean? Do it like this. Not like that. And I remember one time I was at his house and it was like, the summer after graduating, and he was like, ..., so what are you going to do? And I was like, well, I don't know, I'm just going to continue to freak it like, I've been freaking. Get up the next morning and put my shoes on and that's it. And he told me he said, ..., you got to have a plan. I took a step back like what do you mean? Like, you have to have a plan. You're destined to fail with no plan. And of course, I ain't really get it. You know what I'm saying? Whatever. But it never left me. I remember exactly where we were. I remember the exact situation. And from here on out, like, from the time that it clicked in me, that's what that was about. I always have a plan. I might always be reevaluating that plan to try to make it better because I'm an efficiency junkie. I got a plan. You know what I mean? I'm never going to anything willy nilly or dolo ever. Great, men. I was in a rut when I came out of Randolph Macon because I hated it. Ashland was just too small, and I had this whole, like, old school animal house college saying in my mind, and if a damn sure was not that. And I was in a rut, and they came in a town for something, and he saw me. He was like, Dude, it looked like, you need a break. He's like, man, come up to Maine and just come hang out for a little bit. So, I went up to Maine. They have a house in Pemiquette Harbor and just relax, breathe. Let that let all that crap go. And I mean, he had this little dock. It gave me, like, \$1,000 to paint this dock, which I did in, like, 4 hours. You know what I

mean? But it was more like, here's a boost go. He actually paid for me to go to Baton Rouge because I didn't have anything. I literally was like, look, this is a plan I put together. I'm going to go from here, and he was like, what do you need? Mail me a check. I packed a little bit of things I had and moved in a Baton Rouget. So, yeah, got a shout out both of them.

Steven, recalled the experience of having mentors and participating in a community-based program. He stated:

I had a lot of good positive mentors around me. I went to the Boy's Club. The Boy's Club is now called the Boys and Girls Club, but it was the Boy's Club back then and had a lot of friends and participated in a lot of sports.

Theme 5 Impactful Experiences

The fifth identified theme was impactful experiences. The participants shared events or experiences that affect their parents or personal community that had an impact on their educational experience. The sub-themes that were identified under this theme are significant events and significant family events.

Significant Events. This sub-theme consists of significant events that occurred outside of the participants' family but had an impact on their educational experience. Only three participants were able to recall significant events that occurred during their time in school.

Phillip shared an experience of one of his close friends. He stated:

I think it's like knowing my mom teaches at one of Richmond Public schools and just hearing some of the stories about at the time the school is one of the more troublesome schools, George Wythe High School. And just hearing some of the stories about some of our students and how they turned out. I remember when I

was in middle school, also one of my best friends. He got expelled, spent some time outside of school, and I kind of almost like a fear factor, you know, not going that route, trying to do the opposite of what they were doing. So, I feel like that probably had a big impact than I thought it did at the time.

Ronald had a traumatic experience that happened to one of his peers and their families.

He shared:

And then negative was like when I played tennis and my tennis partner, his mom and dad, they all got killed in a car accident. So that was huge. So that was like a huge traumatic moment. I stopped playing tennis after that. And so, I was probably playing College. But that kind of had a huge impact on me. Overall, though, it was good. I mean, those are the prior two experiences that I can look at.

Steven shared about an event that occurred at the school which impacted not only him but the entire school. He stated:

Another experience we had was in the class of 89. We consider ourselves the last class of the OBC, and that means our school got caught on fire my freshman year. I think it was probably in January. Old boiler got set on fire, and pretty much the whole academic side got set on fire. The gym and the athletic office and all of that stuff was fine. So, you can imagine we're out of school for a couple of weeks, but we ended up going to school in trailers in the back of the Fine Arts Museum before all that stuff that they have now, the whole parking lot was filled with trailers. We were going to school in trailers. And just to have that experience that brought us together closer.

Significant Family Events. This sub-theme captured events that occurred to the participant immediate family or personal community which had an impact on their educational experience. Two of the participants shared experiences relative to this sub-theme.

Ronald shared an accomplishment of his fathers that occurred while he was in school. He stated:

Well, I guess positive wise. That was when my dad was, like, '87 so, he had just become a Senator. So just that was like a great time period. And then this is a motivating factor for me because it's like, wow, I was exposed to things that even the white cats weren't exposed to from political stuff. So that was huge. But he's already into politics in '77. So, I was exposed to it already. But I think that was another level.

Cornelius shared an experience that happened to his mother and the entire family as she was trying to turn things around for them. He shared:

So, 10th grade year, I'm sorry, 9th grade year. The whole big buzz was this big term paper that was happening when you walked in the 9th grade year. We had trimesters. So, the first trimester was like, you did your exams, but the whole second trimester was just predicated about this term paper. And it caused every 9th grade that came through St. Paul's anxiety. For whatever reason, at this time, I'm willing to get a great jump on this. I'm trying to crush this term pay was set this year off, right. We go down to Charlotte. My sister was living in Charlotte at that time. She had my niece, and at that time, my mom was trying to move out of Gilpin Court. She was trying to buy a house over in the East End, whatever. But what she was doing was she was buying stuff for the house, and she was putting it

in the apartment. So, we leave to go out of town. And something was like, I don't know about this, it didn't feel right. Long story short, we walk in whole house, flipped and robbed. But the work I needed to do for the term paper was due in a week or two because it was over Christmas break, but we didn't have any TVs, any of these VCRs, anything in there. So, it's just like this whole heap of mess. But the irony is, I took that and busted out. Probably the best paper I've ever written in my life. It wasn't the actual term paper. It was the pre stuff to the term paper. But still, I remember taking 30 pages of notes, something I never done before. You know what I mean? It actually had polar opposite effect, but that is something that I would say probably traumatized to both of us. Yeah, that was a major one. On a different note, on a more like metaphysical note, it snatched the hope and you could feel it. You know what I mean? It really was like, all right, I'm getting out of there. I got my business going. We're doing well. I'm finally going to get back on my feet from the Phillip Morris thing, and then it happens. But I remember feeling that as a young kid, I didn't know exactly what it was. I think, a lot. And that's something that I definitely rocked all of us.

Unexpected Codes

One particular unexpected code that was identified in the data was academic quality. It does not relate specifically to one of the research questions but provides useful data regarding the participants experiences at their schools.

Academic Quality. The participants shared in their individual interviews and reflective journals about factors that contributed to their academic success in which they identified the quality of education they received at their respective schools.

Omar provided his perspective of the academic quality of the school in his individual interview. He stated:

Academically, it was more rigorous than the public schools I had gone to before going to St. Paul's, which is why my parents sent me there. So, I got more opportunities in that sense. I also liked the fact that there was a big emphasis on teaching on integrity

In his reflection, he shared further stating:

Throughout my time, I benefited from a culture of academic and ethical excellence. Academically, the school assumed my classmates and I were capable of complex and nuanced thinking. As a result, I remember being encouraged to not just learn to pass a test, but to engage in my education with curiosity. In particular, I have fond memories of staying after class to discuss World War 2 with my history teacher or popping by my literature teacher's room to discuss the poetic, moral, and theological implications of John Milton's Paradise Lost. The assumption that we all were academically capable did a lot to build my self-image as an intellectually gifted and curious person – traits I still value to this day. Ethically, the school emphasized personal honor and integrity above all else. This emphasis on integrity helped me navigate both college and work in a way that I can be proud of.

Kevin reflected on the preparation that Saints College Preparatory provided him for college. He shared:

I think it would just kind of depend because I'd say the Saints College Preparatory definitely offers more. It was more college, like it was really prepping me for this

when I came in here. I definitely can say I was more prepared for it. But I feel like that was the only difference. Just feeling more prepared for college really.

Phillip shared his perspective on the benefits he experienced. He stated:

I definitely think the classroom size has helped out a lot because you didn't have a relationship with a teacher. You kind of work with each other as well. We only had 13, maybe topped out of 18 kids in the classroom. If you fell behind, it was pretty noticeable. So, we all kind of did a good job picking each other up. Like if you have questions, you ask questions. It started a little rough, especially your first year, because like I said, kids come from all over the place, different school systems, different programs and everything. So just kind of getting everybody to catch up, catch pace and everything in the first year or so. Probably the most challenging year for a lot of kids.

Josiah discussed the additional support he was provided. He shared:

So, then it's like I have more opportunities at a private high school because prime example, I could go to the Arc and get extra help. I could go to these teachers one on one because the class size is smaller and they more than likely. I'm not going to say that, but they might care about your level of education and your success level. You know what I'm saying, being at a private school rather than just being at a public school. So, I would say it definitely is differences that I was aware of making that transition

Thomas shared his reflection on the academic quality at Flagship Christian School. He stated:

Flagship Christian School is a plus academically, and it was the thing that I looked back. They taught us really, like, how to study, how to prepare, and they made it like, okay, yeah, we don't care if you play a sport. We don't care if you do this. We still expect this level of academic output for you to do well in these classes and transferring into college. I felt like my freshman year and sophomore year of college was like a walk in the park. And while a lot of people were overcoming that curve of, oh, man, this is different than what I'm used to.

Ronald shared his viewpoint on the academic program at Saints College Preparatory. He stated:

And always attest Saints College Preparatory like the academic regiment. I wouldn't like the A student. I was like the C student, but the discipline I got from the educational side that definitely transferred over to college. I was prepared, basically. My grades didn't really show it sometimes in high school. But when I got to college, it was kind of an easy transition for me. I didn't really have a struggle...But I think the faith-based structure, academically foundation wise, the small classroom, that one on one little more attention.

Isaiah found the work to be more challenging. He stated:

It forced me to work harder than I would have normally had to had I attended the local public school. Sure, kids in the public school have the ability to do more work than kids in St. Paul's. However, the classes at St. Paul's were such that the baseline knowledge was extremely high. We were all in advanced classes and it prepared us for college

Dwayne briefly stated:

Saints College Preparatory was on a higher grading scale and their classes were hard.

Table 2*Number of Codes Across Data Sets*

Themes	Open-Codes	Enumeration
Influences of their Personal Community	Immediate Family Support	53
	Family Involvement with Education	19
	Family Expectations	5
	Sibling Influence	2
	Extended Family Support	6
	Teacher Support and Influence	30
	Influence and Support Outside of Teachers and Family	17
Parental Support of Education	Parental Expectations	24
	Parental Financial Support	9
	Cost of Tuition	5
	Parental Support through Sports	2
	Example Set by Parents	2
	Parental Direct Involvement at School	8
Cultural Impact	Culture Experiences	71
	Socio-Economic Differences	12
	Racial Experiences	14
	Cultural Differences	8
	School Culture Influences	6
	Sports	24
	Extracurricular Influence or Lack of	3
Religious Influences	Religion Experiences	71
	Religious Influences in School	33
	Religious Influences in Personal Life	15
Impactful Experiences	Impactful Experiences during School	13
	Contributing Factors Success/Path after School	4
	Experiences of a Family Member	2
	Experiences after School	14
Unexpected	Academic Quality	23

Note. This table provides an enumeration of the codes across data sets and their grouping as it relates to the themes.

Research Question Responses

Individual interviews questions, focus group interview questions and reflective journal responses were used to collect data to answer the four research questions for this study. The questions and essay topics were aligned to specific research questions thus organizing the data in a way to allow the data collected to be analyzed. The responses to the questions were organized into themes during the data analysis process. Participant quotes are used to support the themes and answer the research questions.

Research Question One

The first research question examined the influences from their immediate environment that impacted their educational experiences. The participants defined their immediate environment in relation to people who influenced their educational experiences. Those influencers included their parents, extended family teachers, friends, friend's parents, mentors and sports. The related themes and sub-themes include parental expectations, support of extended family, teacher support and influence and influence of peers and mentors.

Parental Expectations. During their individual interviews, participants were asked to describe their family's involvement in their educational journey and share the people who were most influential during their journey. Regardless of whether the participant was raised in a single to two-parent household, parents were reported as the most influential people from the participants immediate environment.

Omar said, "I would say the general expectation and desire of my family that I would not only do well in school but be able to go to a highly ranked college afterwards." When the questions were posed to them, Participants 2, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10 noted both their mother and father

were their main influencers. Josiah said, “Mom and dad both heavily pushed me to excel in school, and I have no other option to succeed.”

In some instances, the participants noted that their parent or parents were also educators. Both Participants 2 and 10 shared that both parents were educators or taught at their school. In his interview, Isaiah stated, “Both my parents are heavy into education. My mother is an English teacher 35 years. My father taught swimming and life guarding for equally long. They were all about a good education.” Phillip, whose mother is an educator as well said:

she always pressed me in the classroom and everything, so did my dad. In high school, they kind of left up to me. I grew up pretty independent, so I was always pretty driven and pretty competitive. I guess, just from being an athlete and also bringing it to the classroom as well, which helped out. I was pretty heavy in sports, and my dad wouldn't let me play anything that's had good grades. So that was the driving force as well. Just being making sure I stay eligible and just trying to compete to be the best of my class as well.

Cornelius was raised by a single parent. He felt that his mother wasn't knowledgeable enough to truly support in the way that he may have needed. He stated:

I can't put the onus on my mother for not being there because she needed to provide. Looking back on it, I remember when I was looking at colleges to go to, and I was kind of like, hey, ma, what do you think? She was kind of like, well, I don't know just kind of figure it out. It was kind of discouraging, and I haven't forgotten that. But in hindsight, I understand her position where she was at that time. It was just kind of like, hey, you've gone this far. Just go ahead and carry it on. God, I'll take you through. I do wish I had a little more.

Kevin felt like his parents trusted him to perform well, so they lessened their involvement in those instances. He said:

It was mostly my mom academic for academics. She just told me. We were laid back because they know my grades were well anyway. Its kind of was mostly on me, really. Because they had the trust in me because they knew I was going to do well and I was doing well. So, it wasn't really nothing crazy. If it was bad grades and then they would be more involved in it. But they weren't really that involved. They had to trust me to do well.

Thomas said:

My family was heavily involved in my educational journey. my parents wanted to know what grades we got and what classes. My mom, I remember she was adamant about we would go to, like, the learning store or something, and they're always, like, prep books for the next grade. My family has always been heavily involved in our academic success and making sure we worked hard. Like I said, my family environment was, we love you, but we expect the best of you. And with that being, like, the understanding, I think that is the biggest factor that drove me to do well.

Support of Extended Family. Participants 5, 6 and 9 reported that their family outside of their parents were also influential to their educational experience. Coming from a large family, Ronald noted that collectively education and success were part of the norm for the family. He said:

Big family. It was a fantastic life growing up, in a sense, like with five uncles, two aunts. So, everybody had kids. So, we grew up at my grandma's house. So that

kept us in line and focused. And then we always around our uncles who were successful, more or less, doing things very progressive. And in my immediate family had the same thing, my dad. So, everybody was like, wanted to be successful or at least make a difference in some capacity. And growing up in a family like mine were very service oriented. My grandfather was a caterer. My grandmother had a big catering company in the 40s and 50s. So, my grandma was like the matriarch of the family. So, she actually kind of guiding p principles on just how to be on land on your own business. And she lived to be 102. So, she passed that on to her children and, who are my uncles. So that was like a huge part of it. And then just as I got older, those principles of working hard and earning something has been an ongoing entrepreneurial mentality, because all my uncles basically have their own business or some capacity. My grandmother owned business. So that entrepreneurial spirit was always like, innate in me. . . My uncles, everybody was with the College, everybody with some professional aspect of life. And so, it's like we're always, like, in a high achievement mentality

Steven shared how his grandparents were supportive of him especially with helping take care of him to assist his mother as she continued her education. There was also support from his extended family. He said:

My grandparents on my dad's side were very involved in my life. Actually, they told my mom to go back and finish school, and they kept me for my first year. My first year, they kept me while she went back to school. So, they were very supportive. On my dad's side, he had four other brothers and I have uncle that I was very close to. And then on my mother's side, both sides were very supportive.

My grandparents, my great grandmother on my mother's side, as well as my uncles and cousins and all of that good stuff. So, for me, being the only child with my mother. I do have two younger brothers, that was from my dad and my stepmother. But I got to experience being not only a kid, but I was involved in a lot of things, a lot of good positive things.

Dwayne looked at his older brother as one of his influencers. He said, “My big brother. He's the one who motivated me to like places I could land, places I could see.”

Teacher Support and Influence. Teachers and coaches were also reported as influencer by most of the participants. The connections and relationships established in and beyond the classroom had an impact on their educational experience.

Omar briefly shared, “In terms of other people that impacted me, I would say my middle school and high school chaplains and a few of my teachers. So, a few English teachers and then also sports coaches.”

The head of middle school made a connection with Cornelius encouraging him to improve academically. He said, “English teacher who ending up becoming head of the middle school, he really started to put a fire under me to make me want more than make me want more for myself than what these other people want for me. He thoroughly got it at me. He would motivate me.” Small gestures such as rewarding Cornelius for good grades, purchasing glasses for him and a blazer for chapel had a lasting effect as well.

Phillip and Ronald shared memories of English teachers that were influential to them. Phillip said:

Probably the most influential. I think on top of my head was my English teacher. He just forced me to think, focus on little details, and he was a tough grader. So,

he made you want to shoot for the best of yourself and then probably my art teacher. I still stay in contact with her to this day. Kind of the same thing forces us to think outside the box, was really hands on, and everything. She made of readily available to us whenever we needed her.

Steven described his teachers as supportive and invested. He stated:

Then you have the support back in high school, I had the support of those coaches making sure that I'm doing what I'm supposed to do. And then you have those particular teachers that were also invested as well. Coach Smith, he was my geometry teacher, and I never failed a class in my life. And when I got the Saints College Preparatory, this was my sophomore year, I failed geometry. Not under him, but under another teacher. And then, just like we have kids today, you can learn certain teachers can adapt. You can learn from teachers in different ways. The same class one guy taught, I didn't get it, but the same class another guy taught, it was easy as pie. So, he was a basketball coach, but he really took the time and he was a really good dude overall. And then I would also let me see another coach, Coach Arthur. He was an algebra teacher. He was a really good guy, definitely a positive influence. And of course, my head coach, he was a really good guy. Coach Ridge, they had the gym name after him and the gym floor and all that good stuff. He was a really good ole dude. They've all had a positive influence on me.

During his individual interview, Josiah reflected on the importance of the connections he had with his teachers. He shared:

I would say factors that have the most influence from school in particular, I would say, is the connections I was able to build with the teachers that I had while at Metro Episcopal School. The connections. It allowed me to become close with the teachers and actually build a relationship that carried on outside of the classroom. And I feel like that's essential. Or it can be beneficial to help somebody progress in life.

Influence of Peers and Mentors. In the study, participants shared that their peers and other mentor influenced their educational experience. Participants 1, 2 and 10 felt their peers pushed them to excel. Omar said, “the students that I liked to hang out with were some of the high achieving students. And so, there was a general sense of striving to be high achieving within that group without necessarily feeling competition.” Isaiah shared a similar sentiment when asked who is influencers were. He stated, “My contemporaries had the greatest impact on me along the way. The kids I went to school with, kids I went to college with, higher thinkers my own age. I like thinkers. My friends inspire me. Sure, there were other influences but none like the students around me doing higher level stuff.”

Thomas shared a story of a specific peer who he felt pushed him through competition to earn the highest grades. He shared:

There was a guy in my high school named Billy Jackson. We were in the same class together. He really pushed me. So obviously, growing up a family where excellence is demanded. You need competition, right? Right. Competition for me. So, I was Valedictorian. He was salutatorian the difference in our GPAs went back to our freshman year, one class.

Participants 3, 5 and 6 spoke of the influences of adult mentors or their friend's parents.

Steven was a part of the Boy's Club. He said:

I had a lot of good positive mentors around me. I went to the Boys Club. The Boy's Club is now called the Boys and Girls Club, but it was the Boys Club back then and had a lot of friends and participated in a lot of sports.

Raised by a single mother, Cornelius was able to find a connection with his friend's father. He used his interactions with adult black males to create his own guide to success. He shared:

The majority of black males that came around me. So, for instance, when I was younger, I had this best friend. We hung out from preschool, probably until I went to St. Paul's. Every single week I went to his house. I learned a lot of things from his father, seeing the way his father moves, et cetera, et cetera. Once I got to St. Paul's, buddies that were in my class. Their fathers were successful. Black guys, really kind of trailblaze in the path of how to get it done properly. I'm into wisdom. So, I look at other people's mistakes and other people's success and try to fit and mold that to myself.

Ronald noticed that many of his friend's families owned businesses around the city. Something that was familiar coming from a family of entrepreneurs. He found that to be a great influence. He said:

And a lot of my friends from Saints College Preparatory, their families and the businesses they had. I didn't know they had businesses. And you realize later on, like, wow, friend of mine best Buddy's dad owns all the Arby's in Richmond, and

they own the Wood lumber and stuff like that. Anyway, so that was great influence.

Sports. Most participants played sports such as basketball, football, lacrosse and track for their respective schools. While many of them mentioned their coaches as influencers, Dwayne and 10 shared that playing the sport itself motivated them to perform well academically.

Dwayne said:

Sports kind of helped me with school work. They (parents) supported me through sports. I remember one time the teachers didn't really update grades by the day. My parents wanted me to get better grades. I was telling them I'm doing everything I'm supposed to do, but these grades aren't getting updated by them. My work is through. So, they took me out of football and around that time, it was a pivotal moment because College coaches were coming around. That's really the only hiccup, I'd say.

Thomas stated:

The fact that I was a lacrosse player was a big drive for me to do well. Academically lacrosse was kind of like, my first love sport. I played baseball. I play basketball and stuff. And I was like, but when I found lacrosse in, like, 6th, 7th grade, I was like, this is a sport I want to play.

Research Question Two

The second research question examined the relationships between the identified influencers in their immediate environment and their school environment. In the individual interviews, participants were asked to describe the extent of their parent's interactions with school, relationship with their teachers, and the impact of either. In the focus group interview,

participants were asked to share the level of support received from their family. The sub-themes that were identified from their responses were parental involvement and parental financial support. This sub-theme not only encompasses parental involvement but includes the parent-teacher relationship.

Parental involvement in school. During the individual and focus group interviews, participants shared the level of involvement their parents had with their schools. The level of parental involvement varied by participant. Some parents were extremely involved where as they volunteered or taught at the school. In other instances, the involvement was much less based on availability or promoting independence. Most of the participants that discussed sports, shared that their parents attended most or all of their games.

Omar shared that his parents' involvement in school was limited to attending parent-teacher conferences and sports. He said:

They mainly would come to the most important sporting events, so they would come to every sporting event, maybe one or two per season. And I would say that was probably it. So, they weren't extensively interacting with the whole community. There might be a few events for parents, maybe one or two per year that they would attend. But that was about it.

He went on to that his parents' relationship with teachers was limited to parent teacher conferences. He said, "there wasn't really much of an interaction."

The parents of Isaiah were involved in all school related events and sports events. He said, "They participated in everything. As far back as it goes. . .they were there." He went on to describe the relationship between his parents and his teachers, stating it was, "...always cordial

and professional. My parents did a great job of being there quietly so they allowed me to find my way.”

Cornelius attributed his mother’s inability to be involved to the challenges and responsibilities she had to provide for them financially. He shared:

My mom gave all she could. She worked like, two, three jobs when I was at school, you know what I'm saying? She did all she could. But she really stayed on me because I think she saw how important it was, and I was at that age where I could start doing real bad outside. You know what I mean? So, it's one of them things. But she was like, you really need to stick with this and stay after that.

The parent-teacher relationship was present according to Cornelius, he stated:

Well, my mom cleaned some of the teacher's houses, which was kind of funny. So, she knew some of them. They were frequent meetings about me not doing X, Y and Z, so she knew them. They were very patient with her. Well, with me, but she was very patient. As I said, she was just the kind of woman like, hey, I got him here, and I'm just going to try to carry on through. She wasn't really involved, involved.

Saints College Preparatory was a new experience for Phillip’s parents, so they were involved in everything from sports to PTA. He also shared that because of their level of involvement they established good relationships with the teachers and other parents.

Ronald shared that his parents were also very involved attending. He said they attended “PTAs and all the teacher conferences and stuff.” He continued, stating:

They were always engaged in what's going on? And, like I said, never had a lot of negative encounters. It was just kind of a study you go, my parents, they were

active. They were involved. But my dad, he had the influence of just being a politician. And then they kind of make sure that. But they never gave me favors or anything. I didn't pass you because of who you were type thing, right. But they were always involved, and we always were communicating. We always communicated, me and my mom mainly about just what's going on and what happened at school and all that kind of stuff. So, it was always a good fluidity with what's going on? So, yeah, it was good.

Steven described his mother and extended family's involvement with school, stating:

I'll tell you; my mother was very active. She my senior year, we have this Christmas tournament called the Saints College Preparatory City Capital Classic. She was the first black woman to be the vice chair of the tournament. She's always been active in everything. And as far as me being at Saints College Preparatory, very active and supportive, she's definitely more hands on. And the rest of my family, they were very active in being whatever I was doing. They were very supportive. You would always see there was never a time in any basketball game or football game that somebody from my family wasn't there. So, they were very supportive, whether it be directly or indirectly, they were always supportive. But my mom, she definitely got a hands-on person.

His mother's relationship with the teachers was just as engaging. He described it as:

She was a don't play mom. I didn't have no problem with teachers calling her because I knew how the end game could have been. So, she was very open and she's like, hey, this is my number. Have any problems, give me a call and we can take care of it right then and there no problem. We didn't have any problem. No

teachers had to call home. But she was definitely involved in engaged without question. It wasn't you fending for yourself, you on your own. But she knew that. And I knew if I wanted to continue to play sports, this, that and the other, I had to take care of business. But she was there when I needed, so I wasn't on my own on that part. It kept me focused. It's one of those things where you ain't going to act up because you know what the possibilities are. That's how she was with me being in school in general, even through grade school, that's how she was. So, her being involved was very important. The way she carried it in grade school, she didn't play the way she carried it in high school. She stayed on it. And even to the point where some things were with high school, in high school started to be more independent on things. I got to study thing down, pack. I'm good. She tried to pitch in and see what I'm doing every now and then, but she was always there in case I needed them. So, I was never left out there by myself. Even as I grew up, she was not more directly involved, but she was still there indirectly when I needed her. She is the rock, she's the one that was holding it down.

Saints College Preparatory was unfamiliar to Kevin's parents, so they attended the parent-teacher conferences to familiarize themselves with the school. They also attended all of the home basketball games. The distance to the away games did not work well with their work schedules.

Since Kevin did not present any academic or behavior issues for his parents, the relationships with the teachers did not go beyond the initial meetings or conferences.

Josiah's parent involvement lessened as he transitioned from middle to high school. He explained it as:

I would say the majority of the involvement that they had was more of, like the education standpoint, making sure I was on my grades and all my material. One thing I would say that kind of decreased as I went to high school was their involvement to the point where it's like, you're in high school. Now you need to start making your own decision. So basically, they had a little less involvement in high school, aside from the education standpoint in comparison to how I was in middle school. In middle school, my parents were in the front office working or volunteering just so she could be in the school environment and not oversee. But basically, if I got my mom in the front office, volunteering working, it's a different tone. But I guess going into high school, her doing that going on through middle school, like, I set the tone. So, their level of involvement wasn't as large outside of the education standpoint of high school.

His mother was certain to keep a relationship with his teacher, he recalled. He stated:

In particular, because my mom handles school work. My mom was always involved with the teachers, and the teachers admired her level of involvement with my grades and how well I was performing in the classroom. And the teachers could respect the level of involvement that a parent would show in regards to their kids.

Dwayne's parents were active. They attended parent-teacher conference. His dad attended every football game.

Thomas's parents were extremely involved with the school. During his individual interview, he shared:

So, my family was incredibly active with school. Like I said, through the interview process. Of course, you don't have a choice but to be active. But even after that. So, my mom teaches at school now, to give you an idea of how much they love it. But even before that, my mom was always a room mom. Whether it be for my class, it switched out every year. She'd be a room mom for my class and my sister's class and my brother's class. I don't know how exactly it worked, but she was always somebody's room mom. My dad, we had this thing called CLC. I can't even remember what it stands for. But it was like a Wednesday group where instead of every individual grade having their own Bible classes, it was like all the lower school, all middle school, all of high school gathered and had, like, a big one together. And my dad taught that every couple of weeks or something like that, so very much involved in that regard. And then even outside of just like academics during the day, my brother, my sister and I all were part of the drama team and stuff like that. So, we all showed up early and did announcements and stuff like that, stayed late and went to play practice and whatnot. What else did we do? And then also, anytime there was like, a school sponsored event like, oh, everybody's going to this, everybody's going to that. We were there. Of course, homecoming, a lot of times we were playing in the games, too. But even after I graduated, I would go back to those when I was still in Virginia and whatnot. So, yeah, very much involved with the school. I definitely think it made it better.

Parental Financial Support. The financial obligation associated with private schools can be challenging for some families. Some of the participants perceived meeting this obligation and a form of support their education. In the focus group interviews, Omar noted in his response

that the financial support his parents provided was the primary support his family provided. He shared:

I'll just add that my family supported me, particularly financially. St. Paul's Catholic School is not cheap, I'm sure as Chris knows. My parents moved hell and high water to make sure that I could go to the school and school fees being paid when I could have just gone to public school, been a lot cheaper. I would say that was probably the main way that they supported my education.

Research Question Three

The third research question examined outside factors such as impactful experiences or events that effected their family or personal community and had an impact the participants' educational experience. The participants reported deaths of peers, academic penalties that peers faced, school fires, burglarized home and political advancement of a parent.

Significant Events. When asked to share significant events that had an indirect impact on your parents or siblings, some participant shared experiences that impacted their personal community. Ronald recalled a traumatic loss of his tennis partner and their family in a car accident. The event led him to lose the desire to continue to play tennis which he felt he would have played through college. He said, "I stopped playing tennis after that. And so, I was probably playing College. But that kind of had a huge impact on me."

When the question was presented to share about their overall experience at school Steven, he shared about a devastating fire that occurred at the school. Based on the nature of the story, it was coded under impactful experiences. The fire destroyed the side of the school leaving his class to work out of trailers the school obtained. The significance is that he said, "And just to have that experience that brought us together closer."

Phillip discussed two events that as he described, “probably had a bigger impact than I thought it did at the time”. His mother was an educator in an inner-city school, which he described as “a troublesome school”. He went on to say, “And just hearing some of the stories about some of our students and how they turned out”. The second event that he mentioned, was about one of his close friends being expelled. He recalled:

I remember when I was in middle school, also one of my best friends. He got expelled, spent some time outside of school, and I kind of almost like a fear factor, you know, not going that route, trying to do the opposite of what they were doing.

Significant Family Events. In contrast to such a negative experience that affected Ronald’s personal community, he shared a positive experience that happened to his father. His stated:

Well, I guess positive wise. That was when my dad was, like, '87 so, he had just become a Senator. So just that was like a great time period. And then this is a motivating factor for me because it's like, wow, I was exposed to things that even the white cats weren't exposed to from political stuff. So that was huge. But he's already into politics in '77. So, I was exposed to it already. But I think that was another level.

Cornelius was raised by a single mother who fell on hard times after losing her job in the tobacco plant. He described the transition, stating:

The family had to move from the suburbs to the housing projects. suburban house to part of projects, like, in the middle of the projects, too. Not even like not even

on the outside. You know what I mean? Like, smack in the middle. It was something that definitely changed both of our perspective on life.

When he got to his ninth-grade year, his mother was trying to move from the housing projects to a house. In that moment their home was burglarized and the items she bought for the move were stolen. During the same time, he had a major academic paper due, so the burglary became even more significant. He shared the story, stating:

So, 10th grade year, I'm sorry, 9th grade year. The whole big buzz was this big term paper that was happening when you walked in the 9th grade year. We had trimesters. So, the first trimester was like, you did your exams, but the whole second trimester was just predicated about this term paper. And it caused every 9th grade that came through St. Paul's anxiety. For whatever reason, at this time, I'm willing to get a great jump on this. I'm trying to crush this term pay was set this year off, right. We go down to Charlotte. My sister was living in Charlotte at that time. She had my niece, and at that time, my mom was trying to move out of Gilpin Court. She was trying to buy a house over in the East End, whatever. But what she was doing was she was buying stuff for the house, and she was putting it in the apartment. So, we leave to go out of town. And something was like, I don't know about this, it didn't feel right. Long story short, we walk in whole house, flipped and robbed. But the work I needed to do for the term paper was due in a week or two because it was over Christmas break, but we didn't have any TVs, any of these VCRs, anything in there. So, it's just like this whole heap of mess. But the irony is, I took that and busted out. Probably the best paper I've ever written in my life. It wasn't the actual term paper. It was the pre stuff to the term

paper. But still, I remember taking 30 pages of notes, something I never done before. You know what I mean? It actually had polar opposite effect, but that is something that I would say probably traumatized to both of us. Yeah, that was a major one. On a different note, on a more like metaphysical note, it snatched the hope and you could feel it. You know what I mean? It really was like, all right, I'm getting out of there. I got my business going. We're doing well. I'm finally going to get back on my feet from the Phillip Morris thing, and then it happens. But I remember feeling that as a young kid, I didn't know exactly what it was. I think, a lot. And that's something that I definitely rocked all of us.

Research Question Four

The fourth research question examined the religious or cultural influences in their personal life and in school in relation to the impact on their educational experience. Two themes were identified from the data. The first was religious influences which had two sub-themes: personal religion and faith and religious influences from school. The second theme was cultural impact which had three sub-themes: socio-economic differences, school culture influences and racially based experiences.

Religious Influences. The sub-themes that were identified from this theme included religious influences from school and personal religion and faith. Since all of the schools were faith-based, the religious influence on education was an important experience to explore.

Personal Religion and Faith. The personal religious affiliation, experiences, and faith of the participants was shared during the individual and focus group interviews. Collectively the participants practice Christianity, Catholicism, Baptist, Charismatic Christianity and personal spirituality. Through their interview responses they shared their personal religious journey.

In his interview, Thomas shared:

So, my religious background grew up in a Christian family. My family was very active in the Church. Growing up, we were the type of family to be there Sundays. We would be there Wednesday night for service, and then if there were any weekend events, of course, we'd be there for that, too...That's the way that it always has been for me and my family. My dad was always really adamant about us being in Church. And of course, so was my mom. But I remember my dad vocalizing it more than anybody else. So, yeah, it was not even a question. Are we going to Church? Unless there was some sort of groundbreaking, like, if there was a tournament, like in another city that we were going to, that would be the only excuse that we were missing Church...And Flagship Christian School in my mind, they did praise and worship for the student body every single morning. And I saw a lot of that reflected in the same type of songs, the same things that they would talk about in those gatherings would be the same things that I would see at church.

Cornelius did not identify a specific religious affiliation but shared his beliefs through this statement:

I think like both of the gentleman before me said, I think the number one thing was definitely my relationship with the Lord. And I think looking back on a lot of things that ended up happening in my life, there were things that I prayed for, didn't know that they would necessarily happen, and they ended up happening. And I got a lot more out of it than I would have if I had done it the way that I thought initially I would get there.

He went on to say:

Honestly, it's been God. Sometimes I look back and I'm like, "How did you do this whole little St. Paul's scenario? If I knew what I do now, there is no way I could have done that. You know what I'm saying? But that was a blessing.

Kevin briefly shared his family's religious practices, stating, "I'd say all of us are Christian. We don't attend Church that much. Not that much. Not at all anymore."

Phillip, who grew up Southern Baptist, spoke to his faith specifically. He said, "Definitely relied on my faith, I know things seem hard or things seem like I couldn't do it. I knew I could rely on my faith to kind of push me through."

Ronald was raised in a Catholic family and attended Catholic schools throughout his educational journey. He shared his background stating:

Born Catholic. So I went to the whole Catholic process, with my brother and sister. And then my mom was a devout Catholic so, she wanted us to go to Catholic school. So, we're about going to a private school is because of her being Catholic and my grandmother's Catholic. So that was just the path. But my dad was Baptist, so we always wanted to get the spiritual side. We go to the Baptist Church. And so, I love that too and stuff. So, I got the best of both worlds on that.

In response to another related questions, Ronald continued to share about his personal religion and experience in school stating:

I was an altar boy and all that kind of the processes in the Church. And then we have Mass, like, once a week. So, it's kind of normal routine, for Saints College Preparatory. It was kind of like an easy fix, wasn't like an overwhelming experience. But it was good, easy transition.

Religious Influences from School. The participants provided their religious experiences related to school. In some instance, the religious customs and practices were unfamiliar to them. However, for Participants 5, 6, and 10 who shared the same personal religion as their respective schools' religious association it was a continuation of their norm.

Steven shared his experiences with the religious aspects of the school. He stated:

The monks, they were the religion teachers and they were definitely strict, but they provided good messages. They were stern and they gave good messages that we can adjust and adapt in life lessons. They gave those type of lessons.

Experiences, you know we continue to have Communion. And like you said, the Chapel, whether you're a Catholic or not, you still have to be a part of that. And that was a part of going to a catholic school. And like I said, if it was somebody who hadn't gone to a Catholic school prior to Saints College Preparatory, then I would be something completely new for them. But if it's a Catholic, going into another Catholic school, it's just like a transition and a continuation of what you already been doing.

He went on to provide his view on the benefits of attending a faith-based school. He responded:

Well, structure once again, and you're able to learn about yourself, faith based. You're learning about yourself. You're learning about how you can learn about other people. You're learning about the word of God. You're learning about how the word of God can relate to you in everyday life. And those are things you're definitely not going to be able to get in a public school. So yeah, that definitely is

a key right there. Being able to put those things and how you can put those things into your life practice.

When asked about the role his faith played in his education, Thomas responded:

So, Flagship Christian School is, as I mentioned, Flagship Christian School Christian School, it's a Christ centered. They call it a discipleship school. I can't remember off the top of my head, but every morning we would have praise and worship in school. And then after that first period was always Bible class. Right. So, for the seven years or so that I was at Flagship Christian School, that was kind of the way that I went every single day praise and worship, Bible class, except for Wednesdays. And then, like I said, Wednesdays was like the group Bible class. So, yeah, it was integral in the fact that Flagship Christian School made us be cognizant of our faith.

He went on to share his experiences at the school, stating:

So, the experiences were good because, like I said, the classes were especially as we got older, they were informative. They really gave us good information that we could use and like, okay, what does it mean to be a Christian outside of just like, being able to quote John 3:16. But on top of that, too, I remember they had us do we called it Bible buddies. That's what it was. And an upper class would meet with a lower class and do a Bible lesson. So, on top of it, just being like, oh, hey, can you answer faith-based stuff for a test? It was also a thing of all right. Now you're going to be going into these lower grades and teaching them Bible stories and stuff like that, not fully being like, a missionary or anything like that. But a little start. And then on top of that, every year, the senior class goes on a

senior trip, mission trip. And of course, part of it was like, oh, we're going to a different country to see some sites and stuff like that. But if we were there for a week, a week and a half. Right, so it was something like if we were there for ten days, six of them, we'd be volunteering, and ministering to the people and stuff like that. And then four days we'd be like, oh, wow, the beaches and stuff, right.

Omar described connection to the religious practices to the school stating:

I think for me, my family is Christian, not Episcopal like St. Paul's but I appreciated the spiritual formation that the school emphasized, although I'm not sure the students necessarily emphasize that for themselves. But I would say that the school was more focused on ritual, so we would have Chapel three times a week, have a little message, sing hymns, and I think in the non-denominational church setting, there was much more of an emphasis on personal faith and personal relationships with the Lord. And so that was very important to me. I really appreciated singing the hymns and going to Chapel and all of those things and discussions of the Bible in school. But sometimes there also felt like there was a disconnect between how important and personal it was for me versus for a lot of the rest of the student body, it kind of just seemed like an activity that was just part of the school day, and wasn't necessarily very important or personal to them. I really appreciated all of it, but then just had to recognize that everybody else may not be taking it as seriously as I was.

He continued:

I think I really connected with the faith-based parts of the curricula. Even though it was apparent to me that I was more practicing than most at the school. I don't

know that I thought about it sort of day to day when I was in classes and things like that. But when we would have our bi- or tri- weekly Chapel services, and when we would talk about ethics and morals, and then we would occasionally have a faith-based class like we take a Bible class that's sort of when I would be thinking about it most. I really enjoyed them. They not only exposed me to Christian traditions, I was not used to just because it's a different denomination than what I grew up as. But also, I thought it was a good way to focus on Jesus and God and everything in the context of school and even before school, because that stuff is often beginning of school.

Phillip shared his experiences with the religious practices of his school versus his personal religion. He stated:

I can kind of piggyback off of that. I grew up in the Baptist Church, grandfather was a pastor and everything. Saints College Preparatory is Catholic, like he said. Just going to the actual Catholic Church does seem very ritualistic. It's a lot different from Baptist Church. Honestly, for myself, I never really understood what the priests might be saying in the sermons and everything. But I would say I appreciated the Theology classes at Saints College Preparatory that we had every day. It really taught me how to read the Bible and how to interpret that for myself. I think I started reading it more just from being at Saints College Preparatory when I got to college because that same book that we read every day in the Bible, is the same book they used to enslave us.

He went on to share:

I was open to learning, especially learning more about the Bible, especially in the classroom. Got more in depth about some stories of the Bible and some imagery behind it. Just learning the history of the Catholic Church was interesting, but I wouldn't say it ever swayed me to go Catholic or anything. It just made me like probably sparked a little more conversations about religion, if not, made me question Christianity in itself at times, which I guess made me stronger Christian in the long end. But just learned, I guess Catholic Church not too much has changed from the basis of it and seeing how it's pretty consistent. That was pretty interesting, I guess. Like going to Mass and everything. Looks like you're always going through a time machine. At times. I admired it and everything definitely sparked about a good conversation as well.

Kevin explained the role faith played in his educational experience stating:

I got to understand more about faith and reasoning. So, this happened and it's a reason behind it and things have deeper meaning. Sometimes I can say that probably would have some relation. I got to understand more about life and why things are because of religion and whatnot.

Josiah shared his experiences with the religious aspect of his school, stating:

I'm Christian. It wasn't really a transition because it's not like I was converting to a different set of beliefs. But me being Christian, they always say at Metro Episcopal School that you might not have the same beliefs as the Episcopalian religion that Metro Episcopal School is based upon. But they always say be open, be respectful and so on. So, me being Christian and going to Episcopalian Church.

I mean, Episcopalian school. It's similar religious themes that cross over between the two. So, it kind of fit in with my beliefs as well.

Cultural Impact. The cultural impact encompasses the racially-based, socio-economic and school cultural experiences of the participants while attending their respective schools. The impact on the participant's education was reported during the individual, focus group interviews and reflective journals.

Socio-economic Differences. Cornelius was living in a housing project in the city while attending St. Paul's Catholic School. During the group interview, he said, "We live in Gilpin Court at the same time as I went to St. Paul's Catholic School. So, yeah, it definitely was a culture shock." He continued, stating:

I wasn't really comfortable in their environment either. You know what I mean? But they just meshed out. I'm glad they did, because it made me a hybrid. I lived in the hood. I live upper-echelon elitist lifestyle. You know what I'm saying? I think that's the biggest problem with the white boy. They hated on you all. It's elitism.

Later in the conversation, he shared the connections that led him to attending St. Paul's. He said:

I couldn't pick a whole bunch of schools. Like I said, my mom had a little cleaning business. She would clean little houses around there. Some of the ladies was like, "Hey, we're going to see what we could do, see if you can get in the school." And I just got in there and made it work. And I'm glad I did. Because like I said, it probably saved my life.

Omar described the nature of the socio-economic differences from his perspective, stating:

So, you often have the same family's kind of intermarrying with one another, going off to school, and then coming back and taking over Grandpa's business, that kind of thing. Nothing necessarily wrong with that. But if you're not trying to do that or if you don't have those opportunities available to you, then you definitely feel that difference.

Kevin reflected on how the socio-economic divide mirrored the racial divide in his experience, stating:

I knew it was going to be some there, like, some racism there. Just because I'd say the school is about 80% white, and I'd say out of the 80%, I'd say about 60% of them, regardless, are probably straight in life because of how wealthy they are and stuff. So, I kind of knew that. The people at private school, I don't really like them that much. They felt more entitled to things. I didn't feel like we were the same. So, I kind of was in my own world. I didn't really mesh well with some of the other kids. It seemed like all the other black kids, they came from, what's the word, like lower income homes. I was with them a lot of the time because I could understand them more. Plus, they're black and I understood them better.

School Culture Influences. Reflecting on the school culture, Omar said:

I really appreciate the all-boys aspect of St. Paul's. I think, especially in the middle school and early high school years, it makes them so much easier to focus, to get your head on right, to not have, I don't want to say the distraction of women

there, but it's definitely easier to focus when the environment all day, every day is just guys.

He added:

I think one of the things that I underappreciated until I got to college was the impact that not only my Christian faith, but specifically the expression that they emphasized at St. Paul's actually formed me in a positive way. There was an honor code. There was this huge emphasis on integrity and the importance of personal honor. And when I got to college, I had spent all of this time learning that and understanding that your integrity is more important than a grade. And so cheating is totally out of the question.

Phillip also spoke to the gender dynamic at Saints College Preparatory. He said, "Makes you little more focused, I would say, also being around all boys throughout the day, too. There's less distractions as well."

Ronald mentioned the benefits of attending an all-boys school. He said, "It was a great experience because it's all-boys school. So, you kind of focus a little bit more. The uniform thing was good kept you in line. And always attest Saints College Preparatory like the academic regiment."

The term "structure" was mentioned 23 times throughout the interview specifically from the participants that attended Saints College Preparatory which is the military college preparatory academy. Cornelius reflected on the benefits of the culture of Saints College Preparatory. He shared:

. . .but they add structure and discipline to people. So, for instance, I think they were mainly like, hey, y'all are young men. They are going to be young leaders.

We're going to add this as a structure to the day. So, Chapel every day, granted, is stunk because you had to get up early. In hindsight, I know a lot of guys that look forward and not look forward, but miss Chapel. This is the one time the whole school was together. Here comes a Pep rally. Here comes this. Whatever's going on, it was something that added structure. Boys need structure and discipline. That's it. And if you can instill that early, they will not depart. Then that's something that I think they put in.

Ronald said, "Another positive was the structure of my education prepared me for college."

Steven shared:

Because one is the structure part, because of the appearances, the structure and the military aspect of it, that's what they don't have. So, it's a combination of the military where it's teaching you structure. And then there's, like you said, the faith-based part, it's all in one school. Other schools, they can wear uniform. But is it the structural part? As I said, the structure. I keep saying that word but that was a big word and how it at Saints College Preparatory.

Kevin also attending Saints College Preparatory. He had a negative experience with the culture of the school. He stated:

I shouldn't say, obviously, but I didn't like it. I didn't like the military part. The rules were like, it was like they choose to follow this, not this. And it wasn't evenly distributed throughout the school. Like, for example, like, hair length or whatever. Like, my hair now is way past military length. But at the time, it was a

lot shorter and some people get away with it. It was kind of biased. Yeah. At the time, I really despised the school. I didn't have a good experience.

Participants 8 and 10 attended different schools than the other participants. Their perspective of the school culture was shared in their individual interviews. Thomas stated:

I think one of the biggest benefits for Flagship Christian School was that instilled Christian discipline of, like, okay, you're here to get an education, but we also teach you, I won't say teach you to do the right thing, but we're going to teach you morals and stuff like that. And I really think that helped me when I got to college.

Josiah described his school culture in a different light than the other participants. He said, "It's more of, like a college based high school to the point where you can basically, like, the Metro Episcopal School motto is "discover your path". So, I feel like I discovered my path at Metro Episcopal School."

Racially Based Experiences. During the group interview, Ronald shared his feelings on his experiences with the race differences at Saints College Preparatory. He stated:

But the negative was you realize what you're dealing with. White folks, they're cool with you, yeah, they kind of tokenism a little bit. And hey, I know they still rocking the Trump stuff and it's still that kind of tokenism vibe, like I got a Black friend sometimes. You get that. And my woke side says, okay, I'll play that game and maintain and stuff, but on the inside, I understand, it's good to know them. I met some great friends from Saints College Preparatory that I'm cool with now, but it's still got your little racist overtones that were negative.

He continued, stating:

But I know that we live in a certain kind of world, so I take all those things, turn them around and put them into a how I can affect real estate, understand business, because a lot of these cats, Phillip will tell you, all you all know really St. Paul's, they all got these kids that own businesses, so it's good to be exposed to them. They probably like, "Hey man, . . ., my freddy, they're all cool with you," so you can make those connections with them for later on. They work out later on. But overall, some of the stuff can be negative based on just because, like I said, it goes back down to just the racial makeup of things. But like I said, I take it away from like, I'm cool with you, but I take away and bring it to my community what I've learned and then empower my community with that. You'll still be able to be cool with them. But that's the good and bad I got from my experience from Saints College Preparatory.

Based on his experiences, Ronald sought the opposing experience for college. He shared:

But we knew that we want to go to the top schools, at least top black schools and stuff because we went to private school all lives. So that was a fact of going to all white environment. We basically wanted to make sure that we knew who we were and culturally, how we fit in.

Omar found it challenging to feel a connection with the school due to the lack of diversity. He stated:

I think the negatives and why I'm less connected to the school, similarly, not many Black folks. I think I came to the school in sixth grade, and there were no Black folks in my class until the sixth grade, so younger than that, there weren't any, and I think there were only a few of us starting from that point. And I think

there was a culture that can be a little bit insular. St. Paul's tends to be a little bit more not just predominantly white, but more like old money, rich part of Richmond white.

He went on to share:

And I think I definitely also experienced some racial undertones, but frankly, overtones as well in that around my senior year, applying to schools, a lot of name brand schools, got into a bunch of them, and I heard at least on one or two occasions folks saying that the reason I got into those schools was not because I was smart enough or gifted enough to get in, but because of affirmative action.

In the group discussion, Thomas said, "I was the first Black male in the class. There was a Black female. And then all the way up through graduation, there was one Black guy who came into our class when I was a sophomore." He continued with a story of his personal experiences of racism that he experienced at Flagship Christian School. He stated:

To just give an example, every school has their prom, right? And everybody at Flagship Christian School went to prom because the school was so small. And you didn't go in a serious relationship. You just took whoever your best friend of the opposite gender was. I asked this young lady to go, and her dad said no, because he wasn't in favor of interracial couples. And I was like, "I'm not asking to marry your daughter here. I'm literally asking to go; it's going to be a group event. We just show up at the same time." And talking, too, about the whole affirmative action thought process, because, of course, applying for colleges, and I remember physically pulling out my resume at that point. And as I said, I had a full scholarship to VMI, but I also had full scholarships to Johns Hopkins, Ivy

League schools, and stuff like that. It wasn't like I had this one ticket. I knew, based off of what I brought to the table that on paper, anybody would be happy to have their daughter go to prom with me or something like that. And this one guy's making a big ruckus out of it because I'm Black. I was like, that doesn't make sense to me at all.

Thomas shared another experience in his individual interview. He stated:

Because in, like, middle school, of course, kids always make jokes and stuff like that about your race and stuff and whatnot. And being the competitor that I was and wanting it to be a thing of. Okay. Yeah, we can agree. People, look at my people and they expect you to be the fastest kid in this class, or they expect you to be the strongest kid. I'm like, well, you all don't expect me to be the valedictorian. Y'all don't expect me to be head of the drama team. You don't expect me to be the class President as well. So, in terms of my education, like being a minority and that knowledge of OK, I am a minority in this school did push me to work harder than what I thought everybody else was. Because everybody else like, oh, yeah, we're coming to school we're having a good time and go home. For me, it was a job. Okay. I'm here to get this done. So that way, no matter what, I can wear that title, I was the best. No matter what anybody looks like, no matter what anybody thinks of me, like, on paper, you can't just do this.

In his individual interview, Omar spoke to the unspoken racial undertones he experienced, stating:

I think race wise, there was an implicit sense, although no one at the school would tell you would say this. There was an implicit sense that being black meant you are academically inferior, however. And so, there is less expectations for you.

He further shared that the term affirmative action was referenced to explain his successful admission into elite colleges.

Phillip shared his experiences with the racial and socio-economic difference at Saints College Preparatory. He said:

At least have a lot of kids they came from like they either went to Church together. They play sports together when they're growing up or went to middle school together. Probably 60-70% of the kids in my school either went to like, St. Paul's, not St. Paul's, but like St. Edward, St. Bridget's, St. Benedict or something like that. And minorities we had, none of us went to school together. But when we got there, we went to the fire together. Major pulled us in together it was kind of blessing. He was like most of our mentors. So, if we had any questions or we didn't have a lot of minority teachers either, he was just like one of the few people that kind of, like, looked after us and everything. Let us know what to look out for. How to communicate with some other teachers and everything, which helped out a lot.

Contrary to the other racial experiences that were shared, Josiah had a different experience at Metro Episcopal School. He said:

I wouldn't say because I feel like the Metro Episcopal School environment is a welcoming environment. Or at least that's what they try to hold their hat on. That's what they say. They take pride in their welcoming environment. So, when I first

was admitted to Metro Episcopal School and had my first year at Metro Episcopal School, I felt welcome. So, I didn't really feel like any race difference. There were no really race differences in Metro Episcopal School, at least emotionally. I was never outcasted or singled out or anything like that. Now, obviously, I know those private schools. It's not going to be many of us. And I know that, but I don't feel like me going through Metro Episcopal School, my race or anything had really any impact on my progression through Metro Episcopal School.

Table 3

Relation of Research Questions and Themes

Themes	Research Question	Explanation
Parental Support of Education	SQ1: How do the participants describe the influences in their immediate environment in relation to the impact on their educational experiences? SQ2: How do the participants describe the impact of the relationships and connections between their immediate environment and school environment?	Participants described their parents as the main influencers of their educational experience due to the support and involvement in school.
Religious Influences	SQ4: How do the participants describe religious or cultural influences in their personal life and in school in relation to the impact on their educational experience	For those participants that shared the same religious affiliation as their school, the influence was more familiar than impactful. The participants who had a different religious affiliation than their school, they expressed appreciation for the moral values and structure the faith-based influence that the school provided. They also found that their personal faith was strengthened.

Cultural Impact	SQ4: How do the participants describe religious or cultural influences in their personal life and in school in relation to the impact on their educational experience	Participants identified certain aspects of the culture to be a positive impact such as the structure, single gender population and college-like academics. Negative influences were based on socio-economic differences and negative racial encounters.
Influences of their Personal Community	SQ1: How do the participants describe the influences in their immediate environment in relation to the impact on their educational experiences? SQ2: How do the participants describe the impact of the relationships and connections between their immediate environment and school environment?	Participants indicated that their connections and relationships with teachers and coaches established in and beyond the classroom had a positive impact on their educational experience
Impactful Experiences	SQ3: How do the participants describe outside factors such as the experiences of family member or other events in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?	A few participants described traumatic experiences that occurred during their school years however, there was not much impact on their education experience.
<i>Note.</i> This table provides a brief overview of the relation of the themes based on the research questions.		

Summary

Through the individual interviews, focus group interview and reflective journals, the ten participants were able to share their experiences of graduating from a faith-based private schools as an African American male. The themes and sub-themes that were identified from the data were (1) parental support of education, (a) parental involvement with school, (b) parental expectations, (c) parental financial support; (2) religious influences, (a) personal religion and faith, (b) religious influences from school; (3) cultural impact, (a) socio-economic differences, (b) school culture influences, (c) racially based experiences; (4) influences of their personal community, (a) support of extended family, (b) experiences with teachers, (c) influences of peers

and mentors; (6) impactful experiences, (a) significant family events, (b) significant events; and (7) academic quality.

The themes of parental support of education, parental involvement with school, parental expectations and parental financial support were identified from participants sharing their family involvement and influence in their educational journey. Participants shared stories of their parent's level of engagement with their schools and education. In most instances, participants felt as though their parents' established expectations for academic success and were supportive through their educational experience. All of the participants shared that their parents communicated with their teachers through parent teacher conferences and through other means. Many of the participants indicated that their parents routinely attending their sporting events and other school related activities. A few shared that their parents volunteered at their schools in some capacity.

The theme of influences of their personal community, support of extended family, experiences with teachers and influences of peers and mentor were identified from further discussion of influences from their teachers as well as others outside their immediate family. All of the participants identified teachers that they connected with during their time at their perspective schools. Many of the participants spoke of the influences of their peer relationships providing a competitive drive to excel academically. There was also mention of support from extended family and mentors.

The impactful experiences, significant family events and significant experience's themes were identified from the third research question responses. Participants were asked to share events or experiences that affected their family which may have impacted their educational experience. Only a small number of participants had a significant event occur during their time in

school. While some events were traumatic, they did not seem to affect their educational experience.

The final research question produced the follow themes from participant responses: cultural impact, socio-economic differences, school culture influences, racially based experiences, religious influences, personal religion and faith, and religious influences from school. Overall religious and culture experiences had a direct impact on the participants and their educational experiences in negative and positive ways.

Lastly, an unexpected theme that was identified was academic quality. Participants shared the specific details about the quality of the education provide at their perspective schools. Many of the participants felt their schools prepared them for an easier transition to college because of the higher level of education they received during high school.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The difference between the standardized test scores of African American students and their Caucasian counterparts demonstrating that Caucasian students significantly outperform African American students is known as the achievement gap (Bell, 2014; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Teasley et al., 2016). For African American students who attend faith-based private schools that gap is reduced by 25% or more than in public schools (Jeynes, 2014). Catholic private schools have been able to reduce the achievement gap by one-third (O'Keefe & Scheopner, 2009; Setari & Setari, 2016). The inability to close the achievement gap has led to an increasing number of African American family to pursue finding alternative option to provide an education for their children beyond the public schools (Teasley et al., 2016).

The voice and characteristics of the African American students graduating from faith-based private schools is not present in the current literature (Land et. al, 2014). Neither are the non-academic influences that contributed to their success (Bell, 2014). This study seeks to discover the both from the experiences of African American males who attended the schools. Therefore, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based schools in Virginia.

The research questions guiding the study are as follows:

1. How do the participants describe the influences in their immediate environment in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?
2. How do the participants describe the impact of the relationships and connections between their immediate environment and school environment?

3. How do the participants describe outside factors such as the experiences of family member or other events in relation to the impact on their educational experiences?
4. How do the participants describe religious or cultural influences in their personal life and in school in relation to the impact on their educational experience?

In order to answer the research questions, ten participants partook in an individual interview. Eight of which provided a reflective journal essay. The five of the ten participants were interviewed in a virtual group setting. The participants shared their experiences in the contexts of the research questions and grounded in the theoretical framework of Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

In this chapter, there is a brief summary of the findings with discussion related to the themes that were identified from the data. The connection between the study findings and the empirical and theoretical literature is detailed. Followed by discussion related to the implications, delimitations and limitation of the study. Lastly, recommendations for future research are detailed.

Summary of Findings

The previous chapter presented the data from the individual interviews, focus group interviews and reflective journal essays that were identified from Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Van Kaam Method of analysis. The process of analysis revealed the themes of (a) parental support of education, (b) religious influences, (c) cultural impact, (d) influences of their personal community, (e) impactful experiences, and (f) academic quality.

When the participants described the sources of influence from their immediate environment that impacted their educational experiences the themes and sub-themes that were identified included parental support of education, parental involvement with school, parental

expectations and parental financial support. Four themes were identified when describing the impact of the relationship and connections between their immediate environment and school environment: influences of their personal community, support of extended family, experiences with teachers and influences of peers and mentor. Concerning impactful experiences for participants that had an influence on their education, these were described through the significant family events and significant events themes. Finally, the themes of cultural impact, socio-economic differences, school culture influences, racially based experiences, religious influences, personal religion and faith, and religious influences from school were used to describe the cultural and religious impact.

Discussion

The findings of this research study further corroborate the previous theoretical literature and empirical research. Urie Brofenbrenner's Ecological systems theory provide a lens to explore the relationships between the ten participants and their environment (Brofenbrenner, 1979). Viewing the experiences of the participants through the lens of the environmental levels highlighted which relationships were most impactful. The similarities to the empirical research include household dynamics of African American families, graduation rates of African American students who attend faith-based private schools, the effects of parental support related to education, and the level of college preparedness of faith-based high school graduates. This research contributes to the field by adding supporting research to the aforementioned topics.

Theoretical Literature

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological systems theory was the lens utilized to review the participant's experiences shared during their interviews and reflective journals in the context of multiple environments that contributed to their graduation from a faith-based private school

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The Ecological Social Theory explores the evolving connections and interactions between a person and the environment of the person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theory explains the impact that these connections and relationships have on a child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paquette & Ryan, 2001). Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory outlines four environmental levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem, and how they each uniquely impact the development of an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The microsystem is the immediate environment for the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Interactions on the microsystem level are typically between family members, teachers, classmates, and others and can affect the development of the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Paquette & Ryan, 2001). The microsystems described by the participants included their family, extended family, teachers, peers and mentors. All of the participants were raised in either two-parent household to include their mother and father or in a single-parent household with their mother. Many of the participants also had siblings that grew up in the same household. Ronald and Steven spoke specifically to the support and influence of their extended family which included grandparents, aunts and uncle. They provided examples of success, motivation, encouragement and support. Participants also spoke of the influence of their teachers, peers and mentors. Each of the participants shared specific teachers that they connected with during their time at their respective schools. They spoke of the connections to their teachers that often expanded beyond the classroom. Participants described teachers who had a significant influence on them as supportive, invested and influential. Omar, Dwayne, Thomas and Isaiah mentioned the influence of their peers. Surrounding themselves around highly motivated and competitive classmates encouraged them to challenged them to excel and built sense of

competition and camaraderie. A few of the participants mentioned relationships with their friend's parents that were significant to them. The advice and guidance that was bestowed to them was the most important aspect.

The mesosystem level typically bridges the family and school, family and friends, or other immediate groups such as church and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this study, the relationship between family and school was explored. The majority of the participants described their parent's involvement with the school as very active. They attended parent-teacher conferences, school activities and their sporting events. In some instances, they volunteered or taught at the school. Their involvement had a positive effect on the participants. Cornelius who was raised by a single mother, shared that his mother was unable to commit to being as active as others due to the challenges they faced financially. She was working more than one job to provide for the family. In that instance, the participant noticed the absence and desired for a different experience. He often mentioned that it was a lot on his mother to take on the job of two parents in raising a male. Regardless of the level of involvement with the school, each participant reported that their parents established a clear line of communication with their teachers.

The third level of the ecological system theory is the exosystem which consists of "one or more settings that do not involve the developing persons as an active participant" but can affect them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). The parent's circle of friends or problems at the parent's workplace that may influence a parent's behavior at home are examples of this system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paquette & Ryan, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Participants shared any significant events that their family or personal community that indirectly affected them. Ronald recalled an event involving an accident that occurred killing his tennis mate and their family. Cornelius shared about a home burglary that took place while his family was out of town. Even

though some of the experiences were traumatic, the events that took place did not seem to cause lasting negative or significant impact on the participant's overall educational experience.

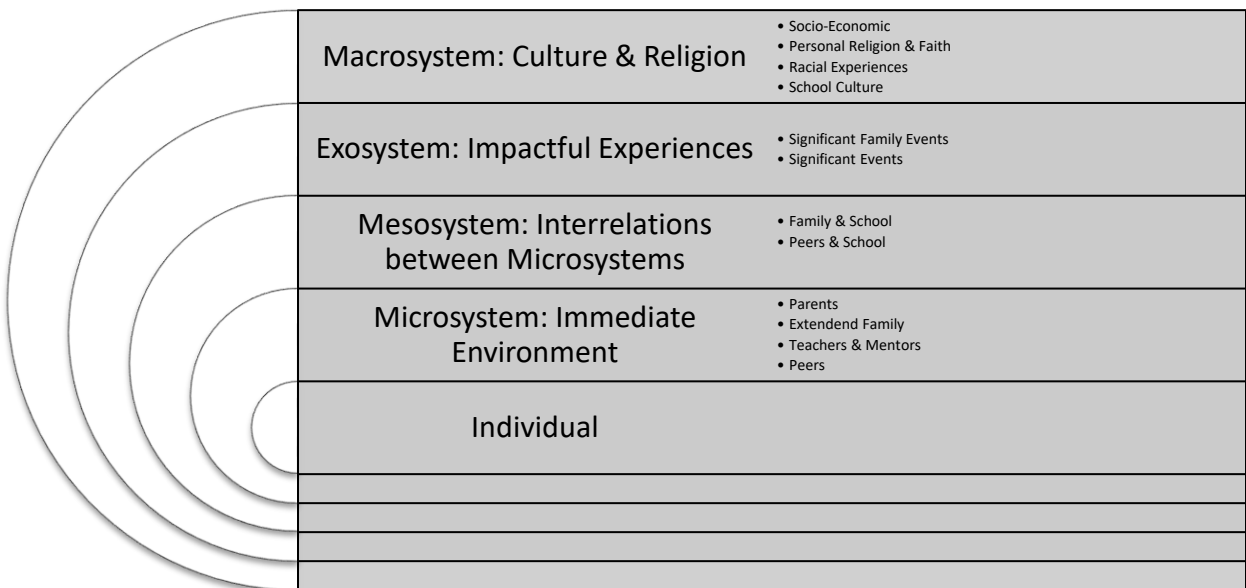
The fourth system is the macrosystem, which refers to the collection people or places that have an effect the child such as their culture, values, faith or belief, socioeconomic status, or political influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paquette & Ryan, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, 2013). There were several influences based on religion and culture reported by the participants. Participants reported strong ties to their personal faith and religion. While only three participants practiced the same religion as their schools, each found some aspect of the religious practices to be influential in some form. The structure of the school's religious practices; exposure to the historical aspect of the school's affiliated religion; the moral, values and ethical principles that were taught all had an impression upon the participants. The culture was another significant aspect of the macrosystem. The socio-economic divide in some instance mirrored the racial divide where African American were of the lower income and their Caucasian counterparts were of a wealthier background. As several of the participants mentioned, there was a history of generational wealth present in their respective schools. Most of the participants shared a personal experience of racism they faced in school. From unspoken racial undertones of implied academic inferiority to accrediting successful admission to elite colleges on affirmative action or being denied the ability to escort a Caucasian classmate to the prom, each experience based on racism was fundamental negative but in turn challenged the participants to be a better version of themselves and excel beyond the stereotyping that was surrounding them.

Based on the study findings, I would conclude that the themes that evolved from the microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem levels were the most influential on the educational experiences of the participants (see Figure 2). The participants were mostly influenced by their

immediate families, relationships with their personal communities which include extended family, teachers, peers and mentors which is the microsystem level. Their parent's expectation of their academic performance and their parent's relationship with their school and teachers which is the mesosystem level. Their personal faith, the influence of the religious aspect of their school and the cultural experiences at school which is the macrosystem level.

Figure 2

Themes within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model



Note. This figure represents the themes of the study as they relate to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1979). Designed by author.

Empirical

Several aspects of the data from this study further supported previous research. The sampling of participants consisted of ten African American males. Their household make up was not similar to the U.S. Census Bureau's statistical data from 2017. Seventy percent of the participants grew up in two parent households. Whereas, data states that 27 percent of African

American households are married (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The remaining 30 percent of the participants grew up in single parent households with their mother.

Statistical data states that fifty percent of African American males aged 25 and older attended college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Only slightly over two-thirds of African American males who enter college never graduate (Land et al., 2014). Research indicates that African American students who attend Catholic schools have higher graduation rates from high school and higher education institutions (Setari & Setari, 2016). All ten of the participants graduated high school and earned a bachelor's degree or higher.

Parental support of education was one of the themes from this study. Participants shared that their parents' involvement and support of their education was the most influential factor to their success. This aligns with research that indicates parental involvement in the education of their children was deemed as imperative to a child's academic success (Al-Fadhi & Kerson, 2010; Bunnell et al., 2018). Another theme that was identified was the positive influence of the participants' personal communities on their educational experience. This theme aligns with a study conducted by Gordon, Nichter, and Henriksen (2013), that noted African American males are positively influenced by "church, grandparents, and extended family members played in their thought formation regarding education, male role models, and success" (p. 158).

Previous research indicated that the religious and spiritual beliefs of African American students have a positive influence on their academic achievement and engagement in school (Holland, 2016; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Research indicates that there is a strong connection between African American families, faith, and church (Taylor et al., 2017). Each participant identified as practicing a specific religion or being spiritual. Most of the participants were

actively engaged in school through sports and academic programs and graduated from their perspective schools.

Another theory this study confirmed from previous research was that African American students who attend Catholic schools are better prepared for college coursework (Setari & Setari, 2016). Each participant that attended Saints College Preparatory, which is a Catholic school, shared that transition to college was easier because they felt prepared for that level of academic rigor. The participants attending the other two schools, shared the same sentiments about their transition to college and the feeling of preparedness for college level work. Research states that it is challenging for higher education institutions find African American students who are properly prepared for the rigor of college level coursework (Aldana, 2014). Those who attend public schools experience challenges in graduating and being successful in higher education institutions (Aldana, 2014). African American students are considered to be better prepared from the rigorous college preparatory coursework provided in Catholic schools (Setari & Setari, 2016). Based on the experiences shared by the participants in this study, there is an alignment with the aforementioned research.

This study sheds new light on the how the exposure to the religious aspects of faith-based schools through religion classes, curricula and activities further strengthened the participants personal faith. This occurred even in instance where the participant's personal religion and the schools' religious affiliation were different. Participants indicated that learning more about the word of God, incorporating religion into their daily life and the conversation in their religion classes were all factors. Many of the participants expressed that their personal faith was strengthen through their time at their respective schools which has carried on through adulthood.

This outcome supports research findings that indicated African American males who have a relationship with God are positively impacted (Gordon, Nichter, & Henriksen, 2013).

Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study applies Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological systems theory as a lens to understand the participant's experiences in the context of multiple environments that contributed to their graduation from a faith-based private school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Applying this theory to the findings of the study revealed the connections and factors that influenced the participants and contributed to their success. This study revealed clear connections and influences within the microsystems, mesosystems and macrosystems. The influence of parents, extended family, teachers, peers and mentors along with the relationship between parents and the schools proved impact the educational experiences of the participants. There were also clear influences from macrosystem which encompasses culture and religion.

The exosystem level consists of one or more settings that do not directly involve the individual but can have an effect on them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). To obtain true influences of the exosystem, additional perspectives are needed to understand the influences that do not directly involve the individual but has an impact on them. In this study, participants were limited in their ability to recall significant events that their parents went through that impacted them. Child are not always aware of the details of challenges their parents may face. For future research, consideration should be given to incorporate the perspective of the parents' viewpoint to compare may be beneficial to obtain a richer description of the child's experiences.

Empirical Implications

This study provides some insight to the benefits of attending faith-based private schools from the perspective of African American male graduates. Faith-based private schools have proven to reduce the achievement gap for African American students by 25% (Jeynes, 2014; O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009; Shorakii, 1997). Research has indicated that Catholic schools reduced the achievement gap for African American students by one-third (Setari & Setari, 2016). From the experiences shared by the participants, one of benefits of attending a faith-based private school was that participants felt prepared for the level of coursework in college. The differences in the outcomes for African American students between public and faith-based private schools should challenge public schools to study the academic practices of these schools. Further understanding can provide guidance to public schools create the structure noted by the participants of this study and mirror the academic practices to lead to higher academic success for their African American male students.

Successful African American males attributed their faith as a vital component to their achievement (Land et al., 2014). The participants of this study indicated that their experiences in their respective faith-based private schools strengthened their personal faith. In line with the research, the participants shared that their faith was a consistent guide through their academic career and into adulthood. Research has indicated that it would be beneficial to students to incorporate conversations about faith in public and private schools (Bunnell, Yocum, Koyzis, & Stohmyer, 2018). While there are limitations to incorporating religious curriculum in public schools, the church can provide ways to make those connections for African American students. The Black church has long provided motivational support in connection to African American public school students in the area of academics (Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Not only should this

continue but serve as a building block to expanding the support given to African American students from church.

The findings of the study highlight the importance of the relationship between schools and the parents of African American males. The support from the parents of the participants in the areas of involvement in school, setting high expectations, and financially had a direct impact on their academic success. Research points out the importance of parental involvement on the academic success of their children (Al-Fadhi & Kerson, 2010; Bunnell et al., 2018). A study conducted by SuiChu and Williams (1996) with eighth grade students indicated that increased parental involvement was a positive influence on their children (Al-Fadhi & Kerson, 2010). Based on the findings of this study, research should continue to look into the ways that both public and private schools can continue to foster the relationship with the with parents of African American male students.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have implications for schools, administrators and educators in both public and private schools to improve the educational experiences and academic achievement of African American male students. The study revealed factors that impacted the educational experiences of the participants. Participants described their most influential teachers as supportive, invested and encouraging. The participants valued the connections they made with their teachers and felt it had a positive impact on their educational experience. Another important connection was the relationship between their parents and the school. The importance of that relationship supports the research that indicates parental involvement in education is imperative to the success of children (Al-Fadhi & Kerson, 2010; Bunnell et al., 2018). The findings highlight the importance for private schools where there are clear minorities to ensure that they

foster a connection to teachers and encourage teachers to build those relationships. Equally as important would be to ensure their families are connected to the school and teachers as well. The findings from this study are also useful for public schools, administrators, and educators trying to improve the academic performance of the African American male students and reduce the achievement gap.

The statistics for African American males highlight the importance of ensuring their academic success. African American males have lower graduation rates than Caucasian males (Bell, 2014; Kunjufu, 2011). While 50 percent of African American males enter college, two-thirds of them never graduate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). All of the participants of this study graduate from high school and college which aligns with the research. African American students that attend Catholic schools are better prepared for college level coursework and have higher success rates in high educational institutions (Aldana, 2014; Setari & Setari, 2016). The inequity in these outcomes emphasizes the importance of the need to determine the contributing factors to the success of African American males in faith-based private schools. Public and private schools must work collaboratively to pinpoint educational practices in the classroom and beyond that can positively impact the academic achievement of African American male students.

Another theme that was revealed was the racially based experiences. The participants revealed their experiences with racism from their classmates and their classmates' families. It would be beneficial for faith-based private schools to acknowledge the existences of this type of challenges that their minority students may face and explore ways to address this.

There are also implications for parents of African American males seeking alternatives to public education. Lack of access to high-quality teachers and instruction, low expectations from teachers, lack of resources and gaps in equity in school curricula, teaching practices, and other

factors in public schools have contributed to the achievement gap for African American students (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Taylor et al., 2018). All of which alludes to gaps in resources and opportunities for African American students (Taylor et al., 2018). Based on the disparities in equity of academic outcomes and educational experiences for African American students, parents of African American children are seeking alternative options for education outside of public school (Teasley et al., 2016). The results of this study support the research that states African American males perform better academically in faith-based schools than private schools (Jeynes, 2012). As parents of African American males make decisions on the academic pathway for their sons, the findings from this study can provide insight into the positive educational experience of the participants at faith-based private schools.

Delimitations and Limitations

According to Naar (2021), the delimitations of a research study identify the boundaries and limits of the study set by the researcher relative to the research question while also defining the methodology and approach that will be used. This study focuses on the educational experiences of African American males that graduated from select faith-based private schools in Virginia. This qualitative research study used a transcendental phenomenological research design was selected to allow the researcher to explore the lived experience of the participants through individual and group interviews along with journal reflections (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study does not include African American males who did not attend a faith-based private school for at two years or less, transferred prior to graduating or graduated earlier than 2018. This delimitation was established to ensure participants were able to provide a reflection of their experiences after attending the school for three years or more and ensuring they were few years removed from the high school setting.

The limitations of a research study are boundaries that are created outside of the researcher's control (Naar, 2021). Qualitative research limitations are often described in terms of time-consuming process, labor-intensive analysis and result verification (Chetty, 2016). A few of limitations Naar's identified were present during this study along with others. The data collection process of identifying participants, completing interviews and collecting reflective journals spanned over eleven months. It was challenging locate participants via social media platforms. The snowball sampling method where my initial participants were used to recruit additional participants was key in finding the number of participants needed (Schwandt, 2015). Another limitation was the data analysis process. This was a labor-intensive process as well due to the amount of data collected from the individual and group interviews.

It is also important to note other barriers faced during this research study. Another limitation was the inability to find participants from one originally identified school site, Central Christian Academy. In order to maintain the desired number of school sites, another school was selected to replace Central Christian Academy. In using the snowball method to identify additional participants, a tenth participant who graduated from Flagship Christian School (pseudo name) was used to ensure there were ten participants.

Another limitation was that the majority of the participants attended two of the four school sites. There was only one participant representing the each of the other two school sites. The preference would to have a more even distribution of participants from each school.

The last limitation was that two of the ten participants did not complete the reflective journal essay. There were numerous attempts made requesting their essays however, no response or reply was provided. The participants had already completed their individual interview so I did

not want to lose that data by replacing them. Data saturation was still obtained from the collected data.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, limitations and the delimitations, the recommendation for future research would be to replicate this study on a larger scale to include multiple faith-based school sites not limited to Virginia. This would provide a richer description of the phenomenon. In addition, the study should include the voice of the parents. Adding both the student and parent experiences together could provide a well-rounded perspective and deliver additional factors that contribute to the success of African American males graduating from faith-based private schools. A qualitative study would provide the opportunity to learn more about the personal experiences directly from the students and their parents.

Additional recommendations include expanding the research to learn about the experiences of African American students who attend other non-public school educational institutions such as private charter schools, homeschool, and Afrocentric schools. Another recommendation would be to gain the perspective of African American females who graduated faith-based private schools. A comparison of the experiences between the male and female African American students would also be valuable to the research.

Summary

Utilizing the theoretical framework of Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study intended to describe the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based schools in Virginia. Using the lens of the ecological systems theory, I was able to explore connections and interactions between the participants and their environment which included home and school. The themes that were identified from the data were parental support

of education, religious influences, cultural impact, influences of their personal community and impactful experiences. In addition, the following sub-themes were noted: parental involvement with school, parental expectations, parental financial support, personal religion and faith, religious influences from school, socio-economic differences, school culture influences, racially based experiences, support of extended family, experiences with teachers, influences of peers and mentors, significant family events and significant events. There was one unexpected theme, academic quality.

As an educator, I am familiar with the disparities in educational opportunities for African American students. The research indicates that African American students who attend faith-based private schools see a reduction in the achievement gap (Jeynes, 2014; Setari & Setari, 2016). The current research failed to document the experiences of African American male students and attributes of successful students (Land et. al, 2014). It also fails to identify the nonacademic factors that contribute to the success of African American males (Bell, 2014). This research study sought to address the identified gaps in the research. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based schools in Virginia.

Based on the experiences of the participants, the influencers that impacted their educational experience included their immediate family and personal community which consisted of their extended family, peers, teachers, their peers' parents and mentors. The connection between their parents and school and their parents and teachers were also impactful relationships. Educators can use this information to ensure this connection is established and fostered through a student's educational journey.

Due to academic disparities, African American parents have increasingly begun to select alternative methods to educate their children (Teasley et al., 2016). There are a few experiences found in this study that may be taken into consideration by parents seeking additional educational options in lieu of public schools. One factor is that the majority of the participants indicated that they felt their school adequately prepared them for the college academically. They indicated in some instances their first year in college was easier due to the parallels in the level of rigor between their high school and college coursework. Another consideration is that the personal connection to the religious aspects of their schools was an impactful experience for the participants. They indicated attending a faith-based school even if it was a different religion than their personal religion, strengthened their personal faith.

Overall, the study revealed that factors within the participants' immediate environment, school environment and how the two interact with each other are influencers of their educational experiences. Further research is needed to continue to identify ways to address the achievement gap that plagues African American students. This study is a start in addressing this issue by revealing factors that foster positive outcomes for African American males.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 12, 2021

Rhonda Turner
Russell Yocum

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-98 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES THAT GRADUATED FROM FAITH-BASED PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN VIRGINIA

Dear Rhonda Turner, Russell Yocum:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46: 101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent

of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B
CONSENT LETTER

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study on the Lived Experiences of African American Males that Graduated from Faith-Based Private Schools in Virginia

Principal Investigator: Rhonda Turner, Doctoral Student, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be an African American male who is 18 years of age or older and who has graduated from a faith-based private in Virginia. You must have attended that same school, at minimum, from 10th through 12th grade graduated prior to 2018. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based private schools in Virginia. The information revealed from this study may prove to be useful to educators and administrators, in both private and public schools, in improving the academic achievement of African American males. It may also prove to be relevant to parents as they make educational decisions for their children.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a face-to-face or an online interview via Zoom with the researcher. Interviews are expected to take 1-2 hours and will be recorded through the online platform's recording device and/or with a hand-held audio device.
2. Select participants will be asked to participate in an online focus group with other participants. The online focus group will be conducted via Zoom which and is expected to take 1-2 hours. The session will be recorded through the online platform's videorecording device and/or with a hand-held audio-recording device. Participants for the focus group will be selected based on their school site to ensure equal representation from each of the four sites.
3. Complete a reflective journal(s) using provided writing prompt options. Participants will be asked to complete 1-2 journal entries after participating in the interview and online focus group. The reflective journal entries should take 1-2 hours to complete. Participants will have two weeks, upon receipt, to complete the journal(s) and return them via email.
4. Participate in member checking to review your interview and focus group transcripts for accuracy.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the potential for schools to use the information revealed in this study to improve upon educational practices in regards to educating African American males.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

As a public-school educator, I must advise that I am a mandatory reporter. If during this study information is shared that triggers the mandatory reporting requirements for child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I am obligated to report it.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and faculty sponsor will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. The interviews and the focus group will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation or using an online platform.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations, studies and/or publications. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. Any paper documentation will be stored in locked cabinet in my home office.
After three years, all paper documentation will be shredded.
- Interviews and the focus group will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher and faculty sponsor will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in online focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart

from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this is Rhonda Turner. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Russell Yocum, at [REDACTED]

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX C
SCREENING SURVEY

Screening Survey

Hello {Participant Name},

My name is Rhonda Turner and I am a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University. I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to learn about the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based private schools in Virginia.

Please answer the following questions as part of a screening survey to determine if you are eligible to participate in my study.

1. Are you an African-American male?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. Are you 18 years of age or older?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
3. Did you attend a faith-based school in Virginia during 10th through 12th grade?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. Did you graduate from that same school prior to 2018?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. Which of the following schools did you attend?

Thank you for your participation. I will contact you if you are selected to participate in the study.

APPENDIX D

RECRUITMENT FLYER

Research Participants Needed

A Phenomenological Study on the Lived Experiences of African American Males that Graduated from Faith-Based Private Schools in Virginia

- Are you an African-American male?
 - Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Did you attend a faith-based private school in Virginia?
- Did you attend that school from at least 10th-12th grade?
 - Did you graduate prior to 2018?

If you answered **yes** to all of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in an educational experience research study.

The purpose of this research study is to describe the experiences of African American males who graduated from faith-based schools in Virginia. The information revealed from this study may prove to be useful to educators and administrators in both private and public schools in improving the academic achievement of African American males. It may also prove to be relevant to parents as they make educational decisions for their children. Participants will be asked to participate in a recorded interview, potentially participate in a recorded focus group, complete reflective journal entries, and review their interview and focus group transcripts.

The study is being conducted both in person and online.

Rhonda Turner, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.
Please contact Rhonda Turner at [REDACTED] for more information.

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515