

THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP AND  
THE CULTURAL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS: A  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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## **Abstract**

The United States education system has been faced with the phenomenon of the academic achievement gap that outlines a disparity of students' academic performance. The purpose of this phenomenological study will be to discover the relationships of the academic achievement gap and the culturally related experiences of Black adult college students in Northern Virginia. As a theoretical framework that the researcher observed is the transcendental phenomenology (TPh). which was largely developed by Husserl as a philosophical approach to qualitative research methodology that seeks to understand human experience thus looking at how Black college students perceive their culturally related experiences. The researcher collected data using the purposive sampling strategy through focus groups, interviews, and surveys. Data was analyzed to provide an in-depth explanation of how students' perceptions of their experiences and their subsequent decisions relate to the academic achievement gap. The overall findings of this study are that Black students' perceptions of their lived experiences relating to culture has a close relationship to their college performance and subsequently a direct and strong relationship to the academic achievement gap.

*Key words:* Achievement Gap, Education, Black , Cultural Experiences

### **Dedication**

This study is dedicated to my late father Steadman Samuels and my late brother Paul Robert Samuels Jr who died during the COVID pandemic. They both cheered me on when they were here and now that they are gone, I can still hear them saying, push on, never give up, finish it.

Well, here I am looking at the end of the road... I wish you were here!

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Participant's Pseudonym

G

rades (A, B, or C). Age Gender

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Intellectual Quotient (IQ)

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

National Education Association (NEA )

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. (STEM)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics or NCES (2021), achievement gaps occur when one group of students, for example, race/ethnicity or gender, outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant. The American school system shows a clearly defined disparity in students' academic performance. These achievement gaps between different classes and races of children in America create inequities in opportunities for students and are possible driving forces of the achievement gaps, threatening the dream of America's future (Garcia & Weiss, 2017).

Educators must pay attention to the academic achievement seen in their work. The information in this study addressed the researcher's curiosities about students' cultural experiences and how their perceptions of these experiences relate to their decisions about their academic endeavors. Researchers agree that the academic achievement gap affects different demographics of students, such as Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asian students (Smith, 2016). Thus, the researcher realized clearly defined disparities in students' academic achievement. As the phenomenon of the achievement gap involves our students, it is essential to examine the different experiences that students have that relate to their academic decisions.

Chapter One creates a framework for the research exercise to explore students' culturally related experiences concerning the academic achievement gap. The researcher investigated the problem that the researcher explored, the background issues associated with the research topic, the problem, the significance of the study, and the purpose of the phenomenon that the researcher will investigate. With this research topic concerning many students in our schools today, it is worth researching the factors contributing to the poor performance of urban high school students

in our nation and hopefully provide some additional information on a subsequent solution to this phenomenon. Background

An achievement gap exists when students significantly outperform other student groups on average in their educational achievement (Hung et al., 2019). Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicated striking gaps in academic achievement between minority students and their White counterparts (Colgren, 2015). This study's findings will benefit students and educators who need the facts to design policies that will help students improve their academic performance.

In addition, DaSilva et al. (2017). argued an essential benefit of evaluating the predictive value of factors contributing to academic failure, early detection of at-risk students, and applying targeted interventions. As these researchers support the importance of this study, they agree that the education arena would benefit significantly from its findings. Researchers have identified the different reasons for disparities in students' academic achievements and how educators can address them (Garcia & Weiss, 2017). This section of Chapter 2 will explain the academic achievement gap's exploratory contexts and issues. These include historical, social, and theoretical contexts.

### **Historical Context**

Although researchers could link racial segregation to academic achievement gaps, the mechanisms underlying this link have been debated by researchers since James Coleman published his eponymous 1966 report (Reardon, 2016). As argued by Hung et al. (2019), during the era of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a common aim was to reduce the achievement gap among students, particularly between White students and Students of Color, showing that this phenomenon has been of concern to our government for decades. Historical factors contribute to

students' poor academic performance in high school settings. Over the years, as the government continues to address this issue with the education system, educational leaders have looked at early childhood education, segregation of students, and the availability of material needed in schools as contributing factors to the issue (Hong et al., 2019).

### **Social Context**

According to Farid and Akhter (2017). Students' academic performance could affect their teachers and parents. Students have had a limited relationship with parents and teachers, resulting in communication issues that prevent students from accessing the information they might need from these adults. Students' stress and anxieties regarding their phones will cause negative consequences, including reduced mental well-being and diminished productivity (Carels, 2019). According to Carels, students' concerns about their cell phones could be one social issue that could be a factor causing their poor academic performance. Also, excessive amounts of stress related to scholarly sources or other stressors can cause burnout syndrome, in which a person has emotional exhaustion (Castellanos, 2018). The social issue of stress could involve many issues that high school students have to deal with, which could contribute to the poor academic performance of many students.

### **Theoretical Context**

Educators have consistently implicated the factors of socioeconomic status and race in fostering an achievement gap (White et al., 2017). Researchers agreed that the United States needs help with an academic issue of disparity among students of different demographics and races. Researchers have investigated various theories concerning the academic achievement gap and found approaches relating to race, economics, gender, and sociocultural background.



Rearden (2016). Theorized about the academic achievement gap is that students' economic experience is causally related to the academic achievement gap. High-poverty schools are, on average, much less effective than lower-poverty schools.

Quinn, (2020). argued that race plays a pivotal role in the academic achievement gap. The researcher outlined that the racial gap caused a deficit-based explanation for the phenomenon. Bowman et al., (2018). discussed the theory linking students' social and cultural standing to the achievement gap. The researchers further outlined that because social science research has focused primarily on group deficits rather than factors that have generated progress, it has yet to build effective support systems despite their genuine desire for help. With the information derived from the different studies about the academic achievement gap reviewed, the researcher will use these factors, such as the various theories and the social and historical contexts surrounding the phenomenon, to build on the different areas of the proposed study.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem related to the proposed qualitative study is that researchers report little about Black adults' lived experiences and perceptions about their culturally related incidents and the achievement gap. Scholars have long documented, with remarkable consistency, persistent gaps in achievement and rates of exclusionary discipline between white and minority children that begin at the school entry-level (Li & Qiu, 2018). The achievement gap could be related to the discipline gap of different races among student populations (Pearman et al., 2019). and the economic standings of different school districts (Jama, 2016). Along with other contributing factors, one problem associated with this phenomenon is affecting more than just the school systems. Still, our very society is at risk of failure as crime is on the rise due to our children's lack of academic achievement, who cannot secure meaningful employment (Martin et al., 2017).

Another issue associated with the academic achievement gap is that students need help setting realistic goals and are thus not feeling empowered to take control of their future (McKenzie, 2019). When this research exercise investigates different culturally based experiences, the findings provide alternate decisions that students could use with academics. One area not seen much in literature is the culturally related experiences of Black students in tertiary-level schools and how these relate to the academic achievement gap. This study aims to target Black adult students and identify their cultural experiences and how they infuse these experiences into their educational beliefs, practices, decisions, and, ultimately, their academic achievements.

Scholars have long documented, with remarkable consistency, persistent gaps in achievement and rates of exclusionary discipline between White and minority children that begin at the school entry level (Li & Qiu, 2018). The achievement gap could be related to the disciplinary practices of some educators when dealing with different races among student populations (Pearman et al., 2019). and the economic standings of different school districts (Jama, 2016). Along with other contributing factors, one problem associated with this phenomenon is affecting more than just the school systems. Still, American society is at the stake of failure as crime rises due to the lack of academic achievements, which cannot secure meaningful employment (Martin et al., 2017).

Another issue associated with the academic achievement gap is that students need help setting realistic goals and are thus not feeling empowered to take control of their future (McKenzie, 2019). One area not seen much in literature is the culturally related experiences of Black students in tertiary-level schools and how these relate to the academic achievement gap. Wong et al., (2020). suggested possible evidence of racism targeting minority students with which the educational leaders are concerned. Efforts to reduce or eliminate racism and inequities

due to ethnic and cultural differences drive social change. The implications of this study were to target Black adult students and explore their cultural experiences and how they infuse these experiences into their academic beliefs, practices, decisions, and, ultimately, their academic achievements.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study involves exploring Black adult college students' lived experiences and perceptions about their culturally related incidents and the academic achievement gap in Northern Virginia. At this research stage, the researcher defined the academic achievement gap as a significant disparity in the academic performance of college students among racial groups (Callahan, 2019). The theory guiding this study is the sociocultural theory by Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky. This theory includes the social interaction that leads to continuous step-by-step changes in students' thoughts and behavior that can vary significantly from one culture to another (Zhou & Brown, 2015).

The sociocultural theory also suggests that development depends on interaction with people and the culture's tools to help from their worldview. As students work through college, they make different decisions related to their cultural upbringing or even the cultural practices of their peers. The researcher examined the students' cultural beliefs about themselves and others around them and how this related to their academic perceptions and decision-making processes.

### **Significance of the Study**

Higher education is perceived to be of enormous importance for an individual as it is vital for getting good jobs, success, and opportunities for better living Arora & Singh, (2017). Educational leaders always look to improve students' academic standing in the United States. It

is incumbent upon students and educators to ensure that students maximize their academic performance, thus producing well-rounded students. The inequality rooted in the foundation of the education system in the United States has fueled historically disadvantaged groups at the bottom of the educational system in the United States. The researcher discussed the significant disparities in the study's practical, empirical, and theoretical aspects.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This research study involves the sociocultural theory by Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky 1896-1934, who stated that researchers recognize ideas by identifying the role social interactions and culture play in developing higher-order thinking skills. (West, 2017). Researchers argued that cultural background plays a pivotal role in learning and perceiving academic achievements. When students are out of school, they learn outside the school curriculum (Cagle, 2017). Researchers see culture as a group's history, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, and artifacts (Oxford & Gkonou, 2018). Researchers also argued that different cultural backgrounds have often posed issues in the teaching-learning environment, causing some students to be left behind academically. Learners bring their cultural perspectives, traumas, and anxieties about fitting into the majority culture. People need learning strategies for language and culture (Oxford & Gkonou, 2018). These researchers agreed that cultural differences relate to students' experiences in the school environment.

### **Practical Perspective**

The issue of students' academic performance and how to help bridge the achievement gap in our schools has affected the nation's educational system for many years. Education developers could address the academic gap among schools by focusing on internal decisions in the

organization and how managers allocate school resources (Bohrnstedt et al. 2015). Literature shows that researchers must explore how the achievement gap relates to students' academic achievements in rural schools (Renth et al., 2015).

In a practical sense, this study will help identify some factors that could be useful for educators in addressing the academic achievement gap in U.S. schools. According to the National Education Association NEA, holes in test scores often lead to longer-term gaps, including high school and college completion and the kinds of jobs students secure as adults. Students with cultural differences often face different experiences related to the educational environment. Therefore, this study will help education leaders understand how cultural diversity refers to learning and then help them make practical changes to the teaching-learning environment.

### **Empirical Perspective**

Dropouts are more likely to become unemployed, work for low wages, have health problems, and have criminal records than non-dropouts, according to (Belfield et al., 2019). A significant academic achievement gap can filter into our communities and cause a domino effect. Integrating curriculum revision and learning facilities, as well as assisting low-income families, are necessary policies. This integration fosters interventions to realize the quest for quality education and a quality labor force for economic development if implemented with greater intersector integration from micro to macro levels (Molla, 2017). Low academic performance may hinder opportunities to develop social and emotional skills through loss of privileges due to academic failures (Doyle et al., 2020).

However, it is devastating when students learn that they did not achieve their goals and face this at the end of their educational journey. Higher education developers must direct

students to get good jobs and better living conditions (Aurora & Singh, 2017). The government has invested in the education fraternity to help secure quality members for our workforce. One significant point to consider here is the efforts of educational leaders toward the academic gap relating to students and, more specifically, the Black race. Differences in the academic achievement for minority students compared with White students remain substantial, (Doyle et al., 2020).

One acute effect of this gap among our students could be the emotional standing of the students. Educators must be aware that when students fail, many become frustrated and lose self-esteem. Emotional understanding bears a solid relationship with academic performance. (Doyle et al., 2020), explained that students rationalize their academic performance with emotional experience, often making decisions that are not valuable to their educational advancement. This study will provide firsthand information for educators to know how students see their academic performance in their future endeavors.

As the researcher looks at the cultural experiences of Black college students, there is agreement that the education fraternity needs to be aware of the psychological ramifications of students' academic performance. Boman et al. (2018). explained that school performance drives the future opportunities of many African Americans and that the gap educational achievement. African Americans and other groups are substantial. Indeed, many educators do not accept or understand the Black culture in the classrooms. When people are unaware of the culturally adaptive reasons for behavior, they are also unaware that African Americans survive despite their many difficulties as a nation (Bowman et al., 2018). This observation could be one of the driving forces for the academic achievement gap.

The researcher designed this study to address the cultural experiences of early black college students to look deeply into the students' experiences and how they make academic decisions with their experiences in mind. As a phenomenological study, the researcher will look closely at the students' culturally related educational practices and how these experiences relate to the learning environment in which they function. This study can be beneficial to educators as the study will identify and report facts about students' academically related decisions. In this study, educational leaders will assess the students' outlook on their academic development and how they perceive future achievements. From this phenomenological study, educators can access information to help make more informed decisions when formulating different curriculum school expectations and policies for Black students.

The significance of the study section contains a description of the study's contributions to the knowledge base or discipline from *theoretical*, *empirical*, and *practical* perspectives. The researcher designed this study through the study's academic significance, which will articulate how the study will contribute to the theoretical underpinnings of the problem. The empirical relevance of the study is how the study relates to other studies or how undertaking the particular methodological approach will add to the literature. The study's practical relevance speaks in one well-crafted section about why the knowledge generated from the study may be significant to the location, organization, and general population (e.g., How might this study be used for the participants, the site, or on a broader scale to affect change).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that will drive the direction of the research. Each question will break down the steps of the research exercise and the contributing factors that drive the poor

performance of Black high school students. Each research question is essential in providing insight and researched arguments that will support the significance of the main topic.

### **Central Question**

What are Black adult college students' perceptions of their cultural experiences regarding the academic achievement gap?

This phenomenological study involves the culturally related experiences of Black adult students, so it will be appropriate to affect the students' perceptions of actions. (Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio, 2019). They outlined that phenomenology is an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it. Thus, when the researcher interviews the young college students, firsthand information will be derived on how they perceive their lived experiences.

### **Sub-Question 1**

How have the cultural-related experiences of Black adult college students influenced their academic performance? According to Li and Qiu (2018), children will practice what they see in their surroundings, making their cultural beliefs and practices push them to shy away or gravitate to specific content, failing to do well in areas of low interest. Byrd (2016) explained that when instruction is culturally sensitive, it offers a challenging curriculum that scaffolds students' learning and builds on their strengths as they take personal responsibility for their success. Concerning sociocultural theory, this question addresses the values of students' families that driven by their cultural beliefs and affect their attitudes and practices toward learning. Therefore, this question is vital as the researcher sought to determine the relationship cultural views have on the achievement gap for adult students.



**Sub-Question 2**

What are the perceptions of Black adult college students about their financial standing and achieving their academic goals at the different universities they might have chosen? This question is critical in the data collection process. It helps the researcher understand how the students see the achievement gap related to their academic development and value the phenomenon. The researcher gathered data on students' beliefs about school related to their academic achievements. According to Vygotsky's theory, students will cultivate their cultural practices as seen in their surroundings, which could be at school or in their communities, and often transfer these beliefs into their classrooms and how they perceive learning. As with the sociocultural theory, this question involves data on students' academic development and financial standings with the academic achievement gap.

**Sub-Questions 3**

What role does culture play in the reactions of Black college students toward their school-related experiences? Research shows that homes, schools, and socioeconomic status influence an individual's career choice (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017). Studies have shown that the educational environment affects students' achievement, happiness, motivation, and success. These research questions address students' culture and how they make career choices. When looking at students' culturally related experiences and how this relates to the academic gap, the researcher will need to examine their future and how they perceive this. Researchers agree that vocational psychology research with people of color is essential to addressing the social, institutional, and interpersonal barriers that contribute to racial and ethnic disparities in education and work (Flores et al., 2019). Examining students' perceptions of their career goals

will help provide valuable data about their willingness to stay in school and complete their academic programs, ultimately positively affecting the achievement gap.

### Definitions

1. *Academic performance*- The evaluation test results correspond to other personal characteristics ( Noemy et al., 2017). *Achievement Gap*- Achievement gaps occur when one group outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant
2. *Dropout Out Rate*: the probability of students not continuing a specific academic program following several consecutive semesters of "theoretical break" (Grau-Valldosera & Minguillón, 2015).
3. *Ontological* – Ontology studies the categories of things that may exist in some domain (Surkis & Reid, 2015).
4. *Paradigm* - These are elements of research paradigms. A paradigm is a fundamental belief system and theoretical framework with assumptions about (a). ontology, (b). epistemology, (c). methodology, and (d). methods (Rehman, & Alharthi, 2016).
5. *School Culture*- The context within which staff and students work (Dinsdale, 2017).
6. *Secondary level* - Secondary education involves junior secondary education and senior secondary education (W. Anderson, 2019).
7. *Sociocultural theory* - Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky. Researchers recognize ideas by identifying social interactions and culture's role in developing higher-order thinking skills (West, 2017).

8. *Socioeconomics and race theory*—*Students' economic backgrounds are causally related to the academic achievement gap, and high-poverty schools are, on average, much less effective than lower-poverty schools (Rearden, 2016).*

### **Summary**

This qualitative phenomenological study aims to explore Black adult college students' lived experiences and perceptions about their culturally related incidents and the academic achievement gap in Northern Virginia. According to Assari et al. (2021), previous research has shown persistent and significant racial inequalities in academic achievement in the United States school system, partly due to the low quality of education at different schools. Literature has shown extensive studies on the academic achievement gap, exploring the causes, effects, and solutions. Pearman et al. (2019), Kuhfeld et al. (2020), and McKenzie (2019) are among the researchers who have looked extensively at the causes and effects of the academic gap without profoundly exploring the culturally related experiences of students.

Assari (2019) added that Black youth from middle-class families do worse than middleclass, clearly defining the existence of disparities among students in U.S. schools. The differences outlined by researchers identify a gap in the literature, opening a need for researchers to look at other areas, such as students' cultural experiences and how these relate to the academic achievement gap. The results of this study can provide valuable facts that could help the education arena gain a clearer understanding of the academic achievement gap, thus helping to identify some solutions to the issue. Due to the academic disparities among students, educational leaders are always looking at ways to improve students' academic standing.

As the researcher continued to develop the study, chapter two included a comprehensive review of the literature on the academic achievement gap related to the cultural experiences of

early college students. Also, in this chapter, the researcher discussed different topics, including the research design and specific study details in chapter three. The remaining chapters focused on the actual research conducted throughout the study. Research results are provided in Chapter IV, followed by an interpretation of the findings in the same chapter. The researcher hopes that the results of this study will help the education system better understand and address the academic achievement gap more effectively.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The United States has seen steady growth in the academic achievement gap among students across the board, specifically among secondary-level students (Colgren & Sappington, 2015). This disparity in our students' performance has posed different issues within the academic arena related to students' work attitudes and ethics. Educational policies and curriculum reformation have been formulated to address this phenomenon of the academic achievement gap (Reardon, 2016). Research topics that involve the academic achievement gap include the focus on bridging the educational gap, teachers' and students' experiences with the achievement gap, and the causes and effects of the academic achievement gap (Reardon, 2016).

This literature review summarizes the historical background of the academic achievement gap as seen in our nation's secondary-level education system and a comprehensive investigation into the different suggestive solutions to the academic achievement gap and how teachers perceive this gap in secondary schools. As reported in the published literature, a focus section will also involve the academic gap. This discussion includes some considerations from the literature for addressing or efforts made to bridge the educational gap. Finally, in this study, the researcher

will develop theories about culturally related experiences of urban high school students and how they relate to the academic achievement gap.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to White et al. (2016), researchers have implicated socioeconomic factors in fostering the academic achievement gap. Indeed, researchers agree that our country needs help with an academic issue of disparity among students of different races and social statuses.

Bowman et al. (2018) outline in their theory that there is a link between students' social and cultural standing of students and the achievement gap. Bowman also argued that because social science research has focused primarily on group deficits rather than factors that have generated progress, it has yet to successfully build effective support systems despite their genuine desire for help. Researchers have investigated other theories, such as Rearden (2016) and Quinn (2020), who outlined different findings associated with the academic achievement gap.

### **Sociocultural Theory**

One theory that will drive this research study is the Sociocultural Theory. According to Zittoun and Baucal (2021), sociocultural psychology is a theoretical approach to human experience and development considering a person's mutual understanding of the social and cultural world. This theory explores one's outlook on cultural beliefs and how these convictions drive the individual's behavior toward their lived experiences that are culturally related. The study further investigates the phenomenon of the academic achievement gap, how Black college students perceive their culturally related experiences in schools, and how theory relates their experiences to their educational practices. Thus, the researcher deems it relevant to utilize the sociocultural theory as one of the driving frameworks for this study.

Dempsey et al. (2021) explained that sociocultural theory looks at the cognitive aspects of human development, and they explain that cognitive development is an interactive process driven by social, cultural, and historical contexts. The researchers believe that people mediate knowledge of the world by being situated in a social environment. Humans gain the representational systems that ultimately become the medium or the mediator of thought (Dempsey et al., 2021). The researcher believes that this theory fits the individual's perspectives of his surroundings and uses this gained knowledge to drive his thought processes as he reacts to lived experiences in different settings. Therefore, this would be a fitting theory to guide students' perceptions of their culturally related lived experiences.

### **Socioeconomics and Race Theory**

Researchers agree that our country struggles with an academic issue involving a disparity among students of different demographics and races (White et al., 2016). Researchers have investigated various theories about the academic achievement gap. People have implicated the factors of socioeconomic status and race in fostering an achievement gap (White et al., 2016) from related literature. Rearden (2016) theorized in his study on the academic achievement gap that students' economic background is causally related to the academic achievement gap and that high-poverty schools are, on average, much less effective than lower-poverty schools. Quinn (2020) argued that race is pivotal in the academic achievement gap. He outlined that the racial gap caused a deficit-based explanation for the phenomenon. Bowman et al. (2018) discussed the theory linking students' social and cultural standing to the achievement gap. The researchers further outlined that because social science research has focused primarily on group deficits rather than factors that have generated progress, it has yet to build effective support systems despite their genuine desire for help. With the information derived from the different

studies about the academic achievement gap, the researcher will use these factors, such as the various theories and the social and historical factors surrounding the phenomenon, to build on the other areas of the present study. The researcher will draw different limitations that the studies reported and try to make related to the present study.

### **Related Literature**

This section of the study involves an in-depth review of the literature that provides a review of the different studies that have addressed the different areas of the study. This literature review provides different arguments from researchers who investigated the academic achievement gap and the experiences of Black college students in the United States. Therefore, this review prevented duplicating the same information as others' writing, giving a unique approach to the academic achievement gap topic. This section gives readers familiarity and knowledge of this field of study, allowing them to analyze the significance of research meaningfully.

### **Academic Achievement Gap**

Gill (2020) explained that phenomenology, the research strategy, involves a philosophical movement and a family of qualitative research methodologies that examine the structures of experience or consciousness. Umanilo (2019) equated phenomenology as an instrument to explore the human mind through observation and recognition of realities that occur in the community. The researcher agreed that this involves using a tool to examine one's mindset and perceptions to understand a phenomenon's action. The achievement gap is the existence of a significant disparity in students' academic performance among and between racial groups, ethnic groups, socioeconomic groups, genders, English language learners, and students whose primary language is English (Callahan, 2019). Researchers agree that numerous policies have focused on

closing the achievement gap in the United States for decades. Despite all these efforts to develop mastery and proficiency, they continue to perform below expectations Bjorklund-Young and Sratte Plasman (2020).

As this study will look at the academic achievement gap phenomenon and examine different factors related to the student's academic performance, it is essential to look at a detailed definition of the gap. In its publication, the Institute of Education Science reported a clearly defined gap in academic achievements among students. The IES stated that from 2000 to 2018, college enrollment rates for 18- to 24-year-olds increased for Black, from 31 to 37 percent, and for Hispanic, 22 to 36 percent. The college enrollment rate 2018 was also higher than in 2000 for White people, 42 vs. 39 percent. The good news is that the enrolment percentage increased, but there is still a clearly defined gap between the college enrolment of White students and black and Hispanic students.

Researchers agree that the academic achievement gap is not an isolated phenomenon in certain schools but is seen widely across nations and in different demographics, including races (Reardon, 2016). This study will explore one key group of young adults and contribute to the academic achievement gap in colleges. It is critical to note that adolescents establish themselves as independent from their parents, often pushing against the family, community, religious rules, and norms (Lorelli et al., 2017). With this self-identification attitude, they move back and limit their academic abilities. The researcher will closely examine the adolescents and how their perception of their experiences relates to the academic achievement gap.

As this phenomenon continues in our education arena, the researcher will investigate the culturally related experiences of students in high school and how this relates to academic achievements. This will provide additional information that can help educators address this



phenomenon. For the sake of the future of our nation, educational leaders need to endeavor to work on this phenomenon and utilize all the resources possible to help address the growing academic gap (McKenzie, 2019). Activities designed to improve school leadership positively impact the student, teacher, and principal outcomes. (Herman, 2017). supported this argument in her study on poverty and the academic achievement gap. She argued that following through with results obtained from the assessment is essential in ensuring that the students will get the support they need to increase their chance of success and the tools to overcome that identified weakness.

### **Equity in Higher Education**

Inequality in students' academic performance in U.S. schools has been reported by researchers as early as kindergarten, as outlined by Dumont and Ready (2019). Black/White inequalities in reading skills worsened somewhat during the first and second grades because the disparity has plagued our education system across the board with age and race. Therefore, one might blame the equity issue on school systems, but as we see here, this is much deeper than just the institutions our children attend. Levinson et al. (2021) argued that children from low-income families, homeless children, and children of color face a higher risk of suffering both more intense versions of and a more significant total number of these hardships that could spill over into the school setting.

The social determinants of learning tie into the social determinants of health; they rise and fall together (Levinson et al., 2021). The unequal distribution of federal funds has often played a role in school performance, leading to low academic performance. Levinson et al. (2021) also outlined that low-income families, primarily white and middle-class educators, and district administrators and policymakers have mistrusted each other in low-income districts.

Educational leaders have been doubted by federal guidance and one another due to decades-long histories of disinvestment, institutionalized and systemic racism, and high-stakes surveillance and accountability measures.

Ainscow (2020). argued that school systems have agreed that clearly defined differences in policies and practices in different school districts fuel the current equity issues. According to the researcher, Policymakers are thus calling for collaborative discussions to secure an equilibrium in policies across communities. With this type of collaborative discussion with all stakeholders, the schools could learn and make unbiased financial decisions regardless of race or socioeconomic background.

### **Students' Learning Styles**

According to the National Assessment of Education Progress NAEP, achievement gaps occur when one group of students (e.g., students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender). Outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores between the two groups is statistically significant. A research study of the phenomenon is crucial in exploring literature about students' learning styles and how they relate to their academic performance. Shamsuddin and Kaur (2020) argued that students' learning style had influenced their achievement. If mediated in a hybrid learning environment like blended learning, it will further evaluate and perform the blended learning environment.

Mangulod (2018). reported that some students and science students prefer visual, group, and kinesthetic learning styles. At the same time, they manifest moderate study habits, proving that students will gravitate to learning techniques during their learning experiences. Shamsuddin and Kaur (2020) discovered that learning does not occur on a single scale or level. Still, different students will learn based on their skills and styles, thus revealing additional steps and strategies

to derive an expected answer. In this study, the researcher deems it valuable to look at the possibility of students being penalized for their learning style, causing low grades. 'Brien and Bjorn (2020) reported in their study on intervention mapping, a teaching strategy that provides an opportunity to support intervention programs for large cohorts of young adults. Siddiqui and KhalidSuch (2018) endorsed the learning style phenomenon by stating that students manage time, create their learning environment, and enjoy challenging tasks. Their intrinsic motivation facilitates their learning process and, in turn, enhances academic achievement.

In addition, Sembiring (2020) further argued that students who achieve academic excellence reflected that they could support self-confidence. As they realize this level of excellence, they will work hard to maintain their high academic performance. Students often gravitate to different styles to learn various tasks. The learner is a dependent personality. The teacher is responsible for deciding what, how, when, and whether students should know it. The role of the learner is to carry out the teacher's directions accurately (Buskard, 2019).

Magilod (2018) reported in her study on students' learning styles that the students of applied sciences courses preferred visual, group, and kinesthetic as significant learning styles, while tactile, auditory, and individual learning styles were minor learning preferences. Magilod, (2018). further helped significant relationships between learning styles, study habits, and student's academic performance in applied science courses.

Şener and Çokçalışkan (2018) concluded that when students identify their learning styles, they hope they will be familiar with their strengths and weaknesses, which will help them become more proficient learners. Study results reveal that the students often preferred visual, group, and kinesthetic learning styles while considering tactile, auditory, and individual learning styles as minor learning preferences (Magulod, 2018). According to these arguments, when

students explore their learning styles, they can work with these skills to help them get better grades and narrow the academic achievement gap.

### **Gender and the Academic Achievement Gap**

When investigating the academic achievement gap, the researcher agrees that looking at the phenomenon from different angles is helpful to get a broad perspective of its meaning. One defining factor connected to the academic achievement gap is the gender aspect of the phenomenon. Nnamani I and Oyibe (2016) also added that a gender gap is related to the academic performance of females versus male. The reporters stated that the mean achievement score of upper-level female students was higher than that of male students. Rearden et al. (2018). agree that the gender achievement gaps are comparable by comparing male and female students' average total scores on an assessment.

This study will not profoundly explore the gender-related aspect of the academic achievement gap. Still, it is essential to mention that researchers can conduct different studies into gender and how this relates to the academic achievement gap (Nnamani I & Oyibe, 2016). Researchers must realize that, like other studies associated with the phenomenon, researchers must recognize when identifying gender concerning the academic achievement gap. Reardon et al. (2018). argued that if gender differences in achievement vary among the set of skills tested, then gender gaps computed from the overall scores will depend on the mix of skills measured by the test.

According to these researchers, it could be helpful for researchers to look at the genders in the study targeted in the test instrument. Bijou and Liouaeddine (2018) discussed the different strengths and weaknesses of males and females as they test. They agree that men are more scientific and hands-on in their learning preferences. At the same time, women prefer to work

with people and thus develop interests related to artistic and social activities. They further argued that, on average, male students favored geometry, probability, and algebra items favored males. In contrast, female students favored statistical interpretation, multistep problem solving, and mathematical reasoning items generally selected females (Bijou & Liouaeddine, 2018). The researchers supported the idea that when considering the gender gap with the academic achievement gap, tests need to consider the skills and knowledge targeted by the researcher, as proficiency depends on gender in many instances.

Reardon et al. (2018) argued that the measured male-female achievement gap would favor male students more if students' assessment tools involved using tests that weigh multiple-choice questions heavily in students' total scores. This practice makes the gender aspect of the academic achievement gap a solid area to consider when researching the phenomenon of the academic achievement gap. In adding value to this study, the researcher will endeavor to include a balanced mix of gender when choosing a sample population to examine the opinions of both genders.

### **Technology and the Academic Achievement Gap**

The education arena faces a significant paradigm shift- in the form of an industrial revolution that requires rapid growth in information technology. Researchers agree that new technologies and infrastructures enable personalized learning for each learner (Kaluyu & Ndiku, 2020). As this study seeks to investigate different cultural experiences of young adults in college that could contribute to the academic achievement gap, it is valuable to look at educational practices and curriculum development to fuel the educational achievement gap. Technology is one such factor that could fuel the academic gap. According to Cohen et al. (2020), information

technology contributes to advancing the understanding of citizens' social and behavioral opinions.

School technology can also be closely associated with their decision-making and academic performance. Often, we see vibrant and assertive students whom everyone expected to be academically successful in school with failing grades. Citizens can readily develop self-efficacy using digital technologies, resulting in implementations. Such practice on a large scale will largely depend on policymakers', recruiters', and trainers' inclusion of the newly defined

Basic Digital Competencies (Guitart et al., 2020).

As the United States workforce continues to develop with technology, the need to strengthen student confidence and academic self-efficacy skills continue to expand is seen as crucial for our student bodies Pauly (2019). With the academic achievement gap, we see that the argument supports a positive impact on student performance, thus narrowing the gap.

Educational developers must develop environmental competencies in teachers to enable the greening of schools (Robina-Ramirez, 2020).

In support of technology, Pierantoni et al. (2017) argued that addressing the school as a system whose governance aims at developing more effective, equitable, and efficient educational offer technologies can sufficiently support the dialectics between "equity" in offering everybody the opportunity to reach their learning goals. Pierantoni et al. (2017) further outlined that keeping actions from the broader community would be relevant to take advantage of the web and be prepared for its downsides. Pauly (2019). explained that helping students establish their educational plans focusing on realistic goals can provide a more solid field for developing the resilience they need. Educational developers should embrace the development of online

communities and networks for student teachers, early career teachers, and their mentors. Thus, researchers agree that using technology to help with the academic achievement gap is unnecessary. Still, it is valuable to prepare teachers to navigate the pedagogical reforms.

### **Diversity and the Achievement Gap**

It is also valuable for the researcher to look at diversity in terms of the academic achievement gap. Polirstok (2017). reported that diversity is a specific factor when defining the academic achievement gap. The researcher noted that the percentage of 12th-grade students proficient in reading was 37%, and for math was 25%. In reading, the gap in proficiency was 34% between Caucasian and African American students and 11% between White and Hispanic students. In math, the gap in ability was 25% between White and Black students and 20% between White and Hispanic students.

Reardon (2016) investigated the academic race gap. They agreeably reported clearly defined educational gaps related to race and, more specifically, different groups of Blacks, such as those from economically challenged backgrounds. According to Reardon (2016), racial differences in exposure to Black or poor schoolmates or neighbors are more strongly related to achievement gaps than simple exposure. However, this pattern consistently holds for exposure to poverty than racial orientation Poleski (2017).

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress in a 2015 report, the Black-White achievement gap was more extensive in the highest-density schools than in the lowest-density schools. This report agrees with Reardon (2016) that there is a clearly defined gap where race is a concern but that the greater the school population of a mix of Black and white students, the more significant the achievement gap. According to a 2015 NAEP report, achievement for Black and White students was lower in the highest Black student-density

schools than in the lowest-density schools. When more Black students mixed in with the white students, the Black boys performed better than their female counterparts.

Researchers reported that African American children, on average, score lower on tests and are given lower grades than Asian, White, and Latino students. Many fail courses and drop out of school (Bowman et al., 2018). The researchers added to their agreement with the racial achievement gap, adding their findings that Black students often fail and drop out of school, further showing that this is a vital issue that faces the education system, with Black students fueling the academic achievement gap. The NAEP report also called for an in-depth investigation into how achievement may be associated with increased racial isolation for Black students.

Researchers also blamed the poor performance of Black students on economics, developmental issues, and culture. While the racial achievement gap is not the critical factor in this study, it is essential to mention this issue related to the academic achievement gap and how the different races are related to the opening. To positively impact the educational gap, educators must embrace diversity, allow students to function under their cultural umbrella, and learn from the differences that will undoubtedly emerge in our schools.

### **Cause of the Academic Achievement Gap**

To investigate the academic achievement gap, it is also vital to examine the causes and effects of this phenomenon. Researchers agreed that while academic performance is the leading cause of the achievement gap, Martin et al. (2017) argued that performance is not only associated with an intellectual quotient (IQ), but there are multiple variables and dimensions with which different predictive values can be associated. Polirstock (2017) agreed that school poverty rates economic, social, and political- factors could impact students, academic performance. Thus, researchers could examine different factors to understand the academic



achievement gap and identify the relationship of other elements to the magnitude of the academic achievement gap. Rodriguez and Smith (2018) added that experience involves perception, thought, memory, imagination, and emotion.

Thus, as the researcher looks at students' lived experiences and how they relate to the academic achievement gap, the individual focuses on a specific 'thing' or event. Polirstock (2017). argued that bright students might not be famous during young adolescence and might be passive learners. They might not demonstrate their abilities and often conceal their academic strengths for fear of garnering recognition. The researcher argued that factors such as self-esteem could contribute to the student's academic performance, as outlined by the researcher. This researcher argued that our high school young adults often deny their academic skills to fit in with the crowd, thus making low scores in classes in return for a place in the group.

Cohodes (2018). adopting successful charter schools' practices may be a great way to improve student achievement in poorly performing traditional public schools, thus narrowing the achievement gap. Cohodes (2018) also argued that student demographics could positively affect the academic achievement gap. As a possible causal factor, Durda et al. (2020). reported that low proficiency levels could be another factor causing poor academic performance; a significant number of adolescents and adults worldwide read at low proficiency levels, even in economically developed countries.

Easterbrook and Haden (2020). They explained that psychological factors could also contribute to inequalities in educational outcomes between groups, even beyond structural and institutional disparities. When leaders are biased, they tend to affect community members negatively, affecting solely or disproportionately the already disadvantaged within broader societies. In addition, Durda et al. (2020). outlined that adults at low proficiency levels usually

understand sentences or sections but are generally unable to process, compare, and evaluate several pieces of information. The consequences of low reading proficiency levels can be harmful in many ways. It could be helpful to channel more resources into student development, thus helping that group of poor readers with reading comprehension deficits.

Farid & Fakhter (2017). studied the causal factors of the academic achievement gap. They reported that, as far as failure attributions in English were concerned, male students considered lack of interest the most critical cause, while females quoted low effort as the root cause of their failure. Thus, students get poor grades due to their interests and tolerance with other researchers. The researchers also added that parents' and teachers' contributions influence students' performance, adding to the factors contributing to the academic achievement gap.

According to the findings of DaSilva et al. (2017), older students at the age at enrolment displayed worse academic performance among international students by the end of Year 3, linking this to a greater risk of dropout. Sim et al. (2018) also reported that an early and solid academic foundation leads to strong academic performance. Sim et al. (2018) cautioned that establishing guidelines based on experience with similar studies runs the risk of assuming a false homogeneity among studies, even with the same methodological or analytical tradition. Thus, the researcher needs to be mindful of the possibility of reporting incorrect information.

### **Equity Among Schools**

Farid and Fakhter (2017) studied the causal factors of the academic achievement gap. They reported that, as far as failure attributions in English were concerned, male students considered lack of interest the most critical cause, while females quoted low effort as the root cause of their failure. Thus, students get poor grades due to their interests and tolerance with other researchers.

The researchers also added that parents' and teachers' contributions influence the performance of some students, adding to the list of factors contributing to the academic achievement gap.

There is a clear issue with equity in our modern schools. Equity could be economic and social inequities among racial and ethnic groups (Shieh et al., 2017). Russel and Jennings also outlined that equity is at the core of improving outcomes and opportunities and reducing the achievement and attainment gaps caused by disparities. The researchers agree that disparities and inequity are strongly operational in our nation's education system and are in some way fueling the academic achievement gap. When investigating the academic achievement gap, several factors are worth looking into to understand the phenomenon better. Along with training, it is also essential to think of ethics when building skills in trainee teachers. According to Snook, Schram, and Jones (2021), when one considers factors that influence educators' attitudes toward their responsibilities as teachers, it can be helpful for educators to develop interventions to build motivational strategies that would apply in classroom settings.

Marshal (2018) outlined that policymakers should consider and address the potential tradeoffs and unintended consequences of narrowly attending to equity dimensions outside of or disconnected from a comprehensive equity and student success strategy. Marshal, (2018). also agreed with Shevlin-Woodcook (2017), placing the spotlight on school leaders to model inclusion, inspire confidence, and challenge inequities. Leaders should encourage dialogue to include the voices of students, families, and the community in decision-making. Educators practicing these skills in school should see equity, which could influence the academic achievement gap. Shevlin-Woodcook (2017) also states that educators must plan equity policies and practices systemically and focus on the organizational process, core teaching and learning processes, curriculum, and school environment and culture. When educational developers

observe these areas in making policy decisions, students can get the quality education available to all, thus improving their academic performance.

Shieh et al. (2017) called for redesigning our school system to recognize the value of the diverse ways students obtain the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to succeed. As we positively shape the academic achievement gap, these researchers agree that educators cannot afford to ignore diversity. Nguyễn and Mordecai (2020) argued that the problem related to strengthening infrastructure, such as internet access, is of high priority for low-income as their limitations include hardware and software development needed to enhance the needs of society and improve equity. Nguyễn and Mordecai (2020) further agree that cultural differences are crucial to helping to narrow the achievement gap.

Educators must emulate researchers and design their policies with diversity at the top of their lists. Liljenbers and Anderson (2017) also argued that by redesigning our education system, a reallocation of power and an improved relationship between district leaders and principals has resulted in a lack of transparency. As researchers outlined, it can be helpful to decentralize the responsibilities of the leadership body of the school system, which should include the principals (Marovich, 2020). Through this extensive mode of communication, developers could help build a better understanding among all involved. Marovich (2020). They also reported that their findings support the idea that the education system must understand that data supports those 135 districts and should consider fostering an equity-focused approach to engaging stakeholders in meaningful conversations about supporting underserved students.

### **Culture and Learning**

Educators can only look at students' academic performance by exploring the cultural aspect of the situation. Investing time and effort in looking at the day-to-day practices of students and

how this impacts their academic beliefs and practices is critical. Cagle (2017). investigated students' infraction records and some contributing factors in schools and argued that street life had replaced the parents, classroom teachers, and coaches. It has become increasingly complex to sit idle and hope things improve; therefore, improving school culture and climate with positive intervention provides the best scenario for all students and teachers to succeed. Papp (2020) added that when students expose themselves to indigenous history and the language of other cultures, they will experience improved self-esteem and succeed in school by obtaining course credits and graduating. Where culture is concerned, the researchers agree that many parents often drop the ball on monitoring and training their children, leaving the bulk of their jobs in the hands of the schools.

Cagle (2017) also agreed with other researchers that students' concepts of their teachers had been one cultural practice affecting their level of respect. In reverse, the group of care teachers gives to students. The researcher further argued that capturing the viewpoints of students and teachers gave insight into the school culture, climate, and perception, which will affect the work habits of many students depending on the school they attend, among other factors—argued that being away from school for short periods could also interrupt students learning and academic performance.

Culture could be one of the reasons for poor school attendance, which could cause poor grades and widen the academic achievement gap—added that a healthy institutional culture is a precondition for the success of any reform, especially reforms aimed at fundamentally changing policy and practice at scale. These researchers agree that once the cultural standing of the institution is in a good place, the institution can achieve accomplished goals as expected.

Li and Qiu (2018) also discussed instances where the family unit strongly relates to the student's academic performance. The researchers reported that the family background significantly impacts children's academic achievement, which is consistent with the conclusions of existing studies. They also noted that differences in educational opportunities and parental education participation are two critical paths for families to affect children's academic achievement. Thus, this article endeavors to further explore the culturally related mechanisms producing the differences in children's academic achievement and how these relate to the elasticity of the academic achievement gap.

It is critical to note that different students have different aspirations, which are sometimes unrealistic. Paulk (2019) reported from her *Adult Based Education Phenomenon* that information about steering adult students toward realistic expectations could lead to increased success in their academic endeavors. This factor could be a solid point since it gives students opportunities through correct information to help them make achievable goals. Easterbrook and Hadden (2020). It added that psychological barriers often result from cues within local educational contexts, including those with low status who have suffered from inequality in wider societies and signals that do not value them in educational institutions. They are often likely to fail their studies and are unlikely to reap any benefits from pursuing an education.

According to Sewell (2020), enlightenment occurs when organizations begin to look at a problem with new mental models. Strategic problem-solving creates inroads for innovations. Thus, it is true that when there are goal achievers, students get the empowerment to develop academic self-efficacy, which often pushes them to success. Students can achieve academic excellence When they practice the right balance of fun and learning. With cultural diversity

comes languages, and with that comes the task for administrators to address the issue of appropriate material.

Nemeth (2016) outlined in the study of diversity in cities and how this relates to the school system that a different challenge occurs in urban areas when there are so many other languages that it is possible to find appropriate books and materials for each language.

Researchers agree that while it is the norm for schools to address the needs of all students as much as possible, it is only sometimes possible to address the needs of all students in a district of vast diversity. Renth et al. (2015), in agreement with Nemeth (2016), discussed additional factors about family practices that could enhance or deplete academic success. The researcher examined the cultural capital theory, which agrees that if educators expose individuals to culturally responsive pedagogy, they will succeed academically.

Renth et al. (2015) also outlined that cultural capital theory and the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy attempt to provide a framework for clarity. The cultural capital theory assumes that the greater an individual's cultural capital, the greater the likelihood of procuring additional forms of money, including economic and social success (Renth et al., 2015). This theory displays another strong association between culture and students' academic skills. Polly et al. (2017) cited Vygotsky's learning theory. Human development and learning originate in social, historical, and cultural interactions; psychological tools, particularly language, mediate the effect of higher mental functions. Learning occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development. While discussing these ideas separately, they are closely interrelated, non-hierarchical, and connected. That learning occurs with some cultural factor and thus should be essential when studying the academic achievement gap.

## **Economic Factors**

There is a steady increase in education costs in the United States, according to a report from the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES), which discussed a study on the status of education in different countries and reported that in the United States, expenditures per FTE student at the postsecondary level were 4 percent higher in 2016 (\$31,600) than in 2005 (\$30,400). The NCES report also stated that education costs are growing in the United States and different countries in this study. This academic achievement gap could be a driving factor causing our secondary students to perform poorly in school. As Carlston and McChesney (2016) reported, some researchers agree that economic growth and the PISA test results have a positive relationship. Test scores and the economy have a recognizable relationship; money could cause students to improve their academic performance, thus providing another avenue for addressing the academic achievement gap.

The researcher will allocate resources fairly and evenly so all students can access wellneeded resources. Hajisoteriou and Neophytou (2020) argued that the researcher would allocate some resources as formal equality of opportunity appears to be compatible with low performance, school failure, and dropouts. Liu et al. (2020) reported that adopting an initiative is a complex process influenced by the learning of technology, academics, context, and strategies. Thus, society will only see that positive outcome with the learning process of the developers of these initiatives that we hope to employ. Shahidul (2020) added that one of the barriers to students' quality instruction and excellent performance is the need for more resources and facilities. This barrier could ensure that students are privileged to quality education that can help them perform better in schools, thus narrowing the academic achievement gap.



Reporters outlined that the poor state could be a driving source of dropping out and producing poor academic performance. In working with economically disadvantaged students, Miethlich et al. (2020) extended the argument by adding that some students receive help from businesses that would like to utilize their skills and knowledge. This knowledge can be positive because grades are usually in good standing. However, the researchers outlined that this could negatively impact students' performance due to the exploitation and expectation of the students involved, resulting in dropouts and broadening the academic achievement gap.

### **Teachers' Pedagogical Practices**

One of the main ideas researchers must examine when investigating the academic achievement gap is teachers' pedagogical practices and, more specifically, teaching diverse students. Teachers need to gain in-depth procedural knowledge about how to counsel students as they are professionally unprepared as counselors, so they cannot determine students' perceptions of their job to succeed (Broussard, 2020). The assumptions underlying how teachers may behave could be interpreted as resistance towards gender equality and diversity work when teachers do not integrate it into their teaching or take pupils' statements seriously (Britt et al., 2019). With teachers being one of the main ingredients in the teaching-learning process, researchers must understand their role in student's academic performance. Keisu (2020) also opened the argument of teachers' negative contribution to the school system. While the curriculum mandates that students be active participants at school, research reveals that such participation is not being experienced substantially by students.

Before discussing teacher perceptions, it is valuable to look at their competency level and preparedness to assess the teaching profession. According to Lakkala et al. (2020), teachers possess higher and lower levels of competence. Through practical experience and a deeper

understanding of the principles of inclusion, their competence can move on to higher and higher developmental levels. Buskard (2019) added that the growth potential is possible when educators nurture each student's unique talents and skills. Surveys and interviews support teachers' desire to aid students in graduating from high school and moving to the next level of education after their secondary studies.

Broussard (2020) added that educators should embrace individuality and pay attention to their training activities, which could help them understand students and, more specifically, the educational process. Teachers could look at different student-centered strategies, thus, giving students the encouragement they need to succeed. Papp (2020) explained that case studies and success stories could reveal which teacher strategies motivate students and assist them in achieving academically. This exploration could reveal the commonalities and contrasts between academic papers that have recorded the voices of different students.

Researchers agree that training might be a good answer when considering teachers and their outlook on teaching and learning. Ismajli et al. (2020). looked at coaching as an effective strategy for working with teachers and reported that this strategy could be effective by working with less savvy teachers to help them gain skills in technology as they learn for their more ingenious colleagues. By manipulating the coaching strategy, the researcher reported that more than having access to technology is required in integrating technology successfully in the subject area to promote critical thinking.

In addition to training teachers, Lakkala (2020) argued that teachers' actions support some students' perceptions of themselves as transformable and developing learners. Also, teachers could design pedagogical practices to help students make friends and form positive relationships. Voight and Hanson (2017) added that academic performance in higher education is

often more encouraging and with a more positive school climate at different points in time. Broussard (2020) cautioned that value needs to be created and demonstrated before executing a training program to optimize performance outcomes, thus placing our teachers in a better position to help students advance academically.

### **Suggested Remedies**

With an in-depth study of the academic achievement gap, the researcher is willing to look at literature that addresses the phenomenon involved. Musharrat (2023) reported that class loads, development of teaching materials, exam-based evaluation system, lack and unavailability of teaching aids are significant challenges that could affect the academic achievement gap from a school system point of view. Voight and Hanson (2017) added that most studies on the relationship between school climate and academic performance assert that a more positive school climate promotes higher academic performance. The school climate will dictate how learning should occur and why it should. Easterbrook and Haden (2020) also agreed with targeting the school climate as a channel for remedies. The researchers highlighted strategies used by educators are often brief, subtle, and ostensibly simple and target the internal subjective experiences of specific students, altering their interpretations of the local context they learn within. It is interesting to know how educators could use the school climate to drive positive academic outcomes.

Guitert et al. (2020) argued that adopting a holistic and transversal pedagogical approach could help overcome the effects of the achievement gap. This pedagogical practice enables users to experience the usefulness of essential digital competencies in the job search processes. Guitert et al. (2020) further explained that educators could achieve this by designing meaningful learning challenges centered on real-life activities. Sowell (2020) agreed with the teacher-

centered solution to the gap and stated that 75% of ISP teachers need procedural knowledge to apply a coaching model that contains essential coaching ingredients that aid students in accessing college. Therefore, Sowell (2020) recommended an information-processing model solution to close this procedural knowledge gap. This study will look at real-life activities closely in a cultural fashion as the researcher looks deeply into students' everyday practices, how these activities relate to their perceptions of academics, and how these perceptions drive the student's decisions in school.

Dinsdale (2017) placed the onus on the school administration to further ensure academic excellence to identify contributing factors of the academic achievement gap. In his study on the role of leaders in the schools, Dinsdale (2017) argued that educators could minimize collaboration through the school-wide cooperation of faculty members. Dinsdale also stated that the level of collaboration among staff in a school is a significant determinant of whether the culture of that school is positive or negative. In agreement with many other researchers, Garcia and Weiss (2017) added that community-level whole-child approaches would alleviate many disparities in opportunity and thus narrow achievement gaps. However, closing those gaps in opportunity and achievement, which scholars and policymakers alike have long viewed as one of our education system's primary goals, requires tackling the broader economic problems that drive these gaps.

However, Kanku (2020) outlined that in infrastructural challenges, interventions providing this strongly needed equipment would make access to technologically associated school projects more practical. Schools with high levels of collaboration among staff tend to promote higher behavioral and academic standards (Garcia & Weiss, 2017). Collaboration educators will agree to bring a blend of skills and knowledge to improve students' academic

performance if utilized correctly. Trúc, Nguyễn, and Mordecai (2020) agreed with Weiss (2017) about using the student-centered approach to help students improve their academic performance. Achievement gaps result from students' underperformance. By providing them with a learning environment that removes psychological and emotional impediments to implementation through short psychosocial interventions, hands-on activities support problem-based approaches to learning by focusing on the experience and process of investigating, proposing, and creating solutions (Musharrat, 2020).

Musharrat (2020) also added that for students to learn different concepts, teachers, and students both need practical opportunities to apply knowledge and help integrate or exchange the knowledge they gain. After a study exploring adopting adult learning theories, Yarborough (2018) agreed that "Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. He reported that students must discuss and write about educational material. Polirstok (2017) also said that students learn differently. Thus, faculty must explore different adult learning styles to help them improve their academic skills and ultimately impact the academic achievement gap.

Also, in a study on strategies to improve academics, Polirstok (2017) looked at several methods, including peer tutoring. He argued that peer tutoring is a well-documented technique educators have used for over 30 years to increase academic performance and sometimes the social/behavioral version of tutors and tutees. Peer tutoring is a widely used strategy to help students improve their academic performance. Polirstok (2017) also discussed other techniques, such as choice maps, Brainology, and behavioral and cognitive approaches to help our young adults' academic skills.

Gibson (2016) added that the government made a direct attempt to reduce academic achievement by passing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002, and legislation implemented an accountability system to monitor student performance through standardized testing (Gibson, 2016). This action by the U.S. government proved that the academic achievement gap is indeed on the government's radar as it attempts to narrow the existing disparities in the student's academic performance.

In agreement with Polirstok (2017), Şener and Çokçalışkan (2017) added that students should be aware of their weak and strong points in terms of learning practices. Thus, they have some opportunities to find correct styles to compensate for their weaknesses, develop their strengths, and use them. In researching the academic achievement gap, educators should look at students' academic performance from the student's perspective. The researchers agree that learning styles and multiple intelligences are factors that researchers must examine if educators address students' academic performance.

Teachers can improve their students' learning styles and intelligence through different techniques. They can, for instance, employ more manageable tasks and practices so that students can be more satisfied with their educational attainment. Şener and Çokçalışkan (2017) further argued that teachers could take steps to improve their student's learning styles and intelligence through different techniques. They explained that teachers could, for instance, use other differentiation techniques so that students can be more satisfied with their educational attainment.

As researchers explore the literature on the academic achievement gap, many different strategies and programs help narrow the gap. Buskard (2019) reported that as adult learners, educators must follow mandated professional development, which may influence them and

encourage them to assess whether their beliefs align with their approach to teaching other adult learners and whether they are following best practices. Bignotia et al. (2019) also agreed that student teachers come together by arguing that exploring the possibility of an institutional consultation schedule between faculty and students could allow teachers and students to work out some limitations in the teaching-learning process. Fedeli (2017) and Buskard (2019) also reported that the Principles of Adult Learning Scale suggests that participating faculty scored highest for a practiced teacher-centered approach to teaching adult learners at Loyalist College. Lou and Nobles (2020) also outlined that teacher feedback can involve their precepting, making learners think that the feedback provider does not support the learners' potential and that they are not competent, leading to negative motivational consequences. According to Fedeli (2017), this practice can help students better perceive their academic performance. Thus, from these studies, students' academic achievement can be positively affected through teacher awareness of different learning styles, differentiating students' assignments concerning their different learning styles, and looking at the students as an avenue for remedy.

O'Brien et al. (2020) argued that researchers often see young adults as a vulnerable group who carry the burden of mental health problems worldwide. They explained that mental health interventions could influence students' emotional and behavioral well-being regarding the diverse piece of the teacher population. Heinz and Keane (2018) added that meaningful engagement with teacher diversity issues would require readiness and determination to critically interrogate some long-standing (and historically rooted) structures and cultural practices of the education system. It is good to look at different strategies and initiatives to help with the academic achievement gap. Still, educators must remember to look closely at the students themselves and how they operate in their circles.

Easterbrook and Haden (2020) researched an initiative called *Wise Philosophical Intervention*. They reported that educational success depends on the fundamentals of good academic practice, high-quality teaching, and other educational resources. Along with wellnourished students, the researchers argued that the initiative needs some fundamental factors for success. With the study about the academic achievement gap in students' cultural experiences, this initiative could help struggling students improve their academic performance. Easterbrook and Haden (2020) explained that a range of *wise* psychological interventions could help remove barriers by targeting students' subjective interpretation of their local educational context. Therefore, it is suitable for schools to adopt this program to help students improve their academic performance and narrow the academic achievement gap.

In their study on teacher-student interaction, Fu et al. (2020) added that teacher praise and encouragement for students' appropriate behavior, accepting students' emotions as much as possible, and affirming students' opinions will help establish good teacher-student relationships. Traditional approaches such as targeted academic support are valuable, but teachers have reported limited success in reducing achievement gaps despite extensive funding over recent decades. Easterbrook and Haden (2020).

### **Summary**

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived cultural experiences of Black college students concerning the achievement gap; it will be valuable for researchers to investigate the phenomenon and publish additional information that would help the educational arena. The researcher designed this study to target some of the culturally related experiences Black students have had as minority students and how these experiences help to drive their perceptions and subsequent academic decisions.



The education system's problem is not simply that students must perform as expected. Still, there is a clearly defined disparity in students' academic performance. Thus, this qualitative phenomenological study aims to explore Black adult college students' lived experiences and perceptions about their culturally related incidents and the achievement gap. It will be valuable for researchers to investigate the phenomenon and publish additional information to help the educational arena. The researcher designed this study to target some of the culturally related experiences. Black students have with as minority students and how these experiences help to drive their perceptions and subsequent academic decisions.

Musu-Gillette et al. (2017) explained that the academic achievement gap had harmed our education system in economics and rising crime rates. Therefore, educators should work with minority students to help them become more interested in their academic studies and reduce criminality in our communities. Riestra et al. (2019) explained a persistent disparity in academic and educational attainment between under-represented minority and non-minority students. This achievement gap discourages talented students from entering STEM professions (Science et al.), threatening these professions' potential, expertise, and perspective. Thus, we see that it is true that American society is in trouble with this disparity in our education system. Therefore, it is valuable for researchers to spend time and resources to look at the academic achievement gap phenomenon. The researcher will investigate the culturally related experiences of Black college students and how they relate to the academic achievement gap. Educational developers hope that with the findings and facts reported from this study, the education fraternity can use this study to address the gap among our student demographics further and help bring more students into the high-performing group in the academic achievement of the student population.

According to Garcia and Weiss (2017), researchers have done many studies to look at the different factors related to the academic achievement gap; however, there is no gap in the literature about the cultural experiences of black students. This study is an opportunity to fill the knowledge gap that exists today regarding what the cultural experiences of high school students have to do with the student's academic performances. Thus, it will be helpful to explore this even deeper into this phenomenon and see if there are culturally related experiences that could be causing our secondary-level students to perform poorly in school.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of the proposed qualitative phenomenological study will be to explore Black adult college students' lived experiences and perceptions about their culturally related incidents and the achievement gap in Northern Virginia. This study involved an in-depth investigation into the academic achievement gap concerning college students' cultural experiences. The researcher will employ a qualitative research method to gather information from college students to explore the academic achievement gap and how students' cultural experiences relate to this phenomenon. It is vital for the future of our students when researchers investigate the academic achievement gap, as this could provide facts about the different factors contributing to students performing below expectations (Bakhshialiabad et al., 2015). In this chapter, the researcher discussed the following sets of information: design, setting, research questions, participants, procedure, data collection, the researcher's role, interview, survey questions, focus group, and data analysis. This chapter also detailed descriptions of the components of the research exercise that will lend

themselves to duplicating different studies as the researcher ensures maximum reliability and validity in the information the researcher most frequently uses.

### **Research Design**

In this study, the researcher chose to employ the qualitative methodology. According to Tomaszewski et al. (2020), qualitative research values people's lived experiences is characteristically subjective and does not embrace the biases of researchers and participants. As outlined by Creswell (2021), qualitative research is an approach that involves the discovery of a person's perception of a phenomenon data collected in a natural setting that affords the researcher a level of detail from involvement in the actual experiences. Therefore, qualitative research involves describing, explaining, and interpreting collected data. Therefore, qualitative research involves describing, explaining, and analyzing collected data.

Additionally, according to Tomaszewski et al. (2020), the quantitative methodology to conducting a research study involves response to relational questions of variables within the research. Also, quantitative researchers seek explanations and predictions that will generate for other persons and places and thus, uses mathematical models as the methodology of data analysis. According to Dawadi et al. (2021), the mixed research method has its philosophical assumptions and methods of inquiry. A procedure includes philosophical beliefs for collecting and analyzing data from multiple sources in a single study. Given the nature of the study, the qualitative methodology is the appropriate research approach.

Qualitative research is an interactive process in which the researcher understands the scientific community, thus making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied (Asper & Corte, 2019). As outlined by the researchers, the qualitative research design involves the researcher gaining a deeper understanding of different phenomena,

allowing the researcher to analyze the facts gained and build on the study results. This study employed the transcendental phenomenology design. According to El-Sheriff (2017),

Husserl later translated the strategy into a qualitative research design by Moustakas.

Phenomenological research is a form of qualitative research that focuses on studying the experiences of an individual as seen in the world (Neubauer et al., 2019). This practice equates to the research design selected for this study, which seeks to examine how students perceive their culturally related experiences and how these experiences drive their decisions and subsequent actions toward their academics.

Different designs involve qualitative research to gather and analyze data for the study. According to Tomaszewski et al. (2020), qualitative design techniques include a case study examining human perceptions and related decision-making patterns. It also involves an understanding of the activities and particular circumstances of the case. Ethnography provides for studying the culture of a group of people, and narrative inquiry focuses on the meaning an individual attaches to an experience through storytelling. In contrast to the other designs outlined, the researcher chose the phenomenological research design because of its appropriateness for this study. This design focuses on the essence of a lived experience or phenomenon that people can observe or feel. This practice allows the researcher to explore the lived experiences of the college students from their point of view. This design will incorporate data collection in an interview and focus group setting.

With transcendental phenomenology study design, people do not just know about these phenomena; instead, they live them (Qutoshi, 2018). This design allowed the researcher to explore the experiences of Black college students, learn how they perceived them, and translate their perceptions into the decisions they make concerning their academic practices. Moustakas

(1994) outlined that those philosophical assumptions involve experience and ways to organize and analyze phenomenological data. The ethereal phenomenology design is appropriate for the study as the researcher looked at how students perceive the experiences that drive their academic decisions. Hermeneutics phenomenology design focuses on the search to understand individuals' perceptions through conversation and spoken words (Guillen, 2019). Gadamer, the father of philosophical hermeneutics, sought to integrate science and thought through language, differentiating it from the transcendental phenomenon outlined above.

The two main components of the phenomenological design are intuition and intentionality. The researcher understood students' perceptions of college experiences (Vagle, 2018). The researchers also argued that intuition is a local experience that contributes to what it is like for the person with the experience. Wiryomartono (2018) further explained that intuition is resourceful because of its strong receptiveness to sensory perception and spontaneous vision for understanding. On the other hand, Christensen et al. (2017) explained that Husserl viewed intentionality as an individual's knowledge, experience, and perceptions of the world as a comprehensive intentional object.

Working with Black college students, the researcher got an opportunity to explore how their experiences relate to their cultural beliefs and practices and how these relate to the academic achievement gap. In this study, the researcher ensured that the findings were clear and accurate using the transcendental phenomenology research design to explore the minds of Black college students. One possible issue with a qualitative study could be the potential areas for improvement with the sample size usually uncontrollable by the researcher. This limitation is associated with the chosen research design, statistical model, and funding constraints

(Theofanidi & Fountouki, 2018, p. 156). They further explained that limitations could also result from location, measuring, testing tools, time, and financial straits.

With this study, the researcher can identify any limitations in the sample size since the prescribed sample size for a study of this nature is 13 participants, resulting in the survey failing to reach data saturation with the data collected from the participants. An anticipated limitation is associated with the chosen research design (Theofanidi & Fountouki, 2018). The researchers further explained that restrictions could also result from location, measuring, testing tools, time, and financial straits. Thus, with the methodology of this study, including the use of interviews with Black college students and the creation of data collection instruments, there could be limitations as things might not happen as planned at the institutions of choice or with the participants chosen in the data collection process.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions came from different areas of the study and were separated by the researcher. These questions involved one central question and three sub-questions that further clarified the direction of the study, showing the different sections that the researcher deemed essential to bring out meaning and clarity to the study as the readers explored the findings presented after the actual study. These research questions provided an opportunity to formulate well-defined and specific research questions and channel the study in making decisions about the study design, population, and, subsequently, what data would be collected and analyzed.

#### **Central Question**

What have been the perceptions of Black adult college students concerning their lived cultural experiences about the academic achievement gap?

**Sub-Question 1**

How have the cultural-related experiences of Black adult college students influenced their academic performance?

**Sub-Question 2**

What are the perceptions of Black adult college students about their financial standing and achieving their academic goals at the different universities they might have chosen?

**Sub-Question 3**

What role does culture play in the reactions of Black college students toward their school-related experiences?

**Setting and Participants**

This section involves detailed information about the study's location and time frame. The researcher ensured that the choice of setting for this study supported the physical, social, or experimental context within which the study. In this research paper, describing this setting was crucial since the results and their interpretation depended heavily on the validity and outcome of the study. This section will outline more than just the setting but also provide clear information about the participants in this study. The researcher ensured that the study protocol was followed carefully regarding the number of participants and description of the different students who were a part of this study.

**Setting**

The researcher conducted the study in a public college in Northern Virginia, a predominantly Black university. This action allowed the researchers to identify Black male and female students selected as part of the population to draw the sample for the study. According to Bowman et al.

(2018), with this study focusing on students' experiences, it is vital to note that culture is critical to each group and what could drive them to adapt to their environment.

While the school is not 100% Black with the population identity, the students have cultural differences that could expose them to challenges as part of the minority group. Therefore, the demographic of the student population includes Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian students. However, since the study focuses on Black college students, the researcher targeted Black male and female students from different socio-cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds for this research exercise. Assari et al. (2021) outlined that previous research has shown persistent racial inequalities in academic achievement in the United States school system due to urban schools' low quality of education. The choice of urban schools should give the researcher valuable insight into the experiences of urban students who often deal with different experiences as students.

### **Participants**

Rafique (2020) outlined that the participants in any study need to be individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and built the reliability of the study. The researcher will focus on an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon through participants' views and perspectives (Qutoshi, 2018). Therefore, to identify participants for this study, the researcher will carefully capture a sample representative of the entire population (Sihoe, 2015). From the population of students in the selected institution, the researcher will select a sample size of 13, reflecting the whole student population. This strategy will ensure that reliable inferences about the people will be accurate and, thus, contribute to the reliability of the study.

Shoe (2015) explained that when identifying a sample size, the study must include any significant result if it exists as the researcher avoids a substantial sample cohort; thus, the sample size will be 13 students of mixed gender. The researcher will get permission from the school



administration to conduct the study at the institution. Along with obtaining permission from the institution, the researcher will provide a preliminary survey to interested students to provide facts about the study. Shoe (2015) also explained that sample size estimation is necessary to allow the investigation to show any significant result while avoiding the recruitment of a substantial sample cohort. The researcher will employ the purposive sampling strategy to identify a reliable sample for this qualitative study. Ames et al. (2019) explained that purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative studies. It allows the researcher to limit collectible data, making it manageable and providing a more reliable analysis. The researcher will target a fully accredited tertiary institution in Northern Virginia with Black students from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, the researcher sought to include a balanced sample size from the school population that would help secure a flat in data collected, making the study's findings reliable and valuable. In keeping with the code of ethics guidelines monitored by the IRB, the researcher secured permission to conduct the study at the targeted institutions.

One possible issue with a qualitative study could be the potential areas for improvement with the sample size, which is usually uncontrollable by the researcher. The researcher sees possible limitations in the sample size since the prescribed sample size for a survey of this nature is 13 participants. The sample size could result in the survey failing to reach data saturation with the data collected from the participants. The researcher also plans to store all data collected in secure locations. The researcher must observe the security of data so that there is no breach of the reliability of the study.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As an educator of over twenty years, I have seen too many cases involving evident and painful disparities in students' academic performance. Academic performance is one significant demotivating factor when discussing motivational aspects and students' achievements. The philosophical assumption and one of the driving factors for this study are ontological as it involves multiple realities. This study also involves various forms of evidence that several different research sources will derive. With this assumption, the researcher looked at the different perceptions of students as they observed their academic responsibilities.

### **Interpretive Framework**

The research paradigm that drove this research study is anti-positivism. According to Altintug and Debreli (2018), the theory of anti-positivism holds that if the world is to explain, any phenomenological science should lean on different methods of understanding and interpreting the phenomenon. This practice is in keeping with the phenomenological nature of the qualitative research that the researcher conducted to investigate different cultural experiences that contribute to the academic performance of early black college students. With this approach, the findings of this study are reliable since there was an in-depth analysis of the different arguments presented in discussing the phenomenon of the academic achievement gap seen in the performance of adult college students.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

According to Moon and Blackman (2017), philosophy creates the general principles of theoretical thinking, exposing cognition, perspective, and self-awareness. From this standpoint, researchers use these assumptions to obtain knowledge of their surroundings and subsequently

understand and manipulate researched information to derive valuable outcomes. This study will address three philosophical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, and axiological.

### **Ontological Assumption**

Ontology is a belief system that shows how an individual interprets a particular factor (Don-Solomon et al., 2018). The ontological assumption involves different beliefs on the nature of reality. Is there one universal reality, or are there multiple realities? At Liberty University, getting too far away from God's truth as the only reality is complex. The human understanding of this truth could be better, explaining mistaken perceptions that multiple realities exist. In the field, people do not believe that various realities are the only possible explanation of the world. This stark contrast of views requires that scholars inform their readers of their ontological arguments to better understand the approaches used during research.

### **Epistemological Assumption**

The epistemological assumption addresses what counts as knowledge, how knowledge claims are justified, and, more specifically, the relationship between the phenomenon and the researcher (Cohodes, 2018). In quantitative research, it is incumbent upon the researcher to create a completely unbiased study in which the researcher's perceptions are not relevant to the process or the outcomes. Thus, in this statistical study, the knowledge comes from the data from the different data collection exercises. Therefore, if the researcher of this study employed this philosophical assumption, the researcher would ensure that no credence is given to his personal beliefs or assumptions while carrying out the study. The researcher also ensured that all facts were collected, stored, and interpreted to reflect a verbatim account of what was said.

### **Axiological Assumption**

The axiological assumption describes how researcher values are known and brought into a study. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) explained that the Axiological Assumption involves defining, evaluating, and understanding concepts of right and wrong behavior relating to the research. Therefore, this assumption looks at the ethical stance of the researcher as it relates to the different aspects of the study, such as the participants, data, and audience the investigation targeted. The researcher needs to convey his values regarding ethical practices throughout the study with qualitative research. For instance, the researcher must observe ethical practices and ensure that readers are made aware of these practices.

### **Researcher's Role**

The researcher is the research instrument in qualitative research, directly impacting data collection and analysis. Inevitably, a researcher's personal and professional experiences shape the generated and interpreted data (Geddis-Regan & Taylor, 2021). Therefore, the qualitative researcher must consider how their position informs participant consent, data collection, and analysis. The researcher also formulated and followed a clearly defined timeline that will help ensure that all study specifications are related or connected. The researcher ensured that none of the participants were related to her in any way. When researchers are related to participants, it could cause disparities with the research design, data collection, breach of confidentiality, or any other form of irregularities that the policies outline regarding data collection and analysis. Also, the researcher endeavored to maintain accuracy and unbiasedness throughout the research process.

## **Procedures**

Rosenthal (2016) outlined several steps involved in the qualitative study process and, in keeping with the researcher, followed the initial prescribed steps before conducting the study. These included identifying a topic and securing a committee led by a chairperson to help ensure that materials are correctly written and in keeping with all the legal specifications the researcher must consider when conducting the research study. Shannon (2018) outlined the appendix as a supplemental part of the paper housed under different headings, additional information, and documents in this section (Shannon, 2018). The researcher deems it necessary to include different appendix sections for the readers of the study to peruse the additional papers to ensure authenticity—the appendix sections at the end of the documents after the reference pages. Also, the researcher considered the time needed to secure permission from the different institutions to conduct the interviews and surveys in the other possible institutions for the study.

### **Permission**

The researcher must secure permission from the site where the researcher plans to conduct the study. Thus, the researcher reached out to the authorities of the targeted institution with a formal request letter from Liberty University introducing the research and the researcher asking for permission to conduct the study at that institution. After getting the clearance from the institution, the researcher proceeded with the actual steps of the research exercise only after securing approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). A copy of this letter is in Appendix B of the manuscript.

### **Recruitment Plan**

The researcher will provide an introductory dissertation recruitment letter to potential study participants. The university (LUO) will provide a sample letter for researchers to recruit

potential participants and seek permission to conduct the study at the institution of choice. In this process, the researcher will introduce and explain the study's aims and gain authorization or consent to conduct the study at the institution. The recruitment letter also informed the participants of the voluntary nature of the research. The researcher delivered these documents to the potential participants and the institution before moving forward with activities toward the actual study. The researcher included the informed consent and recruitment letter documents in Appendix B of this manuscript. After completing the initial steps, including the signature of the consent form and permission from the institution and IRB sanctions, the researcher conducted the study, which involved working with the sample group through interview sessions, surveys, and focus groups.

For this study, the researcher looked at a sample pool of Black students who attended the college selected. Shoe (2015) supported the researcher's goal to identify 13-15 students from the sample pool. The researcher considered cost and ethical factors when considering a sample group. As Sihoe (2017) outlined, many factors govern how representative the target population is. These include how clearly the population and sample are defined and the method used for sampling, with the selection being the most specific factor. Shoe (2015) outlined that the objective of the sampling process is to research a selected subset of the population, ensuring that the subset is representative of the whole population. Therefore, when the sample is smaller, it reflects the entire population so that the researcher can make reliable inferences from the results obtained in the study.

The researcher elected to use the purposive sampling method for this study. This sampling method involved participants who knew and experienced the phenomenon under scrutiny, the academic achievement gap. Nurs (2020) outlined that with the purposive sampling method, the

researcher seeks to narrow the perimeters of the sample size by selecting participants who have first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon through lived experiences and considering the location and accessibility of the participants chosen for the study. Elmusharaf (2016) also outlined that researchers are encouraged to work with subjects of similar backgrounds and gather information from these individuals who might be more likely to have similar experiences when selecting the sample.

The researcher used the homogeneous sampling technique when utilizing the purposive sampling method. It seeks to discover sample members with shared characteristics or a shared set of features. In this case, the researcher will target Black college students' lived experiences. The researcher selected the students for a college population of Black male and female students. Therefore, this sample group's criteria are that students must be Black and actively enrolled in college for more than one full academic year. Thus, the researcher selected 13 participants to represent a sample group for the study exercise.

### **Data Collection Plan**

The study involved different data collection strategies appropriate for transcendental phenomenological research design, such as interviews, surveys, and focus groups (Rafique, 2020 p. 4). Additionally, data collection involved specific ethical steps that include gaining permission, sampling, recording information, and sorting data (Cohodes, 2018). Qualitative data are mostly non-numerical and usually descriptive or nominal. According to Anderson, W. (2019), collecting, analyzing, and interpreting non-numerical data includes language. Qualitative research could help understand how individuals perceive and give meaning to their social reality. Data collected are in the form of words and sentences. Often, such data capture feelings,

emotions, or subjective perceptions of something. Qualitative approaches aim to address the 'how' and 'why' of a program (Kabir, 2016).

With the possible limitations associated with the data collection instruments and the prescribed protocol associated with a phenomenological study, the researcher could experience different issues that might limit the reliability of the study. The reliability includes the randomization process of the sample size selection process and the formulation of the interview questions for the survey (Anesthesiol, 2017). Thus, before the execution of the actual study, an external pilot study was conducted with a smaller number of participants than with the existing research to determine if the data collection instruments and the sample size selection process supported the feasibility of the study.

According to Anesthesiol (2017), a pilot study is the first step of the entire research protocol. It is often a smaller-sized study assisting in planning and modification before the main study. It will include all the data collection and analysis strategies that the researcher plans to use in the actual research. Copies of the instrumentation protocols are placed under Appendix C of this manuscript.

Also, the researcher endeavored to find out if any problems or barriers related to the participants recruited might exist. Before the actual study, a pilot study is necessary at the data analysis stage of the study. Three specific functions of pilot studies in qualitative research include three primary qualitative methodologies: phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography (Malmquist et al., 2019). Data was stored electronically and later interpreted. The pilot research process might be less than in the actual study; the researcher used appropriate steps to ensure that interpretation is accurate and provide any associated limitations with the data collected. Thus, the researcher will observe different stages in this process, including organizing



the data, conducting a preliminary read-through of the database, coding and organizing themes, representing the data, and forming an interpretation to determine authenticity.

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

For this study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews as one of the chosen data collection instruments. Busetto et al. (2020) outlined that semi-structured interviews involve open-ended questions that define broad areas of interest, sometimes including sub-questions. According to Mannan (2022), the researcher asks a standard set of questions to collect data with the semi-structured approach. This practice allowed the researcher to ask additional questions as new lines of interest evolved throughout the interview session.

In keeping with the phenomenology research design employed in this study, the interviews involve a one-to-one, qualitative, and in-depth discussion where the researcher adopts the moderator role. The researcher asked questions in dialogue with a specific individual throughout the interview (Nyumba et al., 2018). The data collection process highlighted the phenomenon and identified ideas perceived by the participants in a specific situation. Galdas (2017) reinforced that the researcher will ensure that the transcript involves sufficient detail on the mechanisms employed to minimize bias in the data collection and analysis sections.

### **Interview Questions**

1. Can you please introduce yourself?
2. Please describe your educational background and career through your current position.
3. Explain how you made your final decision to select this school as your college to attend. SQI
4. Describe any drawbacks you might have experienced at this school concerning school policies. SQI
5. Tell me about your grades; how do you feel about them. SQ]

6. How would you describe your parents' attitude towards your academic performance? SQ2
7. What career path do you plan to pursue? Why? SQ2
8. Do you feel that school is necessary for success in life? Why or why not? SQ2
9. If your parents were wealthy, do you believe it would be necessary to attend school? Explain.  
SQ2
10. Describe your challenges while taking a class at this university. SQ3
11. How do you feel about accessing financial assistance to help you in college? SQ3
12. How important are grades concerning your overall success in school? SQ1
13. Describe college life in your own words. SQ1
14. How do you feel the academic achievement gap is reflected in your academic performance?  
SQ4

With the semi-structural interview, the researcher will formulate 13 questions that will generate short answers and allow the researcher to explore different factors in a discussion format. The first three questions are demographic-related and designed to explore the participants' backgrounds. According to Triguerous and Sandoval,(2017) demographic data presents a more accurate picture of persons involved.

Questions 4-5 address students' experiences at school concerning their academic performance. These questions align with sub-question number 1. These questions support the research topic as they will provide data on the students' cultural beliefs and how families contribute to their culturally related practices relating to grade achievements. The different opportunities and capacities shape the educational equality families have in mind for education. Therefore, the relationship between family background and academic achievement has become critical in evaluating educational equality (Liz, 2018). The researcher looked at the cultural practices of parents and students when examining culture with the achievement gap.

Culture has always played a pivotal role in how students function in the educational arena. Educators agreed that it is often clear that students' perceptions of education tie into their actions in the classroom and can relate to their family backgrounds and practices. Participants must understand who and what they value, which is essential in driving their values and decisionmaking skills (Altintug & Debreli, 2018). Thus, questions 6-9 examine how culture might play a part in the students' perception of attending school to achieve their academic goals. The researcher designed these questions to target sub-research question number two.

The researcher designed questions 10-11 to examine the students' cultural beliefs about their experiences as Black college students at their institution. In higher education, racial inequality is often implicit or subtle. Wong et al. (2020) noted that staff and students from minority ethnic backgrounds could experience microaggression, creating challenges for minority students due to culturally related factors and often driving their perceptions of different experiences. Wong et al. (2020) explained that Black students often agree when they do not have a support mechanism. It does cause much distress and can harm educational decisions. Therefore, these questions are targeting sub-research question number three.

Numbers 12-13 address the students' attitude towards getting good grades to succeed. Students often have better learning attitudes when teachers use culturally sensitive pedagogical practices (Scot, 2018). Questions 12 and 13 look back on students' attitudes towards their grades in school and how this relates to their cultural experiences in their different classes. Thus, these two questions aligned with research sub-question number one, which discusses students' attitudes toward their academic achievements.

### **Semi-structured Interview Data Analysis Plan**

According to Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology provides a systematic approach to analyzing data about lived experiences. Thus, the data analysis process in this study employs the steps and procedures put forward by Moustakas (1994). as data is analyzed. Since this approach relies on individual experiences, the stories will be told from the participants' voices and not the researcher's. To carry out the analytical aspects of this study in keeping with the procedures discussed by Moustakas (1994).

The data analysis process employs phenomenological reduction, including bracketing, horizontalizing, and organizing. The researcher used consistent qualities and themes to construct textual descriptions. Using horizontalization helps identify the equal value of each statement, a segment of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, the researcher categorized the information collected into components and themes to ease analysis. A textural-structural description that emerges from the data collection process represents the meaning and essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Coding. In this research exercise, there was a coding process, which the researcher used to analyze the data that was collected. Coding refers to the identification of topics, issues, similarities, and differences that are revealed through the participants' narratives and interpreted by the researcher Belotto (2018), who explained that according to Moustakas (1994), the coding process allowed for the interpretation of large segments of text and portions of information in new ways. The researcher recorded and transcribed data on the students' cultural experiences and practices when they responded to each interview question.

The researcher used the coding process to organize the information collected further under logical categories to ease manipulating the data collected. To establish the credibility of

the coding process, the researcher could employ a skilled transcriptionist or another researcher to code the same transcript to identify and discuss similarities and differences between the two sets of regulations (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher also included the theming process, which further, the codes from the different transcripts were drawn together to present the findings coherently and meaningfully.

**Synthesizing** In synthesizing the data collected, the researcher will endeavor to summarize and report findings respectfully. Sutton and Austin (2015). explained that synthesizing data presented by the researcher is crucial as it involves summarizing the participant's story in a manner that is both respectful to those participants and meaningful to readers. In synthesizing this research exercise, the researcher ensured that the participants' information included quotes supported by direct quotations. Shaw et al. (2020). agreed that synthesis involves drawing on existing theory and research conducted to make sense of qualitative evidence. The researcher found this necessary to help readers see the students' cultural practices and experiences in each research.

**Bracketing** is a method used in qualitative research to counteract the effect of preconceptions that may taint the research process. According to Eddles-Hirsch (2015) supported by Moustakas (1994), bracketing allows the researcher to listen and record the participant's description of an experience openly. In this phenomenological approach, the researcher deliberately set aside any preconceived notions or everyday beliefs previously used to explain the academic achievement gap, which is the phenomenon involved in the study. In this study on the academic achievement gap among college students, the researcher looked at words like cultural, educational, experiences, and practices, among other words, to ensure that there will be no misconceptions about their meanings as used in the research exercises.

Horizontalization. It is part of the phenomenological research process, where the researcher gives equal value to all the participants' statements. The study needs to gather all the credible perceptions of participants about their experiences in high school, thus helping the researcher to prepare valuable results. According to Cohodes (2018), horizontalization is the second step in data analysis. It involves the researcher listing every significant statement relevant to the topic and giving it equal value. Therefore, in analyzing the different data collection instruments, the researcher removed all repetitive messages and those that do not relate to the research questions.

Cohodes (2018). explained that this step is vital to this phenomenological research exercise because it helps the researcher to include all the words uttered by interviewees so that meaning will remain precise and in keeping with the interviewees' intended messages. In this study that looks at the academic gap of high school students, it is incumbent upon the researcher to ensure that the data collected is as accurate and precise as possible so that the correct meaning will be captured and reported.

### **Focus Groups**

The focus group will consist of eight students the researcher deems suitable for the sample group. Bhar (2018). recommended that when creating a context where students feel more comfortable discussing their experiences, the researcher began with questions to gather students' background information. In contrast, in a focus group discussion, researchers adopt the facilitator or moderator role. Thus, in the focus group setting, the researcher facilitated or moderated a group discussion between participants and not between the researcher and the participants (Nyumba et al., 2018). The researcher secured an in-depth response to each question as the focus groups explored different research questions.

The primary data collection methods include audio and tape recording (Nyumba et al., 2018). As the moderator, the researcher ensured the necessary skills to ensure that the discussion flowed as all the participants got a chance to speak (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). With the researcher as moderator, the group will respond to eight questions addressing the three research questions as the researcher explores the student's perceptions about their culturally related experiences. The researcher will focus on the duration and number of questions in the focus group exercise to minimize or illuminate participants' fatigue.

With the researcher as moderator, the group responded to seven questions addressing the three research questions and the student's perceptions about their culturally related experiences. The researcher paid attention to the duration of the session and the number of questions in the focus group exercise to minimize or illuminate the participants' fatigue. The focus group session was a relaxed and social setting, giving the researcher opportunities to explore different input from the participants. Securing permission from the various institutions before conducting the data collection exercise, the researcher provided for students to be recorded by a third party during the interview session.

### ***Focus Group Questions***

1. Does it matter what school you attend? Why/Why not? Q1
2. Do you think that money is a contributing factor in ensuring students' academic success?  
Explain SQ2
3. What is your perspective on the schools' policies and how this relate to you excelling at your institution of choice? SQ3
4. What are some of your beliefs and practices that contributed to your decisions about the school you would attend? SQ3

5. Describe the actions you would take if you were a financially challenged student seeking to gain academic success. SQ3
6. As a Black aspiring college student, how did your school-related experiences and knowledge help you decide upon the appropriateness of a particular school to attend?
7. What about culture? How do you think that relates to students' academic achievements?  
With the main emphasis of the research questions in mind, the researcher formulated the

focus group questions to derive answers to all the research questions. Therefore, question 1 targets students' backgrounds and cultural stance on school. The researcher explored this area by posing the focus question first and then steering the follow-up question toward the students' cultural beliefs as the conversations progressed. Questions 1, 2, and 3 align to sub-question 2, which looks at students' perceptions of school choice and financial stability towards achieving their life goals.

The researcher designed questions four and five to identify students' decision-making drivers towards their career expectations. These two questions target research question number two, which also involves the finances and career endeavors of the students. Questions 6 and 7 are the wrap-up questions designed to collect additional information on all three research sub-questions as they examine the culture and students' perception of their academic achievements.

### ***Focus Group Data Analysis Plan***

Data will be stored electronically and later interpreted. Since the researcher will collect data using transcripts, the researcher will use the same data analysis processes as indicated for the individual interviews outlined above. While the researcher will manipulate the volume of data in the pilot research process, the data might be less than in the actual study.



## Student Survey

With this study, the researcher used a survey document to conduct the data collection process as one of the data collection strategies chosen. Using a survey in a phenomenological study is relevant because it provides additional evidence of students' responses to the research questions in a written format. According to Bhar (2018), the researcher can use the data collected to compare responses in the analysis process. The survey data collection instrument involved different questions targeting each research question. After the students complete the survey instruments, the researcher will evaluate the students' responses according to the questions. The researcher formulated the survey questions instead of a published survey. Subsequently, each question on the survey aligned with the research questions posed in an open-ended format, allowing the researcher to understand the perceptions that the students discussed.

### *Student Survey Questions*

Read each question and select your answer from the options given.

1	Can choice of school impact our grades?			Sometimes
2	Diversity helps all students	Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree
3	Are teachers doing enough for Black students?			
4	The harder you work the higher grades you maintain.	True	False	Sometimes
	Was it hard to get money for school?			Sometimes
6	How did you get money for school?	Loan	Scholarship	Other
	If you have money, you would do great in school	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
8	I will do anything to get good grades	Agree	Disagree	Ma be
9	How do you believe your family view your schooling?	Interested	Not interested	
10	I believe school will help me to live a good life as an adult	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
11	Who helped with your career plans?	School	Family	Friend
12	Do students and teachers treat you different?	Often	Sometimes	Never

13	How do you feel about the academic achievement	Strongly	Indifferent	Don 't know
14	Do you believe the government can fix the gap issue?	Yes	No	Maybe

The researcher tailored each survey question to target the research questions. Survey questions numbers 1-4 target sub-question number 1. These questions look at how Black students view their culturally related students while attending college. For survey questions 5-8, look at subresearch question 2. These questions examined how students perceived their finance-related issues as they secured funding for school. Sub-research question three aligns with survey questions 9-11. These questions examined how students perceive their culturally related experiences as collect students.

With this phenomenological study, the analysis of this survey is the descriptive statistical analysis method of data analysis. Anderson (2019) explained that descriptive analysis is the type of data analysis that helps describe, show, or summarize data so that the researcher can derive patterns from the data manipulated, fulfilling the conditions anticipated. According to Singh & Rawat (2019), the primary goal of statistical data analysis is to identify trends in consumer behaviors in businesses, providing information valuable for advanced decision-making in business. Additionally, statistical data analysis can assist in summarizing data as statistical data analysis concentrates on interpreting the result to drive inferences and predictions.

### **Data Synthesis**

In synthesizing the data collected, the researcher will summarize and report findings. This action will be respectful to the participants and meaningful to the readers. Sutton and Austin (2015) posited that synthesizing data presented by the researcher is crucial as it involves respectfully summarizing the stories presented by the participants. In synthesizing this research exercise, the researcher will ensure that the information will include and be supported by direct

quotations from the students. Shaw et al. (2020) agreed that synthesis involves drawing upon existing theory or research and may be conducted rapidly, making sense of qualitative evidence. The researcher will ensure that information is made clear to readers that the cultural practices and experiences of the students are addressed in each research question during the interview sessions, adding reliability to the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is one-way researchers can persuade themselves and readers that their research findings are worthy of attention. Lorelli et al. (2017) argued that various sources are essential in any qualitative research exercise since the researcher uses different sources to gather information to discuss other theories related to the research questions. When looking at the phenomenon of the academic achievement gap, with the critical area being students' cultural experiences and practices, the data being collected and reported must be trustworthy. Individuals and institutions that will use the information reported in this study understand that the researcher followed all steps to ensure the information's trustworthiness. The researcher secured reliability in this study by providing no family relations to any participants to limit any possibility of irregularities with the survey.

### **Credibility**

As reported by Lorelli et al. (2017), the credibility of a study determines when readers recognize and understand their experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) study on credibility outlined that it includes activities such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, data collection triangulation, and researcher triangulation. The researcher employed peer debriefing to provide an external check on the research process, increasing the credibility of this study. There will also be an examination of referential adequacy to check the preliminary findings and

comparison against the raw data. In securing credibility, the researcher employed the method of triangulation. This method helps the researcher explore and explain complex human behavior using different ways to give a more balanced explanation (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Dissanayake and Samarathunga (2018) explained that data triangulation involves collecting data from different sources or at other times. In utilizing the triangulation method, the researcher employed the moderator triangulation technique, which includes several researchers. Thus, it is vital to the achievement gap in students' cultural practices and experiences, resulting in the researcher drawing information from several different research papers to explore the findings of other researchers who have looked at similar topics in the past.

### **Dependability**

The researcher ensured the research process was logical, traceable, and documented as outlined (Lorelli et al., 2017). The researcher maintained dependability by getting the information audited by a reputable source. Therefore, after the data collection process, the researcher will identify any errors overlooked in the preparation stage. The researcher will employ the member technique strategy to check for accuracy. Member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is a technique for exploring the credibility of results (Birt et al., 2016).

The researcher returned data results for participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences. With this practice, the researcher is confident that other researchers could repeat the study and that the findings would be consistent as they relate to the factors contributing to Black college students' cultural practices and experiences. The researcher used an inquiry audit to establish dependability. Thus, the research process and data analysis were reviewed to ensure consistent findings. The researcher turned over all relevant documents will be

turned over to an independent person to examine their accuracy and dependability before publishing.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to generalizing the qualitative researcher's inquiry, demonstrating that the findings apply to other contexts (Lorelli et al., 2017). Thus, if a researcher is looking further into the academic achievement gap of students, the information from this study should be transferable. It is essential with any qualitative research because other researchers would like to replicate the research and thus use the material presented in that study. The researcher must have a detailed description throughout the survey to maintain transferability for this study. Those who seek to transfer the findings to their studies can judge transferability. The researcher will extensively explain different terms and factors in the detailed description throughout the paper, which might not be apparent or familiar to the average reader.

### **Confirmability**

According to Lorelli et al. (2017), confirmability ensures that the researcher's interpretations and findings relate to the data. The researcher ensured that the reported results were in keeping with the collected data and did not come from the researchers' minds arbitrarily. Thus, if the researcher has a personal belief about the achievement gap in how students' cultural practices and experiences relate to academic decisions, the researcher ensured that the data take precedence over any personal beliefs that might be present.

To establish confirmability in this qualitative research design, the researcher provided an audit trail to target every step of data analysis to provide a rationale for the decisions made. The audit trail helps to establish that the study's findings accurately portray participants' responses. According to Kaufman (2018), the main aim of the audit procedure is to create a clear

association between interpretations and conclusions in the final research document to the data and throughout the study. Thus, the research endeavored to maintain an audit process that involved an audit trail documenting the entire research process, including data gathering techniques, into the data analysis phase of the study. Chetty (2016) explained that it is vital to maintain ethical practices in this study and accountability towards the public by protecting human or animal subjects. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations involve values like accountability, trust, mutual respect, and fairness among all the parties involved in a study. Haines (2017) outlined that ethical issues in some types of qualitative research, such as ethnographic research, can make justification and gain ethical approval challenging. Since ethical expectations are non-negotiable when conducting studies, researchers must ensure that all prescribed procedures are followed closely throughout the research process. Thus, the researcher endeavored to adhere to all ethical expectations in this study.

Some challenges can arise in data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study's findings. As this research exercise involves gathering vast volumes of literature and data, the researcher made a special effort to maintain ethical practices. Therefore, researchers agree that it is incumbent upon the researcher to manage the possibilities of risk or harm to participants or groups by applying standard ethical guidelines (Haines, 2017). Vital observations were made regarding ethical factors, including assuring confidentiality for all information in the data collection and reporting processes. Surkis and Reid (2015) noted that data management ensures that the researcher plans and executes the data collection process in an organized, understandable, and transparent manner. Thus, data was stored at a secured location, employing different coding strategies for retrieval.

Therefore, the researcher will secure confidential passwords and store sensitive information in secured areas. The researcher could discard data after three years based on the researcher. During the preliminary meetings with participants, all protocols surrounding the study that apply to confidentiality will be discussed, including risks the researcher will address and mitigation factors. Also, to further observe professional ethics, the researcher will ensure that the data reported are not misleading but reported verbatim as provided by respondents to avoid plagiarism. The researcher secured the authenticity of all documents used were secured by the researcher as the origin of each record must be from reliable sources.

### **Summary**

Chapter three involved the description of the vital steps of the research process. The chapter covered the different areas of this qualitative study and set a solid foundation for the study. The researcher will follow all the preliminary steps involved in conducting this study as discussed in this chapter; following the steps outlined ensures that the investigation is reliable and valuable to the different entities that might find the study helpful. This qualitative research study looks at Black adult college students' lived culturally related experiences concerning the academic achievement gap. This type of research studies the different responses to research questions and reports the core findings articulated by the participants during interviews, focus groups, and surveys.

Throughout the research process of this study, the researcher collected, evaluated, and reported the data using ethical practices to ensure that the data reported was reliable and valid in the educational arena. In keeping with this qualitative study, the researcher will endeavor to involve all the key components of a solid research study, including data collection sources, analysis, and reporting techniques associated with a qualitative research study. Understandably,

the researcher cannot identify all related factors in the planning or the implementation process; however, potential roadblocks will be reported in this study as they arise to ensure validity and reliability throughout each study stage.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The current qualitative phenomenological study explores Black adult college students' experiences and perceptions about their culturally related incidents and the achievement gap in Northern Virginia. This chapter includes a clear description of the participants involved in the study. It will outline and describe the data collected in the form of narratives and themes utilizing charts, graphs, tables, or models as applicable based on the researcher's decisions. This section will also include outliers, which are areas not identified in the data related to the research questions. I will organize responses under the themes of each research question under level one headers before the conclusion section at the end of the chapter.

### **Participants**

This section contains information about the participants and provides brief narratives about the student's backgrounds and involvement in the study. Numbers identify each student in keeping with the practices of this qualitative study, which will not be using students' names or any other label that could reveal their identities. As discussed below, all students selected for this study are above 18. There was no need for parental involvement in the student selection process, as students could participate in the study alone. Students who agreed to participate in this study were those enrolled full-time at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia. Based on the information provided by the participating students, their academic status ranged from honors to straight passing with grades A, B, or C. The participants were also Black and over 18 years



which is in keeping with the specified age requirements of the study requirements as outlined on the consent document that I provided potential participants with during the recruitment process.

**Table 1**

*Overview of Participants*

**Table 1**

*Overview of Participants*

<b>Participant's Pseudonym</b>	<b>Grades (A, B, or C).</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Student 1	A's	18	Female
Student 2	A's & B's	21	Female
Student 3	A's, B's & Cs	20	Male
Student 4	A's & B's	20	Male
Student 5	A's	22	Male
Student 6	A's & B's	20	Female
Student 7	A's & B's	22	Female
Student 8	A's	21	Female
Student 9	A's, B's & C's	20	Male
Student 10	A's & B's	20	Female
Student 11	A's & B's	19	Female
Student 12	A's & Bs	20	Male
Student 13	A's & B's	21	Male

Table 1 outlines facts about each student concerning their grades, age, and gender. The consent document houses information concerning the participants and the different data collection instruments: student surveys, student interviews, and focus group discussions. Students provided their first names and age on the consent form. Then, they offered their grade achievement levels during the interview sessions as they responded to the initial question during the interview session.

**Student 1**

This student is from the Washington, DC, area and lives with her mother in a single-parent home setting. She is making straight A's and is a member of the Honors Society at Marymount University. The student is 18 years old. Student 1 came from a home setting that she describes as strict as her mother had it hard to find the funds to support her in college, and thus, she was encouraged to work hard. During the interview session, she expressed her belief in hard work to maintain high grades in her endeavors to be successful in college.

**Student 2**

This student is a 21-year-old female majoring in criminal justice. She attended high school in Maryland and explained that her plans involve her dreams of becoming a judge in the judicial system. Thus, she needs to pursue a degree in Criminal Justice now. This student is from Maryland and thus must secure accommodation close to Marymount as she cannot return to classes daily. She did not elect to participate in the honors society but made straight 'As' in her courses. She is presently a Junior at Marymount University.

**Student 3**

The student is a male student who lives off campus and takes public transportation to school each day. While he does not live at home with his parents, he lives with fellow students and shares living facilities. This student attended high school in Danville, Virginia, comes from Martinsville, Virginia, and is also from a single-family home. He is majoring in biology and hoping to become a medical doctor one day. The student is 20 and in his second year at Marymount University. Student 3 is making As, Bs, and Cs in his classes.

**Student 4**

Student 4 is a student from France and is in the USA on a scholarship, majoring in accounting. The student is 20 years of age and did most of his schooling in his county, which is France. He explained that he struggled with the language initially, but the student likes the university as he continues pursuing his bachelor's degree in accounting. This student is staying on campus for this school year since his family still lives in France. He is making A's and Bs in his classes and is a first-year student at Marymount University.

**Student 5**

This student is a Virginia native who attended high school in Virginia and is now in his second semester at Marymount studying computer sciences. He proudly expressed that his grades look great and, surprisingly, much better than in high school. This student lives off campus and uses public transportation to get around each day. He is also responsible for taking his siblings to school and seeing that she is promptly home daily. He is making A's, Bs, and Cs in his classes. Student #5 is 22 and expressed that both parents support her.

**Student 6**

This student is a female who receives full support from her mother, who is a nurse. She is 18, making A's and Bs in her courses. Student 6 is majoring in Business Administration. The student is a rising senior at Marymount University. This student graduated from a Virginia high school as a Valedictorian and is studying at Marymount University on a scholarship due to her academic excellence. She lives off-campus but does not stay with her family. The student depends on public transportation to commute daily to and from school.

**Student 7**

This student is a female student who is getting As and Bs at Marymount University. She depends on her father and older brother to help finance her college expenses. This student is also from the DC region and lives on campus as she pursues a degree in Criminal Justice. Student 7 is 22 years old and is in the junior year of her studies at Marymount. She plans to go further with her studies and become a leader in the criminal justice arena. Along with getting help from her family, this student depends on small scholarships and grants to help offset some of the college expenses. She has been getting As and Bs in her classes so far.

**Student 8**

Student 8 is a 21-year-old female student pursuing a degree in cosmetology and is making all A's in her classes so far. She elected not to be a part of the Honors Society program but is the president of the Student Union Class of 2023 at Marymount University. She is in the final year of her studies and hopes to graduate this Summer – 'summa cum laude. She gets most of her college finances taken care of by her family and works part-time as she studies. She is partially responsible for her younger brother, who plans to start college this fall.

**Student 9**

This male student is 20 and is getting As and Bs in his classes. He is pursuing a degree in Criminal Justice and hopes to move on to becoming a Lawyer. He is presently in the first year of his college experience. He attended high school in Reston, Virginia, and did extra classes to prepare him for college during his final year. This student depends on scholarships and family support to help him pay for college. He works during the summer months to make extra money to help with his expenses as he continues to live on campus as a freshman at the university.

**Student 10**

This student is a 20-year-old female student who is in her Junior year at Marymount University. She is a native of Washington, DC, and lives with her parents as she attends college. This student is earning As and Bs in her classes at Marymount and is pursuing a degree in entrepreneurship. She depends mostly on scholarships and grants to help offset her college expenses, which involve traveling back and forth to school daily and other on-campus expenses that she must meet. Student 10 believes working hard to achieve her goals is essential based on what her parents taught her.

**Student 11**

Student 11 is a female student who is studying in the field of psychology. She is 20 years old and lives off campus with other schoolmates, sharing living accommodations and expenses with the small group. This student depends on scholarships, grants, and loans from family members to help with college expenses. Student 11 is also making A's and Bs in her classes and is in her final year as a college student. She believes that no matter what happens, she will endeavor to finish college strong and aspire to achieve her goal of becoming a leader in the field of psychology.

**Student 12**

This student is a 20-year-old male student who is studying Engineering at Marymount University. He explained that he started out getting poor grades in high school but got A's in his final years, giving him the drive to continue to college. He decided to attend this university because of the money and additional incentives to participate in the institution. He also gets

money through other grants and scholarships explicitly targeting Black college students and is presently getting As and Bs in his classes.

### **Student 13**

This student is a 21-year-old male student studying to become an orthopedic surgeon and, therefore, is pursuing a degree in biology. He gets money from family members and small grants and scholarships he has secured as a minority student. This student is making all A's in his classes and plans to keep up this trend to qualify for medical school when the time comes. He is originally from Danville, Virginia, and lives off campus. He travels to his parents' home occasionally to spend time with his siblings before returning to the area for school. He outlined that his program would cost much money, but he is adamant about completing his studies and achieving his goals no matter the cost.

### **Results**

This section of the study involved brief discussions of the data collected in them. As Misra et al. (2022). outlined, at the heart of any qualitative research approach, themes are abstract, subtle expressions/patterns adopting processes that explain a phenomenon. Subsequently, the researcher will endeavor to present the articles formulated in this section as perceptions, experiences, feelings, values, and emotions residing in the minds of participants of the research. The researcher employed in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys to collect data and agrees that this strategy will make it easier to detect the themes of this section of the study.

### **Themes**

This study involves thematic analysis, an analytic method for deriving the central themes from verbal data (Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990). As part of the thematic data analysis process, the researcher employed phenomenological reduction, which included bracketing,

horizontalizing, and organizing. This strategy involves identifying consistent themes to help construct textual descriptions. Therefore, data analysis consists of categorizing information collected during the data collection processes and arranging them into components and compositions to ease analysis.

The coding process employed in this study is a deductive coding strategy that allowed the researcher to develop a list of codes based on the individual's research questions. This step involved the identification of topics, issues, similarities, and differences from the different data collection processes. This process was necessary to facilitate the interpretation of the large segments of data collected during the interviews and other data collection exercises. Further, to arrive at the themes for this study, the researcher employed a selective coding process that identifies core categories. Therefore, this theming process drew together the codes from the transcripts recorded to present the findings coherently and meaningfully. Thus, the data was recorded and transcribed under headings coded according to each theme from the research question and the main idea behind each question. Appendix D contains the emerging themes from each data source used.

With this phenomenological study, the data collected, specifically the student survey, was analyzed according to the descriptive statistical analysis method (Singh, 2019). This step was done to facilitate describing, showing, and summarizing data so that readers can identify patterns from it. From this strategy, the researcher used data from the student survey sheets to identify themes and trends in the students' behaviors as they worked through each culturally related experience they had as Black college students.

**Table 2. Themes Outlined**

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<b>Themes:</b>	<b>Theme 1</b>	<b>Theme 2:</b>	<b>Theme3:</b>
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	Cultural Beliefs and Academics	Finances and College Success	Campus Related Experiences
Sub-theme	Students' Perceptions Of Grades	Financial Challenges	Available Resources
Sub-theme	Peer Interactions	Sources of Money	School Policies
Sub-theme	Family Support	School Culture	Academics

Table 2 outlines the themes as well as sub-themes for this research study which were formulated according to the research questions under each data collection instrument and processed to guide the discussion and analysis of the data collected. As displayed in Table 1, this section will involve students' responses to research questions as they are organized and presented during the interview and focus question sections. Each theme has sub-themes that involve even deeper opportunities to explore students' responses to the questions from data collection instruments that address the research questions giving the researcher greater opportunities to explore students' responses. This table is labeled Themes Outlined providing clarity to the relevance of the table as readers need to understand that there was a prescribed requirement for such a table to that would list the different themes derived by the researcher as the different data collection process were conducted and the data was collated.

### **Theme 1: Cultural Beliefs and Academic Performance**

#### **Table 3.**

Culturally Related Factors	Students' Responses
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	Strong	Moderate	No Relationship
Grades	11	0	2
Peers	0	1	12
Family	10	2	1

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To answer the different research questions , a coding process using themes as outlined in Chapter 3 was employed as a data analysis tool to accurately and systematically present and discuss the findings from the data collected. As outlined in Table 3, this first theme looked at students' cultural beliefs in relation to their academic performance, as explored below under the different sub-themes. Through this process, the researcher explored how students associate their cultural beliefs and practices with their academic performance in college. This theme was broken down into three sub-themes to present the data collected.

### ***Students' Perceptions of Grades***

During the interview session, 11 students agreed that working hard for high grades is important to succeed in their classes. In contrast, 2 of the participants did not agree that their grades were important to college success. Student #8 expressed a strong belief in getting high grades as she stated, "I had to drop one of my classes because I was making low grades and could not get the help I needed from my professor, so I dropped out because this would mess up my grade records." Only one student expressed that he did not believe high grades would help him secure success in his college courses. When asked if he thought grades were important,

Student #3 stated, "No, I do not believe in 'slaving' for high grades because it does not mean you will be good out there in the world"; I work to make sure that I am passing my classes.

### ***Perceptions of Peer Interactions***

When asked how they perceived their peer-related experiences about their college success, 12 students responded that they did not have many negative interactions with other students. Only one student agreed that there were few negative interactions with peers, which did not affect her academics. Student #10 stated, "Since this is mainly an athletic-based institution, we did not have time for bias in or interactions since we played on the same team; that did not happen." Student 11 added, "I did not try to join any group that I did not fit in; I just found my circle and stuck to my kind." The students agreed that they did not make the subtle segregation among students an issue or cause them to get bad grades. From the students' responses, the emphasis was on ensuring that you were not caught in the wrong group and thus exposed to rejection from other students who might consider you a misfit.

### ***Family Support***

From the student interview sessions, ten students agreed that families supported them where their college efforts were concerned. 2 students responded that their parents or other family members did not care much about their grades but placed greater emphasis on them remaining in school. None of the participants supported the point that family members did not help them to do well academically as they worked through their college courses. During the student interview, participants agreed that while parents supported them in attending college, some wanted them out of the house and doing something and not excelling so much in college. Student #12 stated, "Really, my family focused on wanting me to attend college because they wanted to know that I

was doing something positive with my life and not much focus on me getting high grades or gaining a career.

Student 5 also stated, "My mother always tells me to work hard and focus on getting high grades because this is how I am going to make it in this world". Two of the 13 students interviewed agreed that they were indifferent about their family involvement in their college endeavors since they did not have much involvement with their parents that could help them to do well in college. The students agreed, however, that when families are involved in their lives, it makes a world of difference for them to know that someone is there to care not only by words but also by action. Student 1 stated I did not have a choice when it came to my college work because my mother did not play when it came to school; she would destroy me if I messed up".

## **Theme 2: Finances and College Success**

The second theme that was formulated based on the data collected was the theme of 'finances and college successes. This theme equates to the second research questions as the data collected was being presented. Under this main theme, the researcher endeavored to identify the students' perceptions about their experiences related to finances and how they felt this relates to their success as Black college students. As a part of the coding process, this theme was also broken down into three sub-themes as a strategy to bring clarity to the data that was being reported and analyzed.

### ***Sources of Money***

When asked about accessing funds for the school, students' responses were scattered. As outlined in Table 3, from the student survey data, six students agreed that it was challenging to obtain funds for college. Student #1 stated, "When I was seeking funds for college, I noticed that non-Black students could access more funds through the different financial entities and much

easier than Black students." Three of the 13 participating students agreed that family members chipped in to help them pay for their college expenses. Eight students indicated they had to seek assistance from sources such as loans or scholarships to raise funds for college. 2 Participants identified grants made available to minority college students as a source of funding for their college expenses. Three students agreed they got loans or gifts from family members to help with their college expenses.

### ***Financial Challenges***

From the student survey data collected, four students agreed that they were relaxed about accessing financial help from the government. Student 9 said, "I was not worried about getting government assistance because I am a minority student." The students agreed that their race was pivotal in receiving financial assistance through grants and loans. As seen in Table 2, more than 1/2 of the students decided that finance was a decisive factor that created some strain on them throughout their studies.

Two of the 13 students outlined that they would not be pushing themselves to complete their studies if they were rich. The other 11 students agreed that they would still want to gain a solid education regardless of their financial standing, as this was what their parents taught them at home. From the student interview, 8 of the 13 students agreed they were optimistic about getting loans for school. One student stated, "I was not too concerned about getting money since I realized that Black students from low-income families could get grants easily due to their family financial backgrounds."

### ***College Versus Money***

When asked about their perceptions of college and the money needed to attend and be successful, the students needed an overall strong belief that college is essential to secure success

in life. Two out of the 13 students expressed their belief that securing funds for a college education is essential as they pursue their life goals and dreams. Nine of the students surveyed were neutral in their responses regarding the need for college and the funds needed to succeed. In contrast, three students disagreed that college was necessary for success in life.

### **Theme 3: Campus Related Experiences**

Based on data collected on the third research question, the researcher formulated this last theme, which involves the students' perceptions of their experiences on the college campus they attended. Since this study is looking at students' overall culturally related lived experiences as Black college students, the researcher deemed it essential also to explore the students' perceptions of the different experiences or incidents they had on the college campus while working on their college degrees. This theme involved three sub-themes that looked at the central theme in different sections to aid clarity and accuracy concerning the data reporting and analysis processes.

#### ***Faculty Interactions***

During the focus group discussion, the participants agreed that there were some instances where faculty displayed behaviors that caused students to be disgruntled with how they treated students. As seen in Figure 3, three students outlined that they had discrepancies with faculty, and some outlined that they had to take their issues with staff outside of the classroom to get some semblance of justice. During the discussion, student 8 stated, "I had to drop one class due to a disagreement with one of my professors, and even though I tried, I did not get the help I needed from the office; the school did nothing to help me with the issue. Most participants agreed that staff-related issues were not so bad as to cause them to drop out of school entirely.

They decided that the staff issues strengthened their zeal to press on and complete their studies. Student 7 said, "When I had issues with staff, I did not let them affect me; they made me want to work harder to succeed." The students agreed that these staff-related issues were uncommon in their college experiences.

### ***School Policies***

When asked about school policies and how they influenced their cultural practices on campus, participants agreed that there were some disparities in how the college enforced its policies among student groups. Student 3 stated, "When it comes to policies, I feel as if I had to work harder to measure up because there are not enough representations for Black students." Some students agreed that the policies were logical and were there to ensure their safety. The students outlined that the authorities did not hinder their cultural practices. One student stated, "Some of the policies seem to be just there for show but expressed that everyone should be made to follow all the rules and not just some." The participants explained that this made them feel uncomfortable.

One student stated, "I have a Black teacher, and even he said that the way they teach is subjective, affecting my academic performance in some of my classes." Still, they opted to avoid taking things any further since they wanted to ensure their growth on campus. When asked about the help professors offered students, the participants agreed that on a scale from 1-5, with five being very high, the students showed two, saying that they do not get much support from professors if they are in any bind and that professors could help them.

### ***Culture and Academic Success***

When asked about culture versus academic performance during the focus group discussion, most students agreed that culture played a substantial part in their grades. Student number 7

stated, "Yes, culture played a strong role in grades since families would strongly express their desire to me make good grades, and since I did not want to disappoint, I made sure that my grades were good." Student #13 added, "I think it is about perspective; this is a big thing because if a teacher is from the same culture as me, then the teacher will help me more to achieve my goals in that class." Student #7 also contributed to the argument and stated, "Not only that, but if a teacher is not from the same culture as me, then that teacher is not going to understand how hard it was for me to come to this point in life, another thing is that if a teacher is not able to see eye to eye with you, then they might not be able to treat yours fairly."

### **Outliers Data and Findings**

This section involves two outliers discovered during the data collection sessions that were not part of the research questions. Nowak-Brzezińska and Łazarz (2021). outlined that an outlier in the qualitative study could be a data object that appears to be inconsistent with the rest of the dataset based on an observation that deviates significantly from other comments, giving rise to suspicions about the correctness of the data. With outliers, the researcher can see a significance in these findings that could change the validity of the data presented. Thus, it is vital to mention these outliers as they arise in the data collection process. I will discuss these outliers below to identify their relations to the data analysis process.

### ***Additional Financial Challenges***

When asked about the possibility of having challenges related to attending college, one student stated, "I did not have setbacks per se, but at one time, I felt like dropping out because I had so many science classes, which were hard, and I did not expect that." Student 7 stated, "I, too, taught about dropping out due to the course content being simple but too much for me at some point. Other students talked about the challenges of the course content that they had to

take, which posed issues for them and resulted in them wanting to discontinue their classes at some point. These are outliers since the difficulty level of course content or the volume of work was not an area not involved in the research questions but could have some relationship to the student's academic performance.

### ***Other Students' Beliefs***

Another outlier in the data collection exercise came out in the focus group discussion concerning students' beliefs that the school did not show that they cared enough about them to make information readily available to them as Black students. While the research questions looked at students' perceptions of school policies and how that related to their academic performances, the sub-question did not zero in on students' perceptions of how they thought the school felt about their well-being as students needing all the support they could get. Student 5 stated, "I felt like no one cared enough to tell me that I could access one-on-one counseling free here on campus, and I had a hard time last year so much that I had to sit out a whole semester to get myself back on track from stress" Another student stated, "Yes, I did not know that there was money I could get at some point to help me with my everyday expenses here on campus. So, I missed out on that." This issue could be tied to the student's willingness and abilities to give their best efforts in school if they did not believe the institution itself did not care about them.

### **Research Questions Responses**

This section offers concise answers to the research questions in direct quotes of the different responses to the research questions. The researcher will arrange the area under headings stating each research question, and then answers to each question will be reported. This action will help set a platform for discussing the findings in Chapter 5. Using this format will provide a logical way to document and subsequently analyze the research questions and identify the correct



outcomes for the study. This reporting step is essential owing to the sensitivity of qualitative research towards the specific phenomenon and the type of paradigmatic stance. Thus, the researchers will endeavor to adopt the prescribed analytical approaches that will involve an exploration of the distinct characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation.

### **Central Research Question**

What have been the perceptions of Black adult college students concerning their lived cultural experiences about the academic achievement gap? The students who participated in this study expressed their belief that going through something as a Black student could cause you to perform poorly in college, negatively affecting the academic achievement gap. Student #5 stated, "There was a time I was so sick and did not have the money to get medical help as a Black student, and I had to drop out for almost half a year because of my poor grades, and this went down in the records if I was not Black, I feel things would be different."

Student 11 stated, "I had to drop out of a class because of a hard racially related situation with the professor, which caused me to get a failing grade in that class; this went down in the records and helped to widen the gap even more ." During the focus group discussion, the students agreed that culturally, not all Black families believe that school is essential. They think some students just come for the experience, so they do not put in that effort; they should get high grades.

### **Sub-Question 1**

How have the cultural-related experiences of Black adult college students influenced their academic performance?

The overall perspective of the participants towards this question is that while cultural backgrounds could play a part in the student's academic performance and a subsequent driver to

the educational gap, some students did not agree with this belief. Student #6 stated, "I have thought about dropping out on several occasions due to some of my experiences here at college, but because of my desire to excel and to achieve my goals, I did not." Another student said, "My parents raised me to work hard, so regardless of what happened to me here, good or bad, I continue to work hard." A few other students agreed that their cultural upbringing help them to believe in hard work to become the best person they can become and not to make circumstances or experiences cause them to let go of their dreams.

### **Sub-Question 2**

What are the perceptions of Black adult college students about their financial standing and achieving their academic goals at the different universities they might have chosen?

The participants' responses to this question showed that they believe money is significant to their academic success. Student 4 stated, "My decision to come to college was very moneydriven since my mother makes good money, but she does not take home all of it, so she could not help me as the paperwork suggested." Another student stated, "I was lucky to get with some people who helped me to get jobs and some different grants and scholarships that helped me to pay for college." In the student surveys, over 80% of the students agreed that with money, they could get into college and become successful students while studying. Roughly 60% of the participants agreed that accessing the cash for college took work, and they had to look at different sources to get the funds they needed to attend college.

### **Sub-Question 3**

What role does culture play in the reactions of Black college students toward their school-related experiences? Culture is an important area to look at when focusing on the perceptions of Black college students concerning their school experiences. The students' responses to this sub-research

question leaned more towards the stance that cultural background can play a significant role in the different experiences that Black college students might have throughout their college career. Student 1 stated, "I feel that the way the school handles the resources for all students was often not done the same for Black students vs. non-Black students.

Another student said, "If I were not Black, I believe the school would handle my situation differently, giving me a better option than to drop out of my class when I did." Student 8 stated, "No one helped me when I got sick and could not come to school; I agree that a part of this was because of my race." Student 10 stated, "There is not enough of 'us' being represented in the decision-making processes, which is not good." However, this stance differed from the participants' consensus as some students felt that their overall college experiences were not culturally driven but just reality happening."

### **Summary**

The information involved themes that targeted the research questions from the data collected and reported. This study's main topic is investigating the relationships between the academic achievement gap and the culturally related experiences of Black college students. Data involved themes involving students' academic performance and their cultural beliefs, culturally related experiences concerning finance school policies, peer interactions, and faculty relations. From the data collected, students' perceptions of their culturally related experiences had strong ties to their academic performance, which could be a strong driver of the academic achievement gap. Based on the data collected, some factors, such as school policies and financial issues, had stronger relations with students' academic performances. As outlined in the different discussions, this caused students to be distracted or discouraged as they pursued their degrees. There was no

significant data to support a relationship between students' interactions and their academic performance.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

This transcendental qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore Black adult college students' lived experiences and perceptions about their culturally related incidents and the academic achievement gap in Northern Virginia. Prior studies indicate a clearly defined gap in students' academic achievement among different races in the United States school system. Researchers have reported that Black and Hispanic students had lower reading and math scores than their White counterparts (Assari et al., 2021; Startz, 2020; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2019). However, there was an existing gap in the literature concerning the culturally related experiences of Black students and how these lived experiences relate to the student's academic achievements. This research study attempted to bridge this gap in the literature and investigate the different experiences that Black students had as college students and how these experiences drove their academic decisions and their subsequent academic performance.

### **Discussion**

Researchers have published different studies surrounding the academic achievement gap and how it exists in the education system throughout the United States. From these studies, researchers have not only been able to quantify the existence of this phenomenon but have been looking at different solutions and areas that could fuel the gap (Ainsley & Hall, 2019; Easterbrook & Haden, 2020; Garcia & Weiss, 2017). Researchers have also reported on different solutions and strategies that could be useful for educational developers to employ when addressing this growing issue with minority students in the United States (Chozan et al., 2021;

Wijngaards-de Meij; & Merx, 2018). Culture could be a primary factor fueling the academic achievement gap. Researchers have also associated the culture of students and school environments with the growing gap among students in the United States.

Other researchers argue that the cultural practices of different institutions have been linked positively or, in some cases, negatively to students' academic performance (Bayar,2021). Based on different reports, Black students are the leading group in the United States educational demographics at the lower end of the educational curve. Researchers have reported that Black students are not only at the bottom of the academic scale but fueling the academic achievement gap. Reports have outlined that African Americans, especially males, are disproportionately identified by the educational system as students with disabilities, often based on test results (Reeves & Smith, 2020; Rosales &Walker, 2021).

### **Summary of Thematic Findings**

The first theme explored the relationship between the students' culturally related experiences and academic achievements. As this study builds on the reports of previous studies explored in the literature presented by other researchers, students' cultural beliefs and subsequent practices could impact their academic performances (Bhar, 2023; Coleman, 2023; Margaretha et al., 2021). As this study involves the cultural beliefs and practices of the participants, it is vital to pay close attention to how the students perceive their experiences as they relate to the different areas in their culture, which would play a vital role in their perceptions and decision-making processes as college students.

Concerning the themes designed to drive the discussion of each research question and the findings from the data collected, the students mainly leaned towards a little to no relation between these two areas targeted. As reported in Chapter 4, the students credited a solid

relationship to how they perceived their grades concerning their academic success. Data showed that most students felt that grades were significant and should be maintained highly to secure college success. Only one student expressed his disbelief in the importance of getting high grades to secure college success.

Another thematic area in the study involved family support, which was secured to determine the students' perception of families' involvement in their college experiences and endeavors. Again, data supported that the student placed a strong relationship on the support they received from their families. Among the participants, 10/13 agreed that family involvement was decisive in their college endeavors. More than 90% of the students deemed their family support as critical to their college success, as outlined in the different interview and discussion sessions. Students were very adamant that when it comes to their families, they have strong support in this area to help them move forward with their college-based activities. Some of the students said that they needed to know that they had the support of their family members, not just to be there but to help them with different things to survive as young college students and, for some, as Black college students. A few students expressed their concerns for the parents who could not support them due to financial constraints but did all they could to help them find the needed resources.

Students' perceptions of their interactions with their peers were another culturally related area that the data collection process involved. The data collected showed that the students did not have many negative interactions with their peers. The students indicated that they had a good relationship with their peers and thus did not have the need to feel that peer interactions interfered with their academic performance. The students explained that there were few cases of interrelating with students outside their 'circle' or their race or socioeconomic group. Students used the term 'circle' to identify diverse groups on their college campus and explained that one

would quickly identify where they fit in and fit into that group. This practice announced a cultural divide among the students, dictating the interactions and experiences of students as part of the diverse student population of the United States.

Research has supported the effects of diversity in the secondary-level education arena in America and has shown how to address some of the issues associated with this growing situation. While the United States education system supports diversity in the classroom, educators will not deny that this has caused some setbacks where teaching and learning are concerned (Ahman et al., 2019; Hogan & Rutherford, 2018; Stout et al., 2018). Schools all over the USA face the challenge of revising curriculum and pedagogy in classrooms to help students and teachers cope with the challenges that come with the changing faces of the classroom.

The second research question includes an exploration of the student's perceptions of their finances and how they view their different experiences when dealing with finances as Black college students. Research has reported different arguments outlining the relationship between students' financial challenges and college success (Brown, 2015). To help address the issues that students might face when seeking financial help for college, the American government has established several initiatives designed to help Black college students deal with the challenges they might have experienced when seeking financial help (Grabenstein & Khan, 2022). When asked about their perceptions regarding any challenges they might have experienced when seeking financial help for college, data collected revealed that half of the students did not believe their experiences related to financial issues impacted their college success. While students need to have the funds they need for college, according to this study, students are also saying that they do not have the extensive issues that society might be portraying about this issue of securing finances for college as Black college students.

This issue shows that the student's perceptions of financial challenges were divided in half, proving that in this study, students did not experience extensive financial challenges as Black college students. While students expressed their stance, they further outlined that they believed that with money for college, students would have had the level of success they experienced. Government and private sector agencies should disburse available funds to students who might need financial assistance for college and have reached out to them for help regardless of their race (Allegretto et al., 2022; Fensterwald, 2022; Garcia & Weiss, 2017; Perry et al., 2021). The study participants expressed their need for more confidence in how agencies are disbursing these funds to students. The students argued that race was vital in how the different agencies decided on how much to give to which students.

The sources of money were another sub-theme explored in this study. Some students face This culturally related area as they work on accessing money for school. Students are fortunate to have money made available to them from many different sources, including grants, scholarships, and even family loans. While this is so, some students need to be fully aware of these sources of financial help and are often frustrated when they access the information. They need to access these much-needed funds and resources, which often create academic setbacks for students since they need help accessing the available resources from different sources (Arday, 2018; Newsome, 2022; Thornhill, 2019). The students in this study complained that they were very frustrated when the institution only informed them of simple resources available to them when it was too late in some cases. The students explained that this lack of communication on campus is more evident among Black student groups than White students, who seem to know more about the resources available as students at the institution.



The third research question's theme involves students' perceptions of their culturally related experiences on the college campus. As this study further explores students' cultural beliefs about their campus-based experiences and how these occurrences drive their decisionmaking patterns concerning academics, further investigations will involve school policies, faculty interactions, and cultural and academic drivers. Students face different experiences that either make or break their college success. Researchers have published studies on different drivers in this area of students' college lives and have identified different forces that could cause

Black college students to fail or succeed in their college endeavors (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Perna & Odle, 2020; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

In this study, students discussed their perceptions of their experiences related to school policies. The students agreed that they believed policies and rules were there to protect them and were happy to know they existed. However, they felt the policies needed to be enforced regarding race, causing some academic setbacks for the students negatively affected. Within any educational arena, all students at all levels of the educational pyramid must feel safe and comfortable functioning within their rights as students of any institution; if not, this could result in academic disparities among the student body (Allen & Mack, 2022; Gasman et al., 2023).

This study explored students' interactions with faculty and participants. This step was necessary to understand students' perceptions of their interactions with faculty and how these experiences relate to their academic performance. To further explore the cultural beliefs of Black college students, it is vital to explore how students view faculty and the relationships they should or are allowed to have with them. Researchers have reported that students or faculty display behaviors that are seen as biased or even inappropriate to students, causing a spiral of adverse outcomes for students attending college (Scheuer & Senter, 2023; Williams & Johnson, 2018).

Some reports have also identified many of the victims to be minorities and, in many cases, Black students being affected and, in many cases, dropping out of school.

It is often a cultural practice of college students and, in many cases, Black students to become involved in inappropriate behaviors with other students or with faculty. This inappropriate action happens for different reasons, a common reason being to gain an academic edge toward college success (Crettenden et al., 2022; Joseph & Kodnani, 2023). In this study, very few students agree that they had negative experiences involving faculty. The students explained that this caused either failure, poor grades, or even dropping out of courses due to these issues. The study participants also outlined that they did not believe they could get proper justice for the faculty issues they believed were unfair to them. The students firmly believed race was pivotal in how the university treated their situations. Again, we see where the school climate played a vital role in students' experiences and how they perceived these experiences as Black college students. When students feel poorly treated or as if they do not matter simply because of race, that can negatively impact the students' grades and their willingness to work hard for success in their classes (Graham, 2022; Griffin et al., 2017); Price & Viceisza, 2023;).

### **Interpretation of Findings**

This section of the study includes a detailed discussion of the interpretation of the findings from the data collected. The information provided in this section outlines an explanation of the data collected in relation to the different research questions as well as the themes derived from the research questions. Along with the interpretation of the data collected, this section will also involve implications, including empirical and theoretical implications to different stakeholders that might find the information presented in this study helpful in planning,

implementing, and delivering educational policies and practices that the schools can benefit from.

### *Academics and Student Finances*

Research has reported arguments that outline strong relationships between students' financial challenges and college success (Brown, 2021). From the findings of this phenomenological study, there is a direct relationship between student's perceptions of their financial standing and academic achievements. As this study builds on the reports of previous studies explored in the literature presented by other researchers, students' cultural beliefs and subsequent practices could impact their academic performances (Anyichie1 & Butler, 2023; Coleman, 2018; Margaretha et al., 2021). With this study involving Black college students' cultural beliefs and practices, it was vital to pay close attention to how the students perceive their experiences relating to their financial standings and how they play a vital role in their perceptions and decision-making processes.

Data collected continued to prove that students further believed that with money for college, they would have had the level of success they experienced. Literature supports that government and private sector agencies are to fairly disburse available funds to students who might need financial assistance for college and have reached out to them for help in this area regardless of their race (Allegretto et al., 2022; Garcia, 2018; Fensterwald, 2022; Perry et al., 2022). However, the findings of this study prove that Black college students have a strong distrust in how agencies disburse funds to them. Some students feel that race played a substantial role in how the different agencies decided on how much money to give to which group of students. This distrust could also mean a fall in student motivation for academic development.

As reported in the findings outlined in Chapter 4, the data showed a strong relationship to how students perceived their financial standings about their academic success. This data proves that students' perceptions and subsequent decisions about their academics leaned strongly on their financial standing as Black college students. It is vital to note that researchers agree that to help address the issues that students might be faced with when seeking financial help for college, the American government has established several different initiatives designed to help Black college students deal with the different challenges that they might have experienced when seeking financial help for college (Grabenstein & Khan, 2022).

### ***Support from Stakeholders***

Another critical area from the data collected was how the students felt about family and other members of their communities supporting them on their academic journeys. The students agreed that family and other community entities supporting them as Black college students played another pivotal role in their motivation to work hard to maintain high grades. The data showed that the students felt some obligations to their families and community-based agencies willing to support them with money and other resources they needed to survive as students. 10 of the 13 students who participated in the study agreed that family involvement influenced their college endeavors. Most of the students strongly supported the idea that when it comes to their families, they leaned heavily on family support, not just for tangible resources but for the moral support they look for in their families.

During the discussion sessions, the students agreed that they needed to know that they had the support of their family members not just to be there but to help them with different things

to survive as young college students and, for some, as Black college students. This action proves that with the support that students get from their families, they are motivated to push themselves to maintain high grades. Also, with this type of support, the students could be more motivated to work hard, positively affecting the academic achievement gap.

### ***Peer Interactions***

Another robust finding from the data collection process involved students' perceptions of their interactions with their peers. From the students' contributions in this area, it was clear they did not have many negative interactions with their peers. One finding from the discussions was that while students did not report extensive negative interactions, there was a clear divide among students as they typically kept to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds as students, leaving little room for harmful incidents among them. The students reinforced that they quickly noticed that there were circles on campus, and students would stick to their own 'circles.' This practice announced a cultural divide among the students, dictating the interactions and experiences of students as part of the diverse student population of the United States. This finding showed that while the students got along well, it would not be safe to say that there were extensive interracial or socioeconomic interrelations on the college campus. Instead, students learned this finding, proving they learned how to play it safely at school.

Literature supports the effects of diversity in the secondary-level education arena in America and how to address some of the issues associated with this growing situation. While the United States education system supports diversity in the classroom, educators will not deny that this has caused some setbacks where teaching and learning is concerned (Amad et al., 2019; Stout et al., 2018; Hogan & Rutherford, 2018). Schools all over the USA face the challenge of revising curriculum and pedagogy in classrooms to help students and teachers cope with the various

classroom issues. The United States education system faces issues related to diversity that are causing some strain on the education system. Since the diverse population of the country's school system involves students of color, it is fair to say that the school system faces yet another issue that affects our students of color, clearly fueling the perimeters of the academic achievement gap.

### ***Culture, College Policies and Practices***

Another interpretation of the data collected involved the Black students' lived experiences on their college campuses relating to the policies and practices of the institution. Within any educational arena, all students at all levels of the educational pyramid need to feel safe as they function within their rights as students of any institution, as this could certainly result in academic disparities among the student bodies (Allen & Mack, 2020; Gasman et al., 2022). As this study involves students' cultural beliefs about their campus-based experiences and how these occurrences drive their decision-making patterns, the data collected proved that students wanted more about how the institution administered their consequences related to the school policies and procedures.

According to the information collected, the students agreed that disparities were among the different groups of students. This data shows that Black students had strong dissatisfaction with the school practices towards them as opposed to the non-black students. This practice also filters into the students' willingness to feel welcome at the institutions, resulting in declining students' academic achievements. In addition, the literature supports that researchers have published studies that support that different campus-related drivers in students' daily college lives could cause Black college students to fail or succeed in their college endeavors (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Perna & Odle, 2020; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Thus, it is vital that students feel

unfairly treated regardless of race or cultural background, narrowing the possibility of students becoming discouraged in colleges.

Subsequently, the data collected in this area proves that if students are not trusting of the treatment they receive as Black college students, again, this could discourage the students, causing them not to trust the system that should support them as students. With students strongly expressing their concerns about the treatment they receive as minorities, they expressed their thoughts of being tempted to leave the institutions or not work as hard as they should with some individuals' negative attitudes towards them. Additionally, researchers have reported that Black students are being affected and, in many cases, dropping out of school due to complaints of disparities in how the schools manage the policies and procedures toward different groups of students (Scheuer & Senter, 2023; Williams & Johnson, 2018).

### ***Results of Negative Treatment***

According to the participants of this study, it is often a cultural practice of college students and, in many cases, Black students to become involved in inappropriate behaviors with other students or faculty. This practice is necessary for different reasons, a common one being to gain an academic edge toward college success (Crettenden et al., 2023; Joseph & Kadnani, 2023). The study participants also outlined cases when they did not believe true justice was available because of the issues they faced with faculty they believed were unfair to them.

The school climate played a vital role in students' experiences and how they perceived these experiences as Black college students. The data further reveal that students feel that school officials poorly treated them or that they do not matter simply because of race. This issue could be a driver of a negative relationship to the student's grades and willingness to work hard for success in their classes (Graham, 2022; Griffin et al., 2017; Price & Viceisza, 2023).

### **Implications for Policy and Practices**

This current research study has several implications for educational developers, students, universities, and families. The following section will discuss these implications and make recommendations for each group. The implications will give a clearer understanding of the academic achievement gap and how different educational sectors address these factors in the communities of the United States. The practices will include some present ones that support the education sector, along with some new suggestions regarding other ideas that could help further address this country's educational gap in tertiary education.

### ***Implications for Policies***

This current research study has several implications for educational developers, students, universities, and families. The researcher will discuss these implications in the following section and make recommendations for each group. This study reveals implications for educational leaders involved in curriculum and school policy development. Agencies that govern the operations of higher-level organizational institutions or entities, such as school districts and state or federal-mandated policies, could find the outcome of this study practical as they perform their duties to support the United States educational system. As the school districts have been looking into the academic achievement gap for as long as this phenomenon has, researchers have been conducting investigations to come up with answers that could help address the apparent gap among the races that make up this country's education system (Bowman et al., 2018; Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023).

From the findings of this study, educational developers could utilize the results revealing that Black college students function based on their perceptions of their cultural experiences lived on college campuses. The study revealed that Black students are using their perceptions of how



school officials develop and enforce policies to drive their academic performance. Students' experiences with school policies have resulted in a domino effect that goes right to the academic performance of Black college students, which is a strong driver for the academic achievement gap that has been growing over the years (Gardner-Neblett et al. 2021& Turner, 2023).

As a recommendation to education developers, this study has provided a look into students' perceptions of their college policy development and enforcement, which could help if educational leaders focus on the perceptions of the students they serve and take into consideration how students think and make their decisions about their academic endeavors. This practice could be advantageous in helping students develop new perceptions of their lived experiences as Black college students. Culturally, the presence of bias of any form can cause students to become distracted and not want to put forth their best efforts due to a lack of confidence in the system they are governed by (Liu, 2023; Libassi, 2018; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

Another finding of this study reveals that students believe school officials do not allow them to be heard or to voice their concerns, which is also resulting in the breakdown of trust that students should have in their school as governing body over them (Anderson, 2021 & Camardelle et al., 2022). It is a recommendation based on this finding that school leaders could build in their policies a platform for minority students to speak on their lived experiences, giving them the empowerment to sensitize the policy developers to factor the students' stance where school policies and enforcement protocol are concerned. From the results of this study, Black students tend to feel less empowered to contribute to the day-to-day running of the institutions. As a recommendation to educational developers, it could help if Black students get the opportunity to participate in school leadership discussions, allowing them to voice their opinions

at the policy-making level as this could help them value and respect their educational environment more and thus be more willing to put more significant effort on getting better grades as Black students.

### *Implications for Practice*

One of the critical areas of interest in this study is the institutions that Black students attend for their tertiary education, one key finding of this study suggests that Black students' perceptions of and decisions toward their academic standing are strongly related to how they feel about the institution they attend. Most students in this study agree that when school policies and operations favor one race of students over the other, it depletes their trust in the school. This study also reveals that with limited confidence in the school's abilities and willingness to support them, students begin to lose the motivation necessary to remain persistent in working towards producing excellent grades.

Universities need to be aware that students' cultural beliefs and subsequent perceptions of different experiences that they might have about the school, and it operates on behalf of students, can play a pivotal role in how students produce grades. It is incumbent upon universities to direct more of their resources toward helping students figure out how to make solid and valuable decisions regarding their studies. According to the findings of this study, students are willing to make important decisions about their studies, which often results in some of them starting to get low grades or even dropping out of course or school; the institutions must option for students to access that can help them work through their decisions making processes as Black students. Indeed, it is essential for students to feel supported at their universities.

As this study focuses on the perceptions of Black college students about their culturally related lived experiences, one recommendation based on the findings of this study is that the

schools could provide direct attention geared towards helping students access all the information they need about the help that made available to them which could help them better work through their limitations in figuring out effective ways of dealing their different issues they might be facing. Students are often made aware of resources available to them, which are often too late, resulting in students making decisions prematurely due to a lack of knowledge of the help they could get when dealing with their situations. Many universities assist students in decisionmaking and other mental health needs (Abrams, 2022; Lisiecka et al., 2023 & McPhillips, 2023).

Additionally, it would be helpful if schools channeled some of their resources toward offering forums and platforms for students to access these helpful resources. They could learn from each other students about different ways to perceive their experience and make better academic decisions.

According to the findings of this study, Black college students have negative perceptions of some of their teachers as they believe that teachers have different perceptions of them and their endeavors, often resulting in them being treated negatively in the school environment. With this being more on the cultural side of the students' perceptions, it is vital for the universities at some point to address the different ideas that students might have about faculty in helping them to see their experiences in a different light other than what they are used to seeing and hearing in their cultural settings. The universities could strongly encourage faculty to employ more culturally sensitive material and pedagogy as they deliver each lesson. This practice could help to bring about some level of uniformity in how faculty structure their lessons, making students feel more valued and respected as part of the minority of the student body.

This research study revealed implications for Black college students regarding their perceptions of their culturally related experiences at their university. The results of this study

reveal that students' perceptions of their culturally related experiences have played a pivotal role in how they view their college life and make decisions about their academics. Students will cling to the cultural beliefs they have been used to over the years and often take these perceptions into the classroom despite being taught alternate ways of looking at their experiences. The crucial part of this issue is that students will make decisions based on their beliefs, which could result in setbacks for them as Black students. The implications and recommendations in this section that relate to Black college students will involve students' willingness to access advice on making decisions based on new ideas and explanations for their culturally related experiences as Black college students.

From the results of this study, it was clear that students cling to what they believe and hold fast to their perceptions of their college experiences. Very often, one's beliefs or perceptions could be wrong about the intended meaning of the experience. Students use their cultural background to understand incidents that might have occurred through their college lives, and unfortunately, in some, these perceptions are wrong; however, students act on their interpretations of these incidents, which they realize later were not accurate perceptions of their experience. If students had been willing to take time to work through the situation or seek help from reliable sources, they might have been able to make better decisions that could not have caused them extensive setbacks.

### **Empirical and Theoretical Implications**

This study involved an in-depth discussion about how the literature highlighted in Chapter 2 and how these arguments align or do not align with the actual findings of this study. This step is necessary to identify a relationship between the literature and the actual themes formulated from this; this section will have two parts: empirical and theoretical implications. In research studies,

there will be times when researchers discover strong agreements between literary findings and the findings that come out of the study itself. It is vital to make this comparison since the researcher should be able to prove not only the relevance and reliability of the study but also the usability of the study as the findings are published. Any study should be able to build on past literature showing some relevance for the study and not just a repetition of what has already been discovered (Kunisch et al., 2023; Santoro, 2023 & Siegle, 2019).

### ***Empirical Implications***

This study seeks to provide facts surrounding the academic achievement gap and how this phenomenon relates to the culturally related experiences of Black college students in northern Virginia. To explore this topic, the relevant literature related to this topic will subsequently show how this study's findings align with the literature explored. Thus, an empirical implication in a phenomenological qualitative study involves Empirical research where conclusions of the study are strictly drawn from concrete evidence of experience, which is verifiable through evidence (Olsson et al., 2022). Subsequently, researchers agree that our country struggles with an academic issue involving a disparity among students of different demographics and races (White et al., 2017). The literature explored various theories about the academic achievement gap and implicated socioeconomic and race factors as driving forces behind this academic achievement gap.

With this study focusing on different aspects of the student's socioeconomic standing and how this relates to the student's academic performance, there has been a clearly defined relationship between these two areas. According to studies explored in the literature review exercise during this study, reports support the finding that students' actions have displayed a relationship between their socioeconomic standing and their academic achievements. Literature

also reveals that researchers agree that there is a clear relationship between students' social standing and the academic achievement gap seen in the tertiary-level education system of the United States. Colleges (Bowman et al., 2018; Quinn, 2020; Reardon 2016). As discovered from the data collected in this study during the data collection sessions, As seen in empirical validation, the participants supported this stance as they agreed that they depend significantly on their financial standing and cultural upbringings to help them succeed in their academic endeavors.

This study reveals that individuals will support their behaviors based on their upbringing and cultural beliefs. Data collected showed how Black college students factor in their race and cultural upbringing while interacting with staff and peers on campus. It was revealed in this study that students will conduct themselves based on what they were taught, believed, and practiced in their different cultural settings when interacting with peers and faculty in college. Similarly, the literature supports that with the sociocultural theory looking at the different aspects of human development, students' skills and abilities are also driven by an interactive process involving the social, cultural, and historical contexts of people's development (Dempsey et al., 2021). The researchers further agree that people mediate knowledge of the world by being situated in a social environment. This finding proves that people understand and act upon their perceptions of their experiences based on their exposure to different living circumstances.

As supported by Quinn (2020), race plays a pivotal role in the existence of the academic achievement gap. The researcher further outlined that a racial gap caused a deficit-based explanation for the academic achievement gap phenomenon. Bowman et al. (2018) further discussed the theory linking students' social and cultural standing to the achievement gap. During the data collection process, the students expressed their belief that race not only played a role in

the administration of school policies but also in how different agencies manage the allocation of funds to non-Black students as opposed to Black students in colleges.

This study's findings revealed that some questionable happenings had taken place in the tertiary-level educational arena of the United States, causing students of color to question equity with the practices and policies of the schools. With a direct focus of this study being the academic achievement gap and students' culturally related experiences, it is critical to outline that when students do not feel that the institution is being fair to them, they then focus their attention on making high grades and begin to think about fairness and equity. The study participants explained this as they directed their discussion regarding financial inequalities.

Levinson et al. (2021). argued that children from low-income families, homeless children, and children of color face a higher risk of suffering both more intense versions of and a more significant total number of these hardships that could spill over into the school setting. Literature also supports that the unequal distribution of federal funds has played a role in school performance, leading to low academic performance (Levinson et al., (2021). The researcher also outlined that low-income families, primarily white and middle-class educators, and district administrators and policymakers have mistrusted each other in low-income districts.

Ainscow (2020). argued that school systems have agreed that clearly defined differences in policies and practices in different school districts fuel the current equity issues. According to the researcher, Policymakers are thus calling for collaborative discussions to secure an equilibrium in policies across communities. With this type of collaborative discussion with all stakeholders, the schools could learn and make unbiased financial decisions regardless of race or socioeconomic background. Students discussed their concerns about the possibility of dropping out of school due to the biased treatment that they or their peers have experienced on college

students as Black students. These bias treatments would mainly involve the administration of school policies and practices to some Black students when this was not the case with the nonBlack students since it was clear that the institution would extend more leniencies to the nonBlack students.

Researchers have agreed that for the sake of the future of our nation, educational leaders must endeavor to work on the academic achievement gap and be willing to utilize all the resources available to help address the growing academic gap affecting all student groups (McKenzie, 2019). According to published research, activities designed to improve school leadership have positively impacted student, teacher, and principal practices. Herman et al. (2017). supported this argument in their study on poverty and the academic achievement gap. She argued that following through with results obtained from the assessment is essential in ensuring that the students will get the support they need to increase their chance of success and the tools to overcome that identified weakness. The findings of this study reveal that students also feel that the schools are making some effort to address the academic achievement gap. The participants of this study expressed their belief in the school system doing what they could do to help with the academic achievement gap. The students further outlined in this study that they feel more action could be taken to help with the growing rate of the academic achievement gap.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

This research study involves the sociocultural theory by Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896-1934). Researchers on sociocultural theory support that this theory outlined that researchers recognize ideas by identifying the role social interactions and culture play in developing higher-order thinking skills. Theorists also agree that cultural background plays a pivotal role in learning and perceiving academic achievements (Cagle, 2017; Oxford & Gkonou, 2018; West,



2017). This study's findings prove the validity of the arguments surrounding the sociocultural theory as the data collected supports that college students will embrace their cultural beliefs and practices learned from their environments and thus transfer their perceptions into their own academic decisions. This section will discuss the value of the findings of this study to the education sector and how the findings equate with the findings of other similar studies to this current research.

Past studies revealed that some students preferred different learning styles that often equate with their cultural upbringing. Researchers agree that individual learning styles are often related to the individual's learning preferences (Britt-inger, 2020; Magulod, 2018; Shamsuddin & Kaur, 2020). This theory was also seen in this study's findings, as students agree that they prefer to be allowed to embrace their cultural beliefs and practices while on campus instead of being forced to follow the policies and practices outlined by the universities. This finding is essential to the educational sector as it is vital to learn that when students, especially Black students, are made to divorce their cultural beliefs and practices, they often shut down or regress in their academic performance, causing a widening of the academic achievement gap among student groups.

Additionally, educators must understand that when students can identify their true potential in achieving excellence in their academics, it will help them embrace these realized potentials and become intrinsic motivations for students to build on their self-confidence as they work through college ( Buskard, 2019 & Sembiring, 2020). This research study also discovered similar findings regarding the students' willingness to embrace their potential as learners by identifying their potential and working to support their findings. Students articulated this belief during the group discussion sessions of the data collection process. They believe that discovering

their potential is a motivating factor that helps them work harder to satisfy their families and themselves (Şener & Çokçalışkan, 2018).

According to the literature explored, performance is not only associated with an intellectual quotient (IQ), but multiple variables and dimensions can be associated with different predictive values. Agreed that the school climate and socioeconomic backgrounds of the institutions could impact students, academic performance (Boyacı, 2019; Polirstok, 2017; Rodrigues & Scott, 2018). The participants of this study also agree, as seen in the data collected, that when the school climate is not supportive of them as Black college students, this not only makes them feel bad but also affects their academic achievement since they do not feel accepted or treated fairly by the school authorities. The students' arguments about some of the treatment they receive during their college experiences reflect some disparity in the school practices when dealing with students of color. Therefore, educational developers in colleges must consider these factors when developing policies and practices for students.

Equity is another area of concern in this study. Students outlined that when they identify inequity among themselves as college students of different ethnicities, they again feel mistreated and will take this disproportion as discrimination towards them as minorities. The participants explained that this is when their academic performance declines amidst the feelings of mistreatment from school personnel. Researchers agree with this argument as they also outlined that through the literature explored, students get poor grades due to their interests and tolerance of the biases of some individuals and entities in their learning environment. The researchers added that parents' and teacher's contributions influence the performance of some students, adding to the list of factors contributing to the academic achievement gap (Farid & Akhter, 2017; Snook et al., 2021).

According to the findings, the critical interpretation of this point is that schools must consider the influences they filter down to students through policies, practices, and individuals who are there to 'support' the students. As the students in this study outlined, factors around them have often negatively affected their will and abilities to perform at their best. Literature provides extensive arguments around culture and students' academic performance as a direct driver of the academic achievement gap. Researchers agree that educators need to look at students' academic performance as synonyms with exploring the cultural piece of their backgrounds. This step involves looking at students' day-to-day practices and how this impacts their academic beliefs and practices, as this is one strong driver that propels students' actions, especially with academics (Cagle 2017; Papp 2020; Engzell, Freyd & Verhagena 2020).

When teachers take the time to learn students' behavioral patterns and the drives behind their actions, it will help them understand students and help them strengthen their classroom activities, including pedagogical designs. This study supports this truth since the Black students who participated in it outlined that when their teachers do not seem to care much about them, they will act upon these perceptions and even decide to leave the programs or dilute their efforts to do well in their studies. Students explained that due to faculty behavior towards them, they have been deeply discouraged and demotivated, affecting their academic performance negatively.

Further to the cultural arguments (Nemeth, 2016 & Renth et al., 2015) are researchers outlining that cultural capital theory and the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy attempt to provide a framework for clarity. The cultural capital theory assumes that the greater an individual's cultural capital, the greater the likelihood of procuring additional forms of money, including economic and social success. Thus, when students feel socially accepted by peers and staff, they feel empowered to exist in the educational environment. Participants of this study also support this report in the literature as they outlined that when they feel misrepresented and unfit

in a particular setting, it is their cultural practice to retreat into different cleeks or circles, limiting their opportunities to grow in the academic endeavors as they limit their possibilities to learn and develop through other students.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The delimitations of this study involve the researcher selecting students over the age of 18. Since this study targeted adult students, it was incumbent upon the researcher to ensure that all the participants were over the legal age of adulthood. This choice was necessary to ensure that the participants would not require parental consent to participate in the study, thus giving the researcher ample opportunities to focus on other aspects of the study that would require more attention and monitoring time.

### ***Limitations***

As explained by Greener (2018), the limitations of a study involve those characteristics of design or methodology that influenced the application and interpretation of the results of a study; they are the constraints on generalizability and utility of findings that are the results relating to the design of the study and the method used to establish internal and external validity. Thus, the limitations of a study are potential weaknesses of the study that cannot be controlled. This section will talk about some of these factors that the researcher identified with the methodology, sampling, and instruments that were uncontrollable while conducting the study.

**Research Methodology and Design.** Another delimitation associated with this study is the deliberate inclusion of a qualitative methodology as a strategy for formulating the research design of this study. Tomaszewski et al. (2020) explained that qualitative research values people's lived experiences is characteristically subjective and does not embrace the biases of researchers and participants. Additionally, this design is an approach that involves discovering a person's

perception of a phenomenon. Data collected in a natural setting affords the researcher a level of detail from involvement in the actual experiences. This design was deliberately chosen to facilitate the transcendental qualitative study design that involves students' perceptions of their lived culturally related experiences as Black college students. With this design, the researcher was able to secure explanations and predictions that will generate information for other persons and places as the methodology of data analysis in this study.

**Sampling and Sample Size.** One limitation of this study is the gender distribution of the participants. The criteria for participating in this study included being over 18, a full-time university student, and being of Black descent. Since there were no specifications of how many male or female students were needed to conduct the study, the participants were randomly selected from a group of students who indicated they were interested in participating. The sample size was also not articulated to the participants; therefore, the researcher had to select from a sample population of individuals who indicated they wanted to participate. This group was an uncontrolled number; however, the researcher design specified 13 students, the number of participants selected to participate in the study.

**Instrumentations.** For this study, the researcher selected several instruments that were in keeping with the recommendation of a qualitative transcendental study. These instruments involved student surveys, student interview questionnaires, and focus group questions. Questions were formulated based on the research questions. The limitation of the instrumentation process was seen in the specificity and thoroughness of the questions being answered by the participants. While these questions were open-ended in some of the data collection processes, students were pressed for time and needed more time to express how they or the researcher would have wanted. The researcher would have wanted to include more questions to adequately explore the research

questions and shed more light on the phenomenon. Therefore, the type of questions remained the same.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are decisions the researcher made to identify the boundaries of the study. It has been described as what a researcher includes and excludes to make a project manageable and focused on the research question (Coker, 2022). One delimitation of this study involves Black adult college students earning passing grades in all their classes at an accredited tertiary institution in Northern Virginia. The researcher targeted these criteria since the literature explored showed a gap, and it did not provide extensive studies on Black college students' culturally related experiences concerning the academic achievement gap. As outlined by different researchers, there is an academic achievement gap, and different contributors influenced the phenomenon; however, this study focuses on the cultural aspect of the student's experiences, which showed some gaps in the literature.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on this study's findings, limitations, and delimitations, several recommendations in this section. These recommendations will include the different areas of the study that could be revised to bring about better clarity and a more extensive field of research on the topic. The areas for recommendations include the topic, population, and design of the present study. According to Graham (2022), the recommendations of any study should involve a brief analysis of the data collected, highlighting ideas or results that do not quite fit the scope of the current study topic or suggestions for further implications of the study's results. There are several recommendations for future research based on the findings of this study. The recommendations are as follows: Future researchers could consider an in-depth exploration to narrow down the topic of the current study.

The revision of the topic could include specific cultural-related areas to target, such as religion or family educational standings as cultural areas of Black college students. This action could give the study's findings a more direct focus by narrowing down the subject of cultural-related experiences, as stated in the topic of this study, to identifying specific culturally related areas.

For this qualitative study, it would also be helpful for future researchers to capture the experiences and perspectives of other researchers who have had mixed or negative experiences from conducting similar studies, as they may be more likely to provide realistic information, bringing deeper analysis into the different experiences of Black college students.

More methodological work on capturing a more substantial balance of gender in the choice of participants for the study could be helpful. Anderson (2021) states that many males view their experiences differently from females. Thus, this strategy could add a deeper understanding of the study's outcome as the data reported would reflect a more balanced variety of perspectives from the male and female students.

It would also be helpful for future researchers to look at including the perspectives of non-Black students as a part of the participants to provide an opportunity to bring an alternate and comparative understanding of students' perspectives of their experiences. By comparing White versus Black students' perspectives of their college experiences, the researcher would be able to report on some of the alternate perceptions of the students that might come out in the study. This additional data could help Black college students better understand their college-based experiences.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative phenomenological study gave voice to Black college students about their perceptions of the different experiences and how culture relates to their perceptions and decisions

about these experiences. This study examined different instances that Black College students experienced and the role culture might play in their perceptions and decision-making process towards these lived experiences as college students. With care taken to select a sample group representative of a generic Black adult student population, the study took place at an accredited university in the Northern Virginia region of the United States. Data was collected using three separate data collection instruments: student interview, focus group, and student survey.

The data collection process was conducted on the campus of the selected institution as the researcher worked with students individually and in groups as outlined. Data collected supported findings that students' cultural beliefs are pivotal in how Black students perceive their different college-based experiences. Further findings revealed that cultural beliefs are a driving force in students' decisions about their academics. With students basing their academic decisions on their perception of their different experiences as Black college students, this could filter into their grades, creating a direct driver towards the perimeter of the academic achievement gap.

While this was a thorough study, some limitations and recommendations highlighted could be helpful for future researchers to observe as they attempt to replicate this study. Some of the limitations and subsequent recommendations include a more specific selection of the participants in this study regarding gender, broadening the topic to include specific culturally related areas to target, such as religion and family backgrounds (single-parent families), and including the perspectives of non-Black students to create insight into other students' experiences that they might have had as college students. Overall, the results of this study could drive future studies along the lines of this study and will assist students and universities in ensuring that students' cultural beliefs and practices are taken into consideration when designing educational policies to



ensure all students are given equal opportunities to functions regarding cultural differences and race.

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## APPENDIX A

### DATA SOURCE PROTOCOLS

#### Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

Read each question and select your answer from the options given.

um				
1	Can choice of school impact our grades?			Sometimes
2	Diversity helps all students	Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree

3	Are teachers doing enough for Black students?			
4	The harder you work the higher grades you maintain.	True	False	Sometimes
	Was it hard to get money for school?			Sometimes
6	How did you get money for school?	Loan	Scholarship	Other
	If you have money, you would do great in school	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
8	I will do anything to get good grades	Agree	Disagree	Ma be
9	How do you believe your family view your schooling?	Interested	Not interested	
10	I believe school will help me to live a good life as an adult	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
11	Who helped with your career plans?	School	Family	Friend
12	Do students and teachers treat you different?	Often	Sometimes	Never
13	How do you feel about the academic achievement	Strongly	Indifferent	Don 't know
14	Do you believe the government can fix the gap issue?	Yes	No	Maybe

### Student Interview Questions

1. Can you please introduce yourself?
2. Please describe your educational background and career through your current position.
3. Explain how you made your final decision to select this school as your college to attend. SQI

4. Describe any drawbacks you might have experienced at this school concerning school policies. SQI
5. Tell me about your grades; how do you feel about them. SQ]
6. How would you describe your parents' attitude towards your academic performance?

SQ2

7. What career path do you plan to pursue? Why? SQ2
8. Do you feel that school is necessary for success in life? Why or why not? SQ2
9. If your parents were wealthy, do you believe it would be necessary to attend school?

Explain. SQ2

10. Describe your challenges while taking a class at this university. SQ3
11. How do you feel about accessing financial assistance to help you in college? SQ3
12. How important are grade concerning your overall success in schools? SQI
13. Describe college life in your own words. SQI
14. How do you feel the academic achievement gap is reflected in your academic performance? SQ4

### **Focus Group Questions**

1. Does it matter what school you attend? Why/Why not? QI
2. Do you think that money is a contributing factor in ensuring students' academic success? Explain SQ2
3. What is your perspective on the schools' policies and how this relate to you excelling at your institution of choice? SQ3

4. What are some of your beliefs and practices that contributed to your decisions about the school you would attend? SQ3
5. Describe the actions you would take if you were a financially challenged student seeking to gain academic success. SQ3
6. As a Black aspiring college student, how did your school-related experiences and knowledge help you decide upon the appropriateness of a particular school to attend?  
SQ4
7. What about culture? How do you think that relates to students' academic achievements? SQ4

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Consent**

Title of the Project: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO  
THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP AND  
THE CULTURAL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS

Principal Investigator: Sonia Barnett Doctoral Candidate, School of Liberty University

### **Invitation to be part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a full time student at an accredited university or college and 18 years old or older. 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.

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

The purpose of the proposed qualitative phenomenological study will be to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of Black adults' college students concerning their culturally related experiences and the achievement gap in Northern Virginia.

#### **What will happen if you take part in this study?**

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

1. Take part in a student survey which involves you filling out a survey sheet consisting of 13 questions geared towards answering the research questions. This process will take no more than 30 minutes.
2. Secondly, you will be asked to participate in a student interview with the researcher. This is a one-on-one interview session with each participant that will take no more than 15 minutes per candidate. Each session will be recorded to capture the exact responses from each participant as data will be reported in a verbatim manner.
3. Thirdly and lastly, you will be asked to take part in a focus group discussion session which will also be recorded. This session should take no more than 30 minutes.

#### **How would you or others benefit from this study ?**

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study include a chance to be entered in a drawing to win a monetary incentive after completing the sessions.

#### **What risks might you experience from being in this study ?**

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be anonymous and will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.].
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After five years, [all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.

- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for five years and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being art of the Study?
<b>What are the costs to you to be art of the study?</b>
Is the researcher in a position of authority over participants, or does the researcher have a financial conflict of interest?
<b>Is participation voluntary?</b>

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Marymount 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 inform the researcher that you wish to discontinue your participation, and do not submit your study materials. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Sonia Barnett. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at 7705681632/[srbarnett12@liberty.edu](mailto:srbarnett12@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, at Dr. Sharon Michael-Chadwell at Liberty University.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about our rights as 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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB). is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

**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 study team 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.





Principal  
Towers High School  
Brook Crest Circle  
Decatur GA

Dear Mr. Denson

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree with the university. The title of my research project is A Phenomenological Investigation into the Academic Achievement Gap and It's Relation to the Cultural Experiences of Black Rural High School Students. The purpose of my research is to provide research facts about how students' cultural experiences are related to the academic achievement gap in rural high schools.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in Towers High School and to recruit participants for my research exercise.

The data will be used to determine how students' different cultural experiences is related to their academic performance which could be related to the academic achievement gap.

Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

For education research, Dekalb County Schools permission should be on approved letterhead with the appropriate signatures. Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,

Sonia Barnett  
Student

IRB #: IRB-FY22-23-549

Title: THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP AND THE CULTURAL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY Creation Date: 11-16-2022 End Date:

Status: **Approved**

**Principal Investigator:** Sonia Barnett  
**Review Board:** Research Ethics Office  
**Sponsor:**

## Study History

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<b>Submission Type</b> Initial	<b>Review Type</b> Expedited	<b>Decision</b> Approved
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## Key Study Contacts

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<b>Member</b> Sonia Barnett	<b>Role</b> Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b> sbarnett12@liberty.edu
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<b>Member</b> Sonia Barnett	<b>Role</b> Primary Contact	<b>Contact</b> sbarnett12@liberty.edu
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<b>Member</b> Sharon Michael-Chadwell	<b>Role</b> Co-Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b> sdmichaelchadwell@liberty.edu
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