

**A STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ACADEMICALLY HIGH  
ACHIEVING BLACK MALE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN AN URBAN DISTRICT**

A Dissertation by

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ACHIEVING BLACK MALE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN AN URBAN DISTRICT**

The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education with a major in Educational Leadership.

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## DEDICATION

*I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me. Philippians 4:13*

I first have to thank God for bestowing me with the opportunity to take on such a challenging endeavor and for giving me the ability to succeed.

First, I dedicate my work to my husband, Milan, my best friend, and partner for life, thank you baby for taking this journey with me. You never ever doubted what I could accomplish and you always reminded me to think positive and never give up. While on this journey not only did you take on most of the load without complaining, but you also provided my life with peace and happiness as I dared to achieve my dream. Your encouragement and support is what helped me cross the big finish line to graduate. With you by my side, God will allow us to accomplish more great things in life. This is not just my degree, it is ours. I love you.

Second, to all of my children, Jasmine, Jonathon, Jade, Chance, Marquila, and Milan Jr., you were also a part of my motivation to complete this dissertation. I wanted to be an example to show you that through hard work, drive, and determination, you can achieve whatever goals you have in life to be successful. Never let anyone or anything in your life limit your options.

Always remember that with God, anything is possible! I pray for your continued success in all that you do. I am so proud of all of you.

Third, I dedicate my work in honor of my mother, Geraldine Herrin, and my grandparents, Ben and Fanny Herrin. I know how important it was to you for me to get an education and have the best opportunities. I know you are looking down from heaven smiling and feeling proud.

I also dedicate my work in remembrance of another special person who left this earth before I could finish, my mother-in-law, Ella Johnson (Madea). I can hear your cheers from heaven now! Thank you for raising a great son. We miss you.

*WE BELIEVE. We are college bound. We are exceptional-not because we say it, but because we work hard at it. We will not falter in the face of any obstacle placed before us. We are dedicated, committed and focused. We never succumb to mediocrity, uncertainty or fear. We never fail because we never give up. We make no excuses. We choose to live honestly, nonviolently and honorably. We respect ourselves and, in doing so, respect all people. We have a future for which we are accountable. We have a responsibility to our families, community and world. We are our brothers' keepers. We believe in ourselves. We believe in each other. WE BELIEVE.*

*Excerpt from the Urban Prep Academy Creed*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examined the school experiences of nine academically high achieving Black males in urban schools to understand how this group is able to succeed in school when others perform so poorly. The theoretical perspective of dominant and non dominant cultural capital and the narrative inquiry approach provided the foundation for this study. Data collection involved semi structured open ended interviews. The themes that emerged from the students' providing insight into their school achievements were, high sense of self-efficacy, resiliency, believing that high school is not the end, but a step to higher education, positive relationships, participation in AVID, involvement in extracurricular activities and high expectations from family.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
CHAPTER 1 .....	1
Research Problem .....	4
Purpose of the Study .....	7
Theoretical Framework: Dominant and Non-dominant Cultural Capital .....	8
Cultural Straddlers .....	10
Cultural Mainstreamers .....	11
Noncompliant Believers .....	12
CHAPTER 2 .....	14
Literature Review .....	14
Black Youth Racial Identity Development .....	14
Educational Resilience .....	24
CHAPTER 3 .....	27
Research Design and Methodology .....	27
Narrative Inquiry .....	27
Research Site: Unified School District 466, Gilmer, KS .....	29
Participant Selection .....	30
Data Collection Plan .....	31
Narrative Interviews and Group Discussion .....	31
Data Analysis and Interpretation .....	33
Researcher Positionality .....	36
CHAPTER 4 .....	37
Urban Northeast High School .....	37
Darryl .....	38
Derrick .....	45
Simon .....	50
Lionel .....	57
Kevin .....	62
Evan .....	67
Urban Northeast Focus Group Discussion .....	72
Acting Ghetto / Acting Smart .....	73
Advice to their peers .....	80
Urban Southeast High School .....	81
Brian .....	81
Chris .....	88
Devon .....	93

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)

Chapter	Page
Urban Southeast Focus Group .....	99
Administrative Support-Who Needs It More? .....	103
CHAPTER 5 .....	110
Conclusions and Implications .....	110
Discussion of Findings .....	111
High Sense of Self-Efficacy .....	111
Resiliency.....	114
High School is Not the End, but a Step to Higher Education .....	116
Relationships.....	118
High Expectations From Family.....	121
Participation in AVID .....	124
Involvement in Extra-curricular Activities .....	126
Conclusions .....	126
Healthy Racial Identity .....	127
Possession of Dominant Cultural Capital .....	129
Living Between the Worlds of Dominant and Non dominant Cultural Capital .....	130
Grappling with Matters of Authenticity.....	131
Implications.....	132
Develop a School Culture of Nurturing Relationships and High Expectations.....	134
Implement AVID Model in Regular Curriculum .....	136
Make Extra Curricular Activities a Requirement .....	137
Personal Reflections.....	138
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	139
APPENDIXES.....	146
Appendix A.....	147
Appendix B.....	152
Appendix C.....	155

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Study Participants .....	109

## CHAPTER 1

As a social worker, I have worked for over 15 years in children and youth services, counseling, family advocacy, and more recently, parent and community support in an urban school district. Because of my experiences I have had the opportunity to work with Black parents with sons in urban school settings whose academic performance did not accurately reflect their potential. I became aware of the disproportionate number of suspensions and expulsion hearings for Black males in both middle and high schools. I was interested in exploring the educational challenges and obstacles that many Black males have to overcome and I have a personal investment in the Black community working with at risk minority youth.

I am also a Black female; I have raised a high achieving Black male who recently graduated from an urban high school, I have always instilled in him the value of an education. As a single parent, my top priority was making sure my son received a good educational foundation that would prepare him for college. I set long-term educational goals for my son. It was important for me to make sure my son was well rounded so I exposed him to multiple extracurricular activities to develop his artistic abilities as well as academic and athletic abilities. I was actively involved in all of his school activities and considered myself his educational advocate. I created an environment in the home where expectations were high, academic achievement was always emphasized and valued, and accomplishments were cherished.

Between my roles as social worker and mother, I developed a special interest in the educational attainment of Black males. To increase the educational outcomes for Black males, I believe more emphasis should be placed on Black males who are successful in school and learning from them how they manage to achieve academic success while so many of their peers are struggling.

According to Ladson-Billings (1998), the relationships formed and the narratives that represent the study participants' lives are truly connected to the past and present experiences of the researcher and her knowledge concerning the topic. As a Black researcher, I feel I have an obligation to help liberate and expose the truth for high achieving Black males in high school and allow them to tell their stories because this is a way to help undo some of the stereotypes that exist in the educational system. This study is also significant to me because I have been exposed to many high achieving Black males in my own family, my circle of friends, and professional networks who value education and have worked hard to attain academic success. It is no secret many U.S. citizens hold a dismal view of young Black males. Over the last two decades, research has highlighted the poor social, economic, and educational outcomes for Black males more than any other racial or ethnic group (Jenkins, 2006). Black males have low educational attainment levels, are more consistently unemployed, are less healthy and die much younger, and are more likely to be in the criminal justice system. Research data consistently portray Black males as a segment of the population beset by hardships and disadvantages (Noguera, 2003). The Schott Foundation reported in 2008, only 41% of Black males graduated from high school. The National Education Association (NEA) disclosed in 2008, Black males aged 18 and over accounted for only 5% of the college population while 36% of them accounted for the prison population. In 2008, 4.6 million Black males attended college, but only half graduated, and nationally, only 11% have completed a bachelor's degree (Council of Greater City Schools, 2010). The NEA also reported the unemployment rate in 2008 among Black males aged 20 and over was twice as high as the unemployment rate among other males of the same age.

Unfortunately, the disadvantages and patterns of failure that Black males experience often begins in school, which is a place where one would expect they would be supported, guided, and encouraged to excel (Noguera, 2003). Researchers and educational scholars have had a particular interest in the nationwide educational crisis of Black males in urban schools. Underachievement, poor grades, tracking, increased placement in special education services, higher rates of suspensions and expulsions, and higher dropout rates seem to be persistent problems for young Black males in urban school settings (Ferguson, 2003; Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges III, & Jennings, 2010; Mickelson, 1990; P. A. Noguera, 2003; Orr, 2003). The low performance and disengagement of young Black males in public schools has become the norm throughout the nation. This has been a recurring theme for decades in research literature, and the data clearly presents a dismal picture of Black male underachievement in urban high schools. A plethora of research studies can be found focusing on the deficits and failures of young Black males (Carter, 2005; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Orr, 2003; Sanders, 1997; Weiser & Riggio, 2010).

Some scholars have argued academic success in schools is mainly established, defined, and controlled by the dominant culture, therefore Black males are at a disadvantage in a White educational power structure, which accounts for their poor academic performance (Jenkins, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Orr, 2003). The mainstream norm on schooling in the U. S. often suggests cultural behaviors necessary for academic success are traits respected by the dominant White middle class (Bell, 1992). The culture that exists in schools privileges members of the dominant culture. Young Black males therefore face many challenges unique to them as students in urban schools because of their social and cultural identity as being Black and attending school where the dominant cultural

patterns such as speech and dress are deemed “normal” (Carter, 2005; Noguera, 2002). Delpit (1995) posited when Black males come to school they are presented with an environment that may conflict with the culture they have been accustomed to at home. The challenge is then presented for a student whose race and culture are incompatible with the school system.

### **Research Problem**

There is a pervasive trend of Black males in urban secondary schools who are underachieving (Floyd, 1996; Milner, 2007; Noguera, 2003). This underachievement and disparity in the educational arena is not a new phenomenon. Research findings from two decades ago showed that among all racial and ethnic groups, young Black males were the least likely to succeed in the public school system (Andrews, 2009; Diamond, 2006; Kearns, Ford, & Linney, 2005; Noguera, 1997; Taylor-Gibbs, 1988). According to a report recently released by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), 51% of Black males in 8<sup>th</sup> grade scored below the basic level in reading and 58% scored below the basic level in math. In some cities such as Detroit and Los Angeles, the percentage scoring below the basic level reached 80%. The NAEP (2005, 2006) has consistently shown that a majority of Black males in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades did not reach their grade level proficiency in the core subject areas of English, Math, and Science. Black males are underrepresented in gifted programs or advanced placement classes, with fewer than 3% of them enrolled in these courses. A report from the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2010) also found in many school districts throughout the United States, Black males are more likely to be classified as mentally retarded or labeled with a learning disability and disproportionately placed in special education classes. Also, when it comes to school factors such

as suspension, Black males have the highest number of disciplinary actions such as suspensions against them (Ford & Iii, 1996; Harry & Anderson, 1994).

The abundance of research focusing on the underachievement of Black males creates the perception that only a few, if any, Black males are performing well in urban high schools. Most Black males in urban schools never have a chance to be thought of as potentially bright or capable of achieving academic success (Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). In spite of the dismal statistics and pervasive status of Black male underachievement and disengagement, there are Black males who are achieving academically and are successful in school. These males excel in academics, take honors and advanced placement courses, are placed in gifted programs, and make good grades in school. As such, this group of academically successful Black males in urban high schools is considered in the educational system as an anomaly because their performance is not the norm. The problem this research will address is how this group of academically high achieving Black males is able to succeed in school when so many others perform poorly?

There are some schools in the U. S. where academic success for Black males is the norm and not the exception. For example, Urban Prep Academy, which is the first all Black, all male public charter high school in the state of Illinois, reported that all 85 graduating seniors had been accepted to four-year colleges. For five consecutive years 100% of their seniors have gotten acceptance letters from colleges since they opened their first high school in 2009 (Urban Prep Academy, 2012). Why are the Black males at this school so successful, especially when only 4% of the school's first freshman class was reading at grade level when they entered? Some studies that have specifically focused on single-sex schooling claimed that this type of schooling benefits students academically, especially males from minority and low socio-economic

backgrounds (Hubbard & Datnow, 2005). Some scholars have argued single race, single gender schools are what is needed while others have argued this signals a return to racially segregated education. For instance, Taylor-Gibbs (1988) argued that separating students by gender and race, especially if it targets minority students, constitutes a return to structured inequality and can deprive students of access to mainstream programs.

Other schools like Montgomery County school district in Maryland reported their Black male student graduation rates were significantly higher (85%) than the national average (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2010). These are just a few examples of Black males excelling in schools doing exceptionally well despite the dismal statistics. There are several factors that can contribute to the academic success of some Black males in urban schools. These include school and parental partnerships, community support, positive relationships with teachers and peers, and school cultures that set high expectations for all students. Another possible explanation for the academic success of Black males in urban schools is concerned with cultural and racial identity.

Cultural identity is defined as a sense of belonging to a particular culture or ethnic group and it provides a feeling of security, inclusiveness, and wellbeing (Tillman, 2002). Oyserman, Gant, and Ager (1995) posited, “connectedness to one’s racial group, awareness of racism, and seeing oneself as succeeding as a group member, provides what is necessary to acquire school success” (p 300). Members of the dominant group are not aware of their own race or culture most of the time because it is just the norm to them. Awareness of race and culture and how it affects individual identity is usually more prevalent during adolescent years, especially for minorities. For Black adolescent males, connectedness to the Black culture provides a sense of worth and purpose. Cultural identity for Black males can be seen as a resource instead of a

problem as they pursue academic achievement. Carter (2006) explored how individual values and beliefs about race are significant in regard to how Black male students behave in certain situations. In the school context, Black male students' racial beliefs influenced their understanding of specific events and how they responded to them. Because the U.S. public educational system is dictated by dominant White middle class ideologies, some Black males have learned how to conform to the dominant culture's ideas and beliefs of academic success without compromising their own cultural values and beliefs. They understand the role of both dominant and non-dominant cultural practices and incorporate the skills necessary to participate successfully in multiple environments, which include school, home, and their communities (Carter, 2005). It is possible the ability to be bicultural and move easily across cultural borders explains the success of high achieving Black males. Have these successful Black males learned how to adapt to multiple roles, to their peers, and to a society that is often in a state of shock when they perform well academically?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to understand and shed light on how some Black males in urban secondary schools managed to successfully navigate through the educational system and achieve academic success when others did not. Often cases of academically successful and highly intelligent young Black males go unnoticed and unrecognized in school especially if their superior performance is non sports related (Swanson et al., 2003). Rather than give the usual expert stance on educational experiences of high achieving Black males, this study highlighted their perspectives on how they have achieved academic success.

### **Theoretical Framework: Dominant and Non-dominant Cultural Capital**

For this study, the theoretical framework drew upon the work of Prudence Carter (2003; 2005) who developed her theory of dominant and non-dominant cultural capital from Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital and Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) oppositional culture theory. Carter wanted to broaden previous research that linked identity and culture to minority student engagement and academic achievement. Carter (2005) developed her theory from a qualitative study of 68 low income Black and Latino students in a restructured urban school district in Yonkers, New York. Carter interviewed participants over a period of 10 months to examine how perceptions of race, ethnicity, and gender relations informed their schooling behavior and career aspirations. At the time of the interview, 84% of the study participants were enrolled in one of the magnet schools in the school district. Carter concluded that these students believed in the value of education and its use as a means of upward mobility; however, it became a juggling act for them to remain attached to cultural values while conforming to the rules of the dominant culture.

Carter (2003, 2005) employed Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, which he developed to explain the disparities in educational attainment of students from different social classes in France. Bourdieu argued that cultural traditions and customs are important to school success. White students considered to be in the upper echelon have an advantage because they have been taught the cultural codes and knowledge needed to be successful in school at an early age. Cultural capital includes resources that can yield social and professional success, and exists in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital is acquired through understanding and knowledge, such as a student who has gained the knowledge of famous art and collectibles from visiting museums during family vacations. Objectified

cultural capital is in the form of cultural goods such as artwork or book collections.

Institutionalized cultural capital is acquired through formal education and higher credentials.

Carter (2005) posited that although poor Black students may have little knowledge or familiarity with the dominant culture know-how, they nonetheless possess cultural capital derived from Black culture. Thus, Black students come to school with a different set of cultural resources.

Carter (2003, 2005) argued that Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital is based on the experiences of the dominant White middle and upper class and tends to ignore non-dominant groups.

Moreover, instead of using cultural capital for long-term social and economic gain, Black students use it to maintain group identity and cultural boundaries, which provides them with a sense of self worth and acceptance within their own culture. When Black students adhere to the behaviors and principles of the dominant White middle class, they may feel they have rejected their non-dominant identity and group solidarity (Andrews, 2009; O'Conner, Mueller, Lewis, Rivas-Drake, & Rosenberg, 2011).

Carter (2003, 2005) also employed Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) oppositional culture theory. In the mid-1980s, Fordham and Ogbu popularized the theory that many minority students do not perform well in school because they desired to avoid being seen as "acting white." That is, Black students associated academic achievement such as studying and excelling in school, with being White. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and Fordham (2008) theorized the students in their studies developed an oppositional identity where the students perceived having to give up their own culture and adhere to the White dominant culture if they wanted to achieve academic success. Oppositional culture theory asserted that for some Black students, doing well in school, such as making good grades and studying, was perceived as a sign they had "sold out" in order to achieve success. Fordham and Ogbu's theory is considered controversial and many

scholars have rejected acting white as a plausible explanation for Black underachievement (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Harris, 2006; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). Carter (2006), however, has argued acting white is not a rejection of the benefits of education but instead is Black students' response to a perceived rejection of their own culture and identity. Carter contended that resistance from Black students is not toward academics, but instead, a rejection of specific values of the dominant culture such as style of dress and music. One's culture facilitates a sense of belonging, self worth, and group solidarity, so when Black students adhere to their own culture codes and values, they are perceived by many educators as rejecting academic achievement (Carter, 2005).

Carter (2003, 2005, 2006) further argued there is no monolithic Black culture and suggested differences such as racial and ethnic values and beliefs, access to resources, and cultural styles account for the differences in school engagement and achievement among Black students. Carter (2005) has categorized these differences into three groups of students: the "cultural straddlers," the "cultural mainstreamers," and the "non compliant believers." Each group represents a state of being in which Black students follow mainstream norms and traditional educational practices. Each of these groups is described in the following sections.

### **Cultural Straddlers**

Cultural straddlers manage to achieve academic success and maintain their cultural identities without being ostracized by their peers. This group of students not only complies with the rules and codes of the dominant White middle class culture of schools, they hold on to their cultural identities and do not associate academic achievement with Whiteness. The cultural straddlers are the most adept at handling the balancing act mentioned previously. In addition, these students are able to make the best use of both dominant and non-dominant cultural capital

by conforming to mainstream ideology in order to attain academic success. The cultural straddlers possess the resources to strategically navigate between multiple environments including their ethnic peer groups, communities, and schools, which are key to being successful in the dominant culture. An example of a cultural straddler is a Black male student who is among the school's academic elite population such as the National Honor Society, enrolled in AP and honor courses, recognized by his teachers as a peer leader and role model, and well respected by his peers at home who do not consider him to be a sellout.

### **Cultural Mainstreamers**

The cultural mainstreamers assume the values and behaviors of the dominant White middle class culture and norms. They believe non-dominant groups should be culturally, economically, and socially conformed to White middle class ideologies. Even though the cultural mainstreamers consider their ethnic background to be a central part of their identity, they display most cultural behaviors as racially neutral. The cultural mainstreamers believe accommodating and absorbing the traditions of White America is the only way for upward mobility and socio-economic success. This group complies with the mandates of the dominant White middle class schooling traditions even if it means they will be rejected by their Black peers (Carter, 2005). An example of a cultural mainstreamer is a Black male student who is colorblind and does not believe race has anything to do with academic achievement. He believes acceptance by the school's academic elite is more important than being accepted by his Black peers, even if it means rejecting his own culture.

Carter (2005) asserted both cultural mainstreamers and cultural straddlers excel in school by seeking the support of teachers and parents to navigate between multiple cultures; however, the cultural straddlers include one important piece into their navigation endeavors, peers. Even

though it is important for Black students to indoctrinate themselves to the dominant culture values of which they are a part, according to Carter it is equally important for them to not give up their own group identity.

### **Noncompliant Believers**

The noncompliant believers are students opposed to adjusting to the dominant White middle class culture's behaviors even though they understand those cultural practices may ultimately lead to academic, economic, and social success (Carter, 2005). This group of students has faith in the educational system to some extent but they challenge the dominant White middle class culture's practices and see more worth in their own value of knowledge, which the school does not recognize (Delpit, 1995). The noncompliant believers do not view cultural assimilation as a precondition for academic achievement. Because the noncompliant believers' engagement and attachment to school is conditional, their educational outcomes are less successful. An example of a noncompliant believer is a student who often challenges school officials regarding policies and procedures they feel target Black students.

For this study, I planned to see if the academically high achieving Black males fit into one of Carter's three categories of minority students who value education, however, they may respond to the structural expectations and dominant cultural values at school in different ways. Although Carter's categories provide a lens for understanding high achieving Black males school experiences, participants' unique stories might extend, deepen, or even contradict Carter's theory of dominant and non-dominant cultural capital. This framework was used to develop the following research questions which guided the study:

- How do academically high achieving Black males describe their school experiences?

- How do academically high achieving Black males in an urban high school define academic success?
- What do high achieving Black males attribute their academic success to?

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to draw on previous research that helps to develop a rationale for the study. I provide some information and highlight prior research that addresses Black youth racial identity development, high achieving and gifted Black students' racial identity, and educational resilience.

Below, I will focus on studies that view racial identity as a positive influence on academic achievement for Black males. This body of research suggests that Black males who are aware of racial barriers and are comfortable with their own racial identity show strength and perseverance, and therefore do better in school. This literature review constructs the argument for a positive relationship between healthy racial identity and Black academic achievement.

#### **Black Youth Racial Identity Development**

Racial identity has been defined as the degree to which race influences a person's self-concept and behavior (Cross, 1991; Tatum, 1997). It is a psychological response to one's race and how one identifies with a particular racial group. For Black Americans, this group membership ideally instills the individual with a sense of belonging and pride (Harper & Quaye, 2007). In a society like the U.S. that emphasizes racial group membership, the development of racial identity takes place in some form in everyone, regardless of race (McGee & Martin, 2011). As a Black child, the integration of one's personal identity with one's racial identity into a group membership is a necessary and inevitable developmental task of growing up Black in White America (Watson & Protinsky, 1988). Racial identity plays a significant role in student achievement for Black students (Ford & Iii, 1996).

In 1971, William Cross, a prominent researcher specializing in Black psychology, developed one of the first and still most widely used theories of racial identity development for Black America (Tatum, 1997). Cross (1971) referred to his racial identity development theory as the nigrescence model, which is a continuum of five stages an individual progresses through to achieve a healthy Black identity. Nigrescence is a French word that literally means the process of becoming Black (Cross, 1971). Since its first publication, Cross has revised the original model and now defines racial identity development or nigrescence as a process of transformation through five stages which are pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment (Cross, 1991).

According to Cross (1991, 1995), a person begins at the *pre-encounter* stage where he or she downplays the importance of race to group identity and focuses more on other group memberships. In this stage one may find a Black child who takes in the values and beliefs of the dominant culture more so than their own cultural group. There are several factors that can influence a student at this stage, such as de-emphasizing the role of Black Americans in a White society and minimizing Black cultural events in school while emphasizing the accomplishments of the dominant culture. This cultural mis-education can cause an adolescent in this stage to have negative feelings about his ethnic background. The second stage, *encounter*, is usually triggered by an event that causes the individual to experience the effect of some form of racism or discrimination that shatters his or her current identity (Cross, 1991, 1995). In this stage, Black students come to realize they are a part of a cultural group not valued in a White society (Cross, 1995). Black students may also experience some form of racism in school from teachers or outside of school. Either way, it is in this stage that an individual's awareness of what it means

to be Black in White America is formed and heightened (Bell, 1999). Thus, the individual's level of Blackness is high as he begins to soak up Black cultural values and beliefs.

In the third stage of Cross' model, *immersion-emersion*, the individual immerses into the world of Blackness by becoming drenched into the culture while rejecting any representations of Whiteness. For example, the Black adolescent at this stage begins to reflect the Black culture through thought patterns, behavior, dress, music, friends, and speech. This is the stage where the individual begins to experience a loss of the old self while gaining a new sense of self. Emersion is the second part of stage three and begins with the individual wanting to regain control of his or her emotions (Cross, 1995). Black adolescents may begin to seek out role models who exhibit positive feelings about their Blackness while at the same time have positive interactions with the dominant White society. The fourth stage of Cross's model, *internalization*, signals a psychological change wherein the individual resolves his or her conflict with the old and the new self to achieve a sense of self-assurance with their racial identity (Cross, 1991). This stage provides the individual with a sense of belonging and social affiliation.

The last stage of Cross's racial identity model, *internalization-commitment* is action oriented and has been presented as having the most affect on Black students' academic achievement. It is at this stage that individuals can feel a strong sense of self (Black identity), pride, and achievement. Black students who move through the internalization stage are comfortable taking advanced classes and having both Black and non Black peers. A positive racial identity and a sense of belonging to or affiliation with their culture can serve as a resource for Black students as they pursue academic success (O'Connor, Mueller, Lewis, Rivas-Drake, & Rosenberg, 2011). Cross's *internalization-commitment* stage is closely aligned with the cultural straddlers which was described earlier. Carter (2005) identified cultural straddlers as Black

students who possess the resources to strategically navigate between multiple environments including their ethnic peer groups, communities, and schools which are necessary for success in the dominant culture.

Each stage in Cross's (1991, 1995) model reflects ways in which Black individuals progress through a series of stages toward a positive racial identity. Academically high achieving Black students utilize their racial identity every day in striving for success in school. However, for the high achieving Black male, this can become problematic in a school setting because the school's culture does not always provide the necessary support for this process to develop. The racial identity theory shows that Blacks who have developed a strong and positive racial identity do not rely on their group affiliation for motivation and appraisal but instead they are inspired by what is best for them as individuals.

**Black student academic achievement and racial identity.** Research has suggested Black students' racial identity affects academic achievement (Rowley et al., 1997). Academic achievement of Black students has been one of the most argued and misunderstood topics among researchers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Jenkins, 2006; Orr, 2003). For instance, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) did extensive research on the differences in achievement for minorities and their White peers in the public school setting. Ogbu's initial study took place in 1968 in Stockton, CA where he focused on school and societal factors that contributed to minority students' underachievement. However, after comparing the academic achievement of different minorities in the same school, the differences among their school performances could not be explained by school and societal factors alone (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). This comparative research concluded no minority group does better in school simply because they are smarter; no minority culture is superior at educating children; and no minority language is superior for learning in

school. However, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argued that Black peer groups in school lessen the value of academic achievement. They suggested that Black students react to limited educational opportunities and jobs by creating oppositional orientations toward their schooling.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) concluded oppositional culture theory explained the racial disparities in academic achievement. These two scholars speculated the reason for the achievement gap between Black students and their White counterparts was because most Black students develop oppositional behavior toward learning in school. They posited that historically oppressed groups, which they labeled “involuntary minorities,” showed resentment toward the dominant group because they believe the U. S., took away their civil liberties. The “involuntary minorities” included those whose ancestors were forced to come to the U. S. in chains against their will (e.g. Blacks). In the school context Ogbu (1992) posited Black students are more likely to resist school success because they do not want to be ostracized and labeled by Black peers as acting White. The oppositional culture theory was initially accepted by many scholars, however, since then, it has been critiqued because there has been no conclusive evidence that Black students resist schooling or face negative peer pressure because of their academic success (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Downey & Ainsworth-Darnell, 2002; Lee, 2004).

Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell (2002) completed a study challenging the oppositional culture theory. They assessed the key components of Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) findings, that is, Black students (involuntary minorities) devalue educational opportunities and believe there are limited job opportunities and Black students resist school more than the dominant groups of students and this accounted for the achievement gap. In other words, their peers criticized high achieving Black students for their academic success. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) examined Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) findings against data they derived from a national survey,

the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), which consisted of a national sample of 17,000 high school sophomores collected in 1990. Their study focused on 2,197 Black students, 653 Asian American students, and 13,942 White students, which they thought best represented Fordham and Ogbu's involuntary immigrant, voluntary immigrant, and dominant groups of students in the U.S. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey concluded oppositional culture theory was inconsistent with the data they examined. Their study revealed that Black students do value education and consider it important for their future career endeavors, and the high achievers have positive relationships with and are supported by their Black peers. In an earlier study completed by Oyserman et al. (1995) with minority students, they found that students with a positive feeling about their racial identity and a sense of connectedness to a group provided them with meaning and purpose and promotes school success.

During adolescence, Black teens begin to feel the need to identify strongly with a sense of shared social identity by belonging to a specific group that is characteristically differently from other groups. More specifically, Black teens begin to examine the relevance of using the White middle class norm to define their self-worth (Robinson & Biran, 2006) and Black identity group membership takes on a new and more powerful meaning (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995). For example, Ward (1990) researched a group of minority high school students and found having a positive connection with their racial group allowed them to reject society's negative stereotypes of their group and thus achieve academic success in school. This presents a far different relationship between group identity and academic success than Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) theory of "the burden of acting white" which means giving up their Black identity to achieve in school. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argued that Black students interpret doing well in school as trying to be White and behave like the mainstream school culture, which is commonly observed

by their peers as not cool. Black students fear that assuming the dominant culture's ways in school will be detrimental to their strong racial identity and undermine group solidarity. Ward's (1990) study found that even when Black students attended elite White private schools, they viewed their racial identity and sense of group connectedness as necessary for academic motivation and sustained success. Other scholars have also linked racial identity and awareness to educational motivation and attainment (Grantham & Ford, 2003; Oyserman et al., 1995; Robinson & Biran, 2006).

**High achieving and gifted Black students racial identity development.** Most high achieving Black males maintain a strong sense of racial and ethnic identity and group connectedness that helps them be successful in educational settings (Chavous et al., 2003). Gifted students are more likely to face challenges with their racial identity in educational settings (Bonner II, Jennings, Marbley, & Brown, 2008; Grantham & Ford, 2003). However, they are able to overcome these challenges and succeed in school as demonstrated in this section.

High achieving Black males do not have to deemphasize their racial-ethnic identity in school in order to attain academic success (Wright, 2011). Wright's study explored the racial-ethnic identity and academic achievement of five Black males in an urban high school. He discovered that a healthy racial-ethnic identity was revealed in several ways. First, the high achieving Black males had confidence in their intellectual abilities and valued the educational achievement of their fellow Black peers. Second, the participants took comfort in and were assertive about their racial-ethnic identity in the school context. Third, the participants were fully aware of barriers and discrimination so they were prepared to respond in resilient ways. These academically high achieving Black males felt a strong sense of connection to their culture and were prepared to work hard to overcome the challenges they faced in the educational system.

The study revealed that for young Black males, a healthy racial-ethnic identity is integral to every aspect of their being in a White middle class society. Black youth who are successful in school cannot disregard their racial-ethnic identity in negotiating and navigating their educational experiences (Wright, 2007). Chavous et al. (2003) also found that Black high school students who had a strong sense of racial identity, group connectedness, and pride, showed higher academic persistence and achievement than their peers who de-emphasized their ethnic identities by acting white in order to be successful in school.

Fordham (1988) suggested that high achieving Black students sustained their school success by minimizing their racial identity and cultural group connectedness in exchange for mainstream values and behaviors. Fordham's finding is similar to Carter's (2005) cultural mainstreamers, which were mentioned above. The cultural mainstreamers assume the dominant culture's values and behaviors as the norm more so than their own ethnic identity.

Other scholars (Tyson et al., 2005) completed a study on the burden of acting white theory and its significance in understanding and addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students. Their study used a qualitative method in which they interviewed high achieving students from eight secondary schools in a North Carolina district. The findings revealed the burden of acting white does exist for some Black students, but it was not customary among the group of students they interviewed. The study also showed the burden of acting white did not relate to students' academic performance and they were not discouraged from taking advanced placement courses. The authors concluded the burden of acting white could not be specifically attributed to Black students only. They found that some high achieving White students reported a similar experience with the burden of high achievement. This is

known as the anti-intellectualism trend; no one wants to be seen as being too smart. Both groups of high achievers experienced forms of animosity from their low achieving peers.

Many gifted Black students encounter barriers in their attempts to develop their racial identity. Gifted Black males in particular have to embrace multiple identities, which include being Black, male, and gifted. Embracing these multiple identities is critical in fostering a positive self-concept and identity (Grantham & Ford, 2003). Oftentimes, they find that their academic success and abilities moves them farther away from their peers instead of creating a sense of group connectedness (Bonner II et al., 2008). These challenges of self-esteem, identity development, and family and peer pressure often leads these students to feel isolated and alone (Lee, Winfield, & Wilson, 1991). Perry, Steele, and Hilliard III (2003) posited that in school settings, gifted Black males are expected to perform at levels commensurate with their intellectual abilities and at home they are expected to act in a manner that coincides with their social home environment. What often happens, according to Perry, Steele, and Hilliard III, is students find themselves caught in the middle; too smart to fit in with the home community; and too distant to be a part of the mainstream. Many scholars have pondered how some of these gifted Black males are able to overcome the pressure of sometimes being the only Black male in a high level class with identity development and pressure from family and peers in order to navigate successfully through these multiple worlds (Ford & Moore, 2004; Herbert, 1998).

Grantham (2004) completed a single case study exploring Black males' motivation to participate in gifted and advanced level classes at a semi rural high school in Virginia. The total male population at the school was 49%, of which 16% were Black males. However, the school's gifted program consisted of 91% Whites, 3% Blacks, and 6% other. The overarching question for Grantham's study was "Why do some Black males, if qualified, choose to participate in

gifted programs and others choose not to participate?” The study suggested social factors and teacher influences played a major role in gifted Black males’ motivation to participate and excel in gifted and advanced classes. The study also suggested that some Black males successfully navigate barriers that hamper their motivation to participate in gifted classes in school. Grantham’s study represents a defiance of the odds and conveys a vital message regarding the importance of positive motivation to student outcomes.

The underrepresentation of Black males in gifted programs has been another challenge for educators over the years (Floyd, 1996). Nationally, as many as 50 to 70% of Black males go unidentified for gifted and advanced classes (Bonner II et al., 2008). Stereotypes about Black males and low expectations hinders teachers and other educators from seeing the strengths in these students and referring them for appropriate screening and assessment. This also leads to gifted Black males failing to reach their academic potential (Whiting, 2009). Inadequate assessment policies and practices, low teacher referrals, and low student motivation, are the main reasons for Black male underrepresentation in gifted programs (Floyd, 1996).

Several scholars have supported the claim that educational resiliency allows many gifted and high achieving Black students to rise above the many challenges and obstacles they may encounter in the school setting and pursue academic success (Floyd, 1996; Oyserman et al., 1995; Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2004; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). Gifted and resilient children share some of the same unique characteristics such as intellectual abilities, problem solving abilities, sense of purpose, and self-efficacy. These characteristics can serve as protective factors and deflect the harmful effects of adversity (Grantham, 2004). In the next section I will be discussing educational resiliency.

## **Educational Resilience**

Education resilience is the ability of students to succeed in school despite risk factors that may make it hard for them to do so. Studies have shown that resilient children are those who beat the odds or rebound under challenging or adverse circumstances (Henderson & Mistein, 1996; Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, & Maton, 1999). Resilience promotes success and motivates students.

Over the years, researchers have used resilience as a conceptual framework to examine why some students are successful in school despite adverse conditions while others are not (Reis et al., 2004). Henderson and Mistein (1996) defined resilience as “The capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social, academic, and vocational competence despite exposure to the stress that is inherent in today’s world” (p. 7). It is important to understand how academically successful Black male students manage to transform their struggles and negative school experiences into success (Allen & Griffin, 2006).

Students who have the capabilities to rise despite the many challenges they may face develop protective processes or factors that offset the obstacles that may impede their pursuit of success ((Bonner II et al., 2008). Protective factors are conditions or attributes that help cultivate positive outcomes for students who are in at risk situations (Gutman & Midgley, 2000). A resilient student will use protective factors to overcome risk and be successful in adverse situations. These protective factors may include a strong sense of self-confidence and internal locus of control, which are internal factors, whereas enrollment in advanced classes, extracurricular activities and supportive families and communities are external factors. Internal protective factors such as a sense of identity and self-confidence are the student’s ability to act independently and employ control over one’s environment. Resilient students have a sense of

purpose and believe in a bright future. External protective factors such as family and community support emerged in the literature as one of the most influential factors in determining positive outcomes for students in at risk situations (Bonner II et al., 2008). Supportive and caring relationships with at least one adult in the home or community play an integral role in fostering resilience in a child's life to offset negative challenges (Reis et al., 2004). Oliver (2006) similarly posited that resilience is determined by both individual and environmental factors. In other words, how a person responds to environmental stressors influences his or her success in adapting to other adverse circumstances. Resilient students surround themselves with other positive students and peers, which may help alleviate the negative experiences they may be faced with at school. These students are not only achieving well academically, but they also have positive personal relationships, are often involved in extra-curricular activities, have high self-efficacy, and have a sense of purpose (Reis et al., 2004).

Gayles (2005) completed a study involving three high achieving Black males who were seniors at one of the least affluent high schools in Florida. These students exhibited resiliency because they succeeded in school despite their dismal living conditions and school environments. His study revealed two main themes regarding resilient students. First, the successful males were positive that their academic achievement would enable their "upward mobility" with others in society. Second, the academic resilience for those students ran counter to the larger narrative for non-affluent Black males at that school who were not expected to graduate with honors and receive college scholarships.

Resiliency empowers Black males to succeed despite the adversity they may face during their high school experience. High achieving Black males who are resilient to the negative

stereotyping in school, defy expectations by learning to be well-adapted individuals (Grantham, 2004).

## CHAPTER 3

### Research Design and Methodology

Qualitative research was the overarching approach using narrative inquiry in particular to gather data for this study. Qualitative research was a suitable methodology for this study because it is designed to give voice to the participants. The qualitative research tradition is a method that considers personal stories, perspectives, and the experiences of people's everyday lives and is valuable to understanding the social world (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative researchers empathize and seek to understand people from their own frame of reference and to experience reality as the study participants experience it (Merriam, 2009). By exploring the experiences of academically high achieving Black males in urban schools, qualitative research allowed me to understand the context of the students' lives and the meanings they have constructed.

Qualitative research is naturalistic when it takes place in the setting studied and provides a context for understanding the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The contexts for this study were two secondary schools in an urban district. The voices of multiple participants were sought, and a detailed description and interpretation of the problem, findings, and connections of findings to significant literature and practice can be found in chapters 4 and 5 (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Stake, 2010).

#### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach that involves making meaning out of individual lived experiences through the stories they tell about themselves (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2000, 2006). Researchers engage in narrative inquiry by respectfully infringing on the lives of the research participants and asking them to help us understand and learn about

their lives from told stories (Wyrick, 2010). Narrative is about understanding lived experiences through the interactions of the study participants in a particular context. Narrative inquiry served as the appropriate research methodology because the purpose of my study was to explore the lived school experiences of high academic achieving Black males in urban school settings. It allowed me to capture the rich stories and events of the successful educational endeavors of academically high achieving Black male high school students. Employing narrative inquiry is a unique method to express and understand lived experiences as contextual and meaningful (Kramp, 2004). Narrative inquiry allowed me as the researcher, to gain access to the personal experiences of a group of high achieving Black males as they articulated and revealed their school experiences.

Narrative inquiry is human centered and captures how people make sense of the world (Webster & Mertova, 2007). A researcher who engages in narrative inquiry is seeking the meaning of a particular experience or event and tells about it in story form. For some people, storytelling is a natural way of describing their life experiences. Individuals shape their daily lives and interpret their past in terms of stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Stories reflect that experiences are a matter of growth and understandings are continually developed (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posited that educational experiences should be studied narratively because narrative inquiry is much more than seeking out and hearing a story. Narrative inquiry “is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction within a milieu” (p. 20). In narrative inquiry, the researcher becomes an active listener and the interviewee does most of the talking. Power is given to the storyteller because it is through the telling of personal narrative that a life is

understood (Kramp, 2007). It was essential for me as the researcher to have meaningful engagement with the participants and have the ability to listen and understand their perspectives.

Narrative inquiry allowed me to explore my participants thinking beyond their external behaviors and create meaning from their school experiences. Narratives of the participants provided counter stories and contradictions to the beliefs that are more commonly held about young Black males in urban high schools ((Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Each story expressed events, emotions, thoughts, and interpretations unique to the individual lived experience (Chase, 2005). Academic scholars of narrative inquiry have proposed that narrative research should be judged by the response of the reader and by the change it may inspire (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The stories in this study focused on and highlighted the strengths of nine academically high achieving Black males in two urban high schools. My hope is the study results might bring forth meaningful solutions and create a pathway of academic success for other Black males who are underachieving.

#### **Research Site: Unified School District 466, Gilmer, KS**

Unified School District 466 (USD 466) is an urban district located in Gilmer, KS (fictitious name). Gilmer is a large city in the state with a population of approximately 345,000 people and is comprised of the following ethnicities: White 78%, Black 12%, Hispanic or Latino 10%, Asian 4%, American Indian or Alaska Native 2%, and other races 6% (City of Gilmer, 2012). USD 466 is also a large district in the state educating approximately 11% of all public school students. The district's 2012-13 enrollment was about 50,000 students. USD 466 is ethnically diverse with a student body that does not mirror the larger community, but is represented by 35% Caucasian, 32% Hispanic, 18% Black, 9% Multi-racial, 5% Asian, 1% Native American, and 0.2% Pacific Islander. The school district is comprised of 7

comprehensive high schools. Gilmer City Schools qualifies as a Title I district with 76% of students coming from economically disadvantaged homes (Kansas State Department of Education, 2009).

### **Participant Selection**

Purposeful sampling was utilized to select participants because it is the foundation of qualitative research techniques and seeks out certain research participants for their knowledge of the topic in order to gain the most insight (Merriam, 2009). Nine participants were selected due to their distinctive perspectives about issues important to this study. Criteria for selection was Black male students attending a USD 466 comprehensive high school, who were from various socio-economic backgrounds, currently in their junior or senior year, have a 3.3 to 4.0 cumulative grade point average, and were enrolled in at least one AP, Honors, or College Prep course. The grade level of these participants was important to this study because they were on track to graduate and they had more experiences to talk about than a freshman or sophomore.

I requested data from the USD 466 Office of Innovation and Evaluation to get an idea of the number of Black males enrolled in advanced level courses at each of the 7 comprehensive high schools. The data revealed there were 148 Black males in the high schools who have taken an advanced level course. Due to the timeframe of this study and the nature of the in-depth interviews in narrative inquiry, not all 148 students could be interviewed. Out of the 148, I asked the counselors from the 7 comprehensive high schools to identify students who met the criteria listed above. The counselors and school data leaders identified 42 students who met the criteria, averaging about 4 students per school. However, 2 of the schools in the district, Urban Northeast (11) and Urban Southeast (8), had the highest number of Black males enrolled at the school and had the highest number enrolled in advanced level courses. I had the counselors from these two

schools further identify from their list, the students highest in class rank to participate in this study. A total of 9 students participated in the study, six from Urban Northeast and three from Urban Southeast. All of the participants were asked to sign a consent form; if the student was under 18, the parent or legal guardian of the minor student were asked to sign an assent form. Copies of consent and assent forms are contained in Appendix A.

### **Data Collection Plan**

To complete this narrative inquiry, I employed two data collection strategies to address the research questions and objective of this study. They included conducting one-on-one interviews and having at least one group discussion per school with the participants for a total of two discussion groups (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The interviews and group discussion were digitally recorded and transcribed to ensure data accuracy. By working in a collaborative dialogic relationship with the study participants, their individual voices were captured and brought to light as I explored the experiences of Black males in urban schools who are achieving academic success while so many of their peers are underachieving.

### **Narrative Interviews and Group Discussion**

Interviews were the primary method for data collection for this study. Interviews are often the main source of data needed for understanding the participants' experiences (Yang, 2011). In a narrative interview, it is vital for the researcher to actually hear what the participant has to tell. Interviews allow the researcher to get more in-depth with the study participants in order to understand their experiences (Chase, 2005). This type of interviewing gave me good insight into how the study participants viewed how their school experiences have affected their academic achievement. My role as the researcher in this narrative inquiry was to empower the participants to describe their school experiences and to co-construct the participants' stories as

they are told. To ensure I was listening to what was being said instead of anticipating what the students expressed, I withheld my own biases and preconceptions. This meant prompting open sharing and guiding the conversations so that the participants could tell their stories in their own unique ways (Yang, 2011).

Study participants were asked to take part in a minimum of one in-depth semi-structured interview, which took approximately 45-60 minutes. The interviews were recorded to ensure I fully captured everything the participants had to say. The goal of narrative interviewing was to create detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements. Therefore, questions were informal, as well as somewhat broad and open ended with the intention of giving the participant equal control of the conversation (Kramp, 2004). I started with a limited set of questions allowing space for new questions to emerge from the participants' answers to the previous questions. It was important for me to develop rapport and trust with the interviewees to allow for their true stories to emerge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Interview questions are included in Appendix B.

Group discussions are a further adaptation of in depth interviewing. Similar to focus groups, they are formed around individuals with similar backgrounds and can reveal a wealth of detailed information and insight (Merriam, 2009). The objective of group discussions in this study was to create conversations among the participants around topics they believe influenced their academic success in school (Patton, 2002). The group discussions took place in an accepting environment that put the study participants at ease and allowed them to generate their own questions and give meaning to their answers. There were two group discussions, one at each high school, approximately 60 minutes in length and they were recorded.

## **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Analyzing and interpreting qualitative data entails how the researcher captures the life experiences, storytelling, and life histories of the study participants (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The lived school experiences of nine academically high achieving Black males in two USD 466 secondary schools are embedded within a historical and cultural context. I analyzed and interpreted the students' accounts of their experiences and transferred them into a written text, making sure the stories were told from the narrator's voice (Merriam, 2009).

As noted earlier, the primary data source for this study consisted of audio recordings of individual interviews and group discussions. I organized the data and created a central file to keep everything in one place. After the data were gathered, I began with listening attentively to the recorded interviews and discussion groups to transcribe them accurately. In order to analyze and interpret the narrator's experiences and create meaning, it is important for the researcher to actively listen and pay close attention to the voices within each narrative (Chase, 2005). As the researcher and co constructor of the stories, I listened to, read, and listened to again until a specific theme or pattern emerged within each narrative (Wyrick, 2010). My goal was to construct each participant's story so that it brought value and significance to the study.

The purpose of analyzing and interpreting the students' lived experiences and transferring them into written text was to deepen the understanding of the meaning conveyed in their stories (Polkinghorne, 2007). As the interviewer I took an open listening stance and paid careful attention to any unusual or unexpected responses from the students. This ensured that each student's voice was heard and that the text was not something I expected. In order for the researcher to hear clearly what was being said; according to Polkinghorne (2007),

An interpretation is not simply a summary of a storied text. It is a commentary that uncovers and clarifies the meaning of the text. It draws out implications in the text for understanding other text and for revealing the impact of the social and cultural setting on people's lives. (p. 484)

Narrative data analysis involves organizing and arranging the information gathered, and data interpretation involves creating meaning and making sense of the stories shared by the narrators (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I created meaning of what each student expressed in his story about his lived school experiences as a high achieving Black male in an urban high school. I continually analyzed the data throughout the study from beginning to end to identify threads or themes that emerged in each narrative that was shared by the participants.

### **Research Quality**

Unlike the traditional qualitative research methods, narrative inquiry relies on criteria other than reliability, validity, and generalizability (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Narrative inquiry and storytelling seek to explore individual truths participants have articulated more so than identifying broad and repeatable events (Webster & Mertova, 2007). A narrative story must be credible. I accomplished this by first establishing a rapport and trusting relationship so that the students could feel comfortable and open up to tell their stories. My social work background and experience was a plus because one of the things you learn as a social worker is how to make the interviewee feel comfortable and empower them to become want to tell their story. I was able to build a trusting relationship with these young men because as a Black researcher, I was familiar with their culture and I focused on their lived experiences, not just the research study. During the interviews, I tuned in to what the students viewed as important to them. By actively listening to the meaning of the answers the students gave and how it was said was also critical to

establishing credibility. My goal for doing that was to capture the true meaning of their responses.

Keeping a personal journal during this study also helped in establishing credibility. Personal journals can be a valuable tool because it provides a record of thoughts and ideas in order to manage the research study. Writing short notes to oneself when the idea occurs is actually the beginning of analysis (Watt, 2007). I utilized this personal journal as a reflective tool and notebook, documenting spontaneous thoughts or ideas related to the study. A personal journal also allowed me to write down my impressions, reactions, and observations after each contact with the students, including interviews, group discussions or when initial contact was made to arrange the interviews. After each interview session I wrote down my thoughts and feelings about the session, to include my own personal feelings. The notes I kept in my journal helped clarify a lot of what was said from the voice recording sessions. I immersed myself into the data by listening to the voice recordings repeatedly to ensure I was interpreting the participants meaning of their lived experiences as I constructed their stories.

Member checking is another one way of establishing research credibility, I employed this method for the interviews (Creswell, 2007). Member checking is taking the data and findings back to the study participants to verify the interpretations (Merriam, 2009). Member checking also ensures the study participants that their perspectives are being accurately represented. When the drafts of the student's narratives were written, I shared the data with the students so they could determine if I accurately represented their stories. In addition, I sought peer reviews from my colleagues and departmental faculty and maintained a personal journal.

## **Researcher Positionality**

Reflexivity is essential to qualitative studies because the researcher is the instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007). I was the primary researcher to collect, analyze and interpret the data provided by the study participants. Reflexivity is the means by which the researcher is continually aware of any biases, values, and experiences that she may bring to the research study. Reflexivity allows the researcher to take stock of any biases, thoughts, and feelings that might influence the study. Because my position as a researcher for this study is linked to many identities (Black female, mother of a high achieving Black male, social worker, education specialist, instructor, and educational researcher), my reflexivity can be seen as an asset and added strength in some ways. But I was also aware of the preconceptions and personal biases I had when I began this study. My role as a researcher was to create a non judgmental and trusting environment where the participants would feel safe and secure to articulate their experiences.

## CHAPTER 4

This chapter provides an analysis of the data collected from interviews and group discussions with nine academically high achieving Black males in USD 466. All of the participants in this study identified themselves as Black males, which included three bi-racial students. The nine participants provided insightful descriptions of their lived experiences in a high school and how they managed to achieve academic success when many of their peers do not. They spoke about the relationships they had with their peers, teachers, and families. For confidentiality purposes, I used fictitious names for the participants and the schools to protect their privacy.

The nine narratives are separated between the two schools. The first part of the chapter provides demographic information about the high school followed by individual narratives and group discussions for that school. The narratives are divided into themes that emerged from the participants individual interviews.

### **Urban Northeast High School**

Urban Northeast High School is one of the seven comprehensive high schools in the USD 466 school district. The school is located in Northeast Gilmer, which is perceived as where the most affluent and cosmopolitan residents of Gilmer live. The student enrollment of 1,548 is comprised of 41% Whites, 33% Blacks, 13% Hispanics, and 13% other races, which includes Asian and American Indian. Approximately 54% of the student population lives in economically disadvantaged homes (Kansas State Department of Education, 2012). Urban Northeast offers an accredited comprehensive curriculum that provides for a wide range of student interests and abilities. In addition to the regular academic offerings, including Special education, the school has elective course in the arts, sciences and industrial and vocational areas. Honors courses are

offered in English, Biology, Social Studies, and World History. Advanced Placement (AP) courses are offered in English, Pre-Calculus, Chemistry, U.S. History, Government, and Computer Science.

Urban Northeast also offers the AVID program, which stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination. AVID is a college preparatory curriculum, which is specifically designed to provide the necessary academic support and encouragement to at risk students with academic potential, but who lack the resources needed to enroll and succeed in college. AVID is used nationwide in the public school system starting in middle school. AVID is premised on the philosophy that when students are held to high standards and expectations, they will rise to the challenge of taking rigorous and challenging classes such as AP and Honor courses. The students are provided with academic and social support to include skilled AVID tutors and trained teachers to help them throughout the program. The students who participate in AVID must go through an application process and be selected. Other requirements include actively participating in weekly tutorials, enrolling in the AVID class as their elective; enrolling in one or more Honors and AP courses; maintaining GPA, attendance, and behavior requirements; and participating in community service work. AVID figured prominently in many of the boys' narratives.

Six of the high achieving African American males in the study were students at Urban Northeast. The stories of Darryl, Derrick, Simon, Lionel, Kevin, and Evan are presented in this section. Their individual stories are followed by a group discussion held with three of the boys.

### **Darryl**

My first face-to-face conversation with a participant in this study was with Darryl Oliver. Darryl was a senior at Urban Northeast High School with a 3.5 GPA. I remember the counselor

escorting me into the small conference room where I would be interviewing the students and I was pleasantly surprised to see Darryl sitting at the table appearing eager to get started. Darryl would usually leave school at 1:00 pm to go to his part time job, but after I spoke to him over the phone to schedule the interview, he made arrangements with his job to come in at a later time so he could do the interview. Darryl only had to attend school for half a day during the spring semester of his senior year because he already had earned 23 of 24 graduation units required by the Kansas State Board of Regents. Darryl was enrolled in three classes his last semester of school, one of them being AP Calculus.

Darryl is a handsome young man, clean cut, with an athletic build, hazel eyes, and a light brown complexion. He is biracial, his Mother is White and his Father is African, but he identifies as Black. Darryl admitted that he is somewhat “shy” but does speak up for himself. Urban Northeast was the first public school Darryl had attended. From kindergarten to eighth grade he went to a small private Catholic school where the average class size was ten. He was one of the two minorities that attended the school. Darryl was an honor student throughout his elementary and middle and high school years. Darryl plans on attending college to obtain a chemistry degree to become a pharmacist or pursue another career in the medical field.

**Darryl's family.** *My Father is Nigerian and my Mother is White and they actually met right here in Gilmer. I do remember going to Nigeria multiple times to visit my dad's family when I was little. The first time I really don't remember because I was a baby but the last few times I remember meeting my grandmother and grandfather and all of my dad's family. I remember Nigeria looking like a poor area and poverty stricken but yet I enjoyed the visits because that is where my ancestors and most of my relatives are from. I think it is important to learn about the history of your roots and your family. With the little Black History that is*

*included in our lessons, not much is said about Africa. I plan on going back to visit someday again and spend more time there and learn more about my heritage.*

*I have two older brothers but they have both moved out of the house. So yes, I guess you can say I am the baby of the family since I am the only one living at home with my parents. Both of my brothers went to KU, but my oldest brother graduated with his Masters in computer engineering or something like that. He lives and works in Kansas City. My second to oldest brother went to KU for two years but then he got tired or bored with school and came back home to work for a while. As you can see, I have two opposite older brothers. My dad got really frustrated with my brother who came back home so he gave him two options, go back to school or move out, so he decided to go back to school. My parents are real big on education. My dad is an engineer and my mom is a social worker for like the state of Kansas. They both have four years of college, so, yeah, both of my parents are real big on education. I think my dad had a couple of extra years but he just didn't get another degree. So going to college in my family is expected.*

**Switching from private to public school.** *Going to a public school after my eighth grade graduation from Holy Cross was really my choice. My parents just kind of said as long as you keep good grades. I just wanted to experience something different. And believe me, when I started my freshmen year at Northeast, it was a lot different than what I was used to. Like demographically, the people and the size of it. You see, my eighth grade class only had like 10 students in it total and the school's population was predominately White. So compare that coming to Northeast, where the freshmen class size was 400. That was a big change for me. But at first I didn't mind because Northeast is so diverse. So at first everything was cool when I started my freshmen year. I even played JV football. But midway through the semester I felt like*

*I wasn't being challenged enough here even though I was taking Honor classes and AP classes. So by the spring of my freshmen year I decided to apply for the IB program at East because a lot of my friends from the eighth grade went into that program and they were telling me about it. I left Northeast after my freshmen year and started the IB program at East for my sophomore year but when the second semester started in January, I switched back over to Northeast. You know the old saying, sometimes we think the grass is greener on the other side until we actually get there and see that it isn't. I just thought the program would be different but being over there made me uncomfortable.*

*East High's IB program not a good fit. Well one of the reasons was like the IB students were really separated from the rest of East population. So it was kind of like the IB students were always together and then there was the rest of the school. There was no mixing the two groups unless you had some elective classes to take like photography or Family and Consumer Science (FACS), then you would be with the other students. But for your primary classes, you were always with the IB students. And I had a lot of friends at East that I rarely got to see and hang out with. It felt like some type of segregation. Yeah, and then I was like one of only a few minorities in the program. I really wasn't connecting with the people in the program too well either, and some of them were my friends from grade and middle school! And I don't know, my grades weren't doing too well. My grades kind of reflected that I wasn't happy there. I was not happy because of the surroundings, so I did not put much effort into my schoolwork. It was the first time I had ever felt that way because I was always used to being one of the few minorities in a school environment. But it was something about these kids in the IB program, they just kind of acted like stuck up. It was primarily White kids and for some reason, I don't know, I didn't really make friends too well. I felt like I had to act different around the IB students, I couldn't be*

*myself. I mean they dressed preppy, and even the other students at East looked at the IB students as nerds. Like sometimes I like to sag my pants a little and wear my earring and the students in the IB program would look at me funny because I wasn't dressed like them. I felt like people in the program didn't really even give me a chance to show them who I was. They just prejudged me. To them I was just some Black kid. Those students in the IB program, I don't know, they just acted liked rich spoiled White kids. I always felt judged by both my peers and the teachers. Which is why I kept to myself and was a lot quieter. So whenever I got the chance to be around the "normal" students at East I did act different. I could relax and be myself. And here at Northeast, I feel more comfortable and I can be myself and not act different. So that's why I made the switch to come back to Northeast. But when I think about it now, I could have put more effort into my work back then and my grades would have been a lot better. It's just that I wasn't prepared mentally to handle the situation back then.*

**More accepted at Northeast High.** *I just feel comfortable here at Northeast, mainly because of the diversity. There are all ranges of people. It is just more accepting here in this environment. Unlike East in the IB program, I just felt kind of isolated. I mean sometimes when you walk down the hallways you may see a little segregation between different groups but there is also a lot of commingling, especially now that I'm a senior. Here I have a lot of friends. I know a lot of different types of people and some of my friends are in my AP classes and some are not. I have a lot of White, Asian, Hispanic, and Black friends but I mostly hang out with my White friends because most of them have taken AP classes with me throughout the past 3 years at Northeast. A lot of my Black friends dislike school. I think a lot of my minority friends don't take the AP classes because they just don't want to put any effort into it. So when I hang out with them, we really don't talk about school. I'd say more of them are in the lower level classes*

*and they don't really care that much about their grades or they are involved in other things. I mean they're not failing but they are probably passing with C's and D's. Well, I guess you can say that I'm kind of in the middle because I have all types of friends. My friends here at school are the same friends I hang out with outside of school.*

*I would say the thing I like the most about this school is actually the relationships I have with my teachers. Unlike some of my friends, I like my teachers. Most of them I've had good connections with, which makes it easier to learn. My two favorite teachers have been Ms. Talbot in Honors English and Ms. Stevens, in Spanish. They were both good teachers and made their classes interesting. They would push you to do your best. Since most of my classes are AP classes, the teachers have high expectations from everyone. I never really had any problems with any of the teachers at Northeast. The teachers here probably focus on the kids that are struggling more than the ones that are achieving in class, which makes more sense to me.*

*You see when I was in the IB program at East, the teachers there tried to make a personal connection with me but they just made me feel kind of awkward instead because they paid too much attention to me. I just don't like it when people try to treat me special because they think I'm smart. To me, it's really not much of a big deal if I get an A in the class because it wasn't too challenging or too hard to begin with. Well, I will admit that this year, my AP calculus class has been challenging at times. Yeah, even though math and science are my two strongest subjects, that class was pretty hard. But I know it is preparing me for college level calculus.*

**Motivated to prepare for college.** *Preparing for college is what has motivated me to do well in school. I feel like college will be a lot different than high school. I mean in high school I never really had to study for tests or complete homework at home because I would have time to*

*do those things at school. Even though I participated in extra-curricular activities, I managed to stay on top of my schoolwork and stay focused. My brothers told me that college will not be that easy. Probably the biggest motivation for me is the fact that I hope to get scholarships when I go to college so it will be easier on my parents. I don't want my family to worry as much financially. I want to just focus on college and graduating. Also, another thing that motivates me to do well in school is the fact that my parents have always expected good grades from me my entire life. My parents have always expected me to do well in my academics. So that is my interpretation of high achieving.*

*I feel good when I do well in school and it is important to me. But I don't think I'm special just because I'm a "Black" male excelling in academics. I feel like my race should be less significant. I think it is wrong how people classify certain groups. You can't just classify all Black males as failures or whatever. Yeah, there are some Black males in schools who are not doing so well, some who are even failing. However, it's an individual problem. I know from seeing my friends who are struggling that some of the problems come from the environment or from the influence of other people. But I feel like the best way to overcome that has a lot to do with attitude. It's not that they're unable to do the work, or get the grades. People always want to think negatively about the entire group of Black males in school. So when a Black student does well in school, especially a male, some people want to make a big deal except his family because that's what is expected. I was raised to have high expectations for myself. I want to do well in college because I know I need to make good grades in order to graduate and become a pharmacist.*

## **Derrick**

Derrick is a junior with a 3.5 GPA. He is currently in the AVID program. Although Derrick speaks on a monotone level, he is very articulate and has his own ideas about racism. Derrick stated that people have always told him that he has an “old soul” for his age. Derrick described himself as a “loner, a conformist, misogynistic, cynical, stubborn, tired, and highly intelligent.”

Derrick transferred to Urban Northeast High School the spring semester of his sophomore year from Powder Springs, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. His Mother become ill and had a stroke and they moved to Gilmer so she could be cared for by his grandparents. Derrick described this period as “chaotic” and “panicky.” But despite the sudden change and transfer to a new state and new school, Derrick perseveres and does not let that interfere with his academics. He plans on attending college to major in History or English so he can start his career in education as a teacher but his ultimate goal is to write a novel.

**Derrick’s family.** *I’m an only child. I guess you can say I was raised in a single parent household in Powder Springs, Georgia. My Father left when I was very young. Right now my relationship with him is non-existent. My Mother had a stroke when I started high school in Georgia so we relocated here to Gilmer to live with my grandparents. My relationship with my Mother, well, I mean it was there until she had a stroke. And then after that, our relationship was already fragile, but with the stroke it just kind of dissipated a lot. She was having some difficulties when we moved here and so we somehow convinced her to move down with her brother in North Carolina. So currently I am still the only child in the house with my grandparents. And yes, my relationship with my grandparents has always been strong.*

**Switching from school in the south to the Midwest.** *I would have to say that my school experiences at Urban Northeast have been moderately pleasant, I suppose. I mean it's just high school really. I don't know if there is anything specific I can like about it. I will say that compared to the school I came from in Georgia, Urban Northeast is small. Oh yeah, this place can't compete with it. The population there was around 3,000 or higher. The school in Georgia was easily a college campus size. It was very diverse. You had people coming from high privilege, high wealth societies, and low privilege and low wealth societies, and then middle income. You also had people from overseas and recent immigrants. You had a little bit of everything there. But I will say this; my one and a half year spent there was dull. It wasn't unpleasant but it wasn't really pleasant either.*

*So transferring to Urban Northeast was something new to me. I just had to get used to the smaller environment because that means you have to interact more with people. Does that make sense? I see a lot more things here than I need to. I believe that some people just kind of forget that they are in high school, and while they have achieved so much up until this point, they are not as great as they believe themselves to be. It's like illusions of grandeur, or whatever the term is. Not only that, but this is usually seen when it comes to the White kids that I meet here at this school. You see, they tend to--well just the way they carry themselves, it's just something about that I don't like. I've never liked it. It's just a weird vibe that you get at this school, you know. And most people don't really pick up the vibe. My grandmother thinks I'm just kind of just throwing this out there for no reason, but you know what I'm saying, all you have to do is observe. Okay, I'll admit, yes I know I'm in a different league, but I'm in a league they could never compete with. So uh, these White kids are not exactly smarter than me or any other regular person. I feel this way whenever I'm around a group of reasonably intelligent White*

students, however, I don't react to it. I just keep cruising because it really doesn't matter to me whether or not they decide to be all pretentious and arrogant and whatnot. I just know that you can only add so much weight before something breaks. So like, I can only take so much before I get agitated. And I'd like to think I have a very high tolerance level because of what I had to go through in Georgia. Oh, you know things like bullying; we had name calling, teasing, that type of stuff. Like I said, I have never really been much of a people person so I never had friends to begin with. As you know, a lot of kids in middle school can be rowdy, pretty rowdy, and I did not want to be a part of those people. You know, ignorant. I had to learn patience to deal with ignorance. It's just one big learning experience that just never seems to end.

**AP classes.** In most of my AP classes I would consider myself the minority not only because I'm a guy but also because I'm Black. There are not that many African American girls taking AP classes either. In my AP classes you have those, "privilege kids," well it's difficult to describe really. I mean they kind of walk around and you know they're privileged to some degree, you can just tell, right? They walk around and sit here as if they have like this reason to assert themselves above like the normal standard. Like I said, they are just so pretentious at times. And it's not blatant or anything, it's rather subtle, you know, and it's just the minor tendencies that they exhibit on a day-to-day basis. But to anyone who just sits down and just pays attention, you can see it. Oh and I'm the greatest actor of my generation. Yeah, ha-ha. I interact right along with them.

**Friendships.** Like I said earlier, I'm mostly a loner so I don't really hang out with too many people. The people I do hang out with are reasonably intelligent, very ambitious, and serious about their academics. Now these are the friends that we can get into some deep conversations about our assignments or grades and so forth. Yeah, actually most of my

*intelligent friends have higher GPA's than mine, like my girlfriend. She has a 4.0. That's marginally better than mine. I'm not going to sit here and complain, despite the fact that they did have better grades and they are intelligent in their own right. Personally I don't like to brag or toot my own horn, but I do know that I am more intelligent than most of my friends. But then again, I can't have all my associates be intelligent and smart because that would be kind of boring. So I make sure I have a diverse group of friends. I have some other friends who are just into the day-to-day activities of teenagers; partying, playing loud music and all that good stuff. Believe it or not, I do have quite a few White friends. But with my Black friends I have to act somewhat hmm, reckless, I suppose. I don't know if you've seen our Black society as of late, but we're not exactly the most focused people around. So of course I have to kind of temper my own intelligence to a degree so I can interact with them in a positive manner, you know, relate to them. Now with my White friends I just try not to be pretentious, I suppose. I just try to be a regular person with them; not too smart, not too dumb; just a good character. And the same with my Hispanic friends too. I mean it really just depends on the person, honestly. Remember, I'm from Georgia, and that is where I have learned how to relate. Southern folk aren't exactly known for over pleasantness. We find something or someone out of the norm and you tend to swarm on them. So you have to find a middle ground.*

**Relationships with teachers.** *Even though I find the teachers here are kind of distant, they are supportive, if that makes sense. I like most of my teachers, and usually if I don't like somebody it's not really so much the person themselves, it's their teaching styles. Some teachers do too much hand holding which isn't necessary. I mean we are in high school. I have two history teachers and one of them I love without a doubt, and the other one is just too, well I don't like her teaching style.*

*Most of my teachers don't really say much of anything to myself anyway, I mean, not unless they're specifically going over grades that day or something like that. All of my teachers are White. When I think about it, I guess I have to really initiate a conversation with them. But once the discussion get started, then it just won't stop. Now that's funny. Ha-ha.*

**Motivated to just get through school.** *School has never exactly been the most mentally challenging thing in my life. But what has been challenging is just socially, patience-wise, trying to deal with people. So my motivation I guess you can say is Oh God, just getting high school over with so I can start the next phase of my life. I'm not exactly what you would call one of the norm. I've never been one of the norm. I mean, I don't think like normal kids, I don't act like normal kids, and I certainly don't talk like normal kids. When I say normal I just mean the general consensus among the general teenage population. I have yet to find any group in which I'm actually normal with.*

*I attribute my success in school to two things; nagging and drive. Nagging from everybody about our race and what we can or cannot do. And you know it's partly our fault too. Good God, it took centuries just to work out all the crap that messed us up in the first place and it's only been maybe 40 something years since the entire Civil Rights thing. Black people are still trying to recover from the damage that was done to the race as a whole but as we progress it is unsettling to know how other people really view you. I just have that drive to do my best and make something of myself and to prove that I'm not a bad person. I mean prove my self-worth. To be honest, I don't have any intentions to be the smartest guy or a renaissance man or something incredibly complicated. I just want a simple life like the next the next person.*

## **Simon**

Simon is an 18 year old senior at Urban Northeast with a 3.8 GPA. He has a smile that lights up the room. He has a muscular build and is neatly groomed. Simon is a friendly, thoughtful, and charming young man. Simon described himself as an ambitious person who has a strong belief in faith and wants to live the life that God has planned for him. “I am pretty religious. I try to live my life according to Christ and how He’d want me to live. I don’t do that perfectly, but nobody does. But I do feel I’m in good stands with God. Right now my life is amazing and well balanced.”

Simon was born in Kenya, Africa, and went through a lot of struggles growing up especially when his family came to the United States in 2000, when he was age 7. He had to repeat 2<sup>nd</sup> grade when he came here because he did not get to complete it back in Africa. Most of his childhood he lived in fear of being deported back to Africa. Despite the setbacks however, Simon now sees himself as a person of great strength. He is a self-motivated and independent minded individual who does not care what others, especially his peers, think of him. Simon is not involved in any extra-curricular activities because of his part time job as a cashier at the Fresh Market and full course load at school. Simon did not get inducted into the National Honor Society because he lacked the required community service hours even though he did have the overall GPA. Simon plans on attending college and majoring in physical therapy or another field in the medical profession.

**Journey from Kenya to Kansas.** *I was born in Kenya, Africa, in a small town called Mabuya and as far as I remember, life was pretty all right back home there. I mean it was amazing. It’s not really rural because we had cars and streets and big buildings. I went to the Mabuya Academy there. I remember waiting for the school bus to pick us up in the morning. I*

*loved going to that school and spending time with my friends. I think that was the happiest time of my childhood. I'm the only child. Well, I've got a half brother and sister but I really don't know them. But yeah, other than that, I'm the only child from my mom. My dad wasn't really present in the home. He first left our home when I was a baby. He was an alcoholic, you know, a drunk. He came to the United States before I even turned 5. So for a year or two, I never saw or heard from him.*

*One day my dad just popped up and said he was taking me and my mom back with him to the States. It was crazy. That is when my childhood memories turned ugly. I guess he meant well, he wanted to give us a better life. But my mom and I had to go through so much stuff to get to where we are right now. You see, when we first came here in 2000, my dad promised that we would be starting a new life here and things would be good. Instead, my dad became more abusive and he just kind of ran me and my mom away. We had to stay in a homeless shelter for 2 years in Hutchinson, Kansas.*

*And then we had to go through the various battles of the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), and trying to get our papers to remain in the United States. It was through the grace of God that we are here today. God has been present in our lives forever, even when I didn't know it. Like when I look back on it now, the only way I can see us coming out of the situation we were in is because of Him. There is no other explanation. My childhood was pretty much lived in fear. When other kids worried about going to Chucky Cheese, I was worried about deportation because that was more of a reality for me. I was 7 years old at the time.*

**My Mom is my hero.** *My mom is one of the strongest women ever because of all the things she had to go through for us. She had to endure a lot of things being a single parent raising a kid, coming from another country. At one point she had a bad case of depression that*

*she tried to hide from me but I knew she was sad because of all the situations we were going through trying to remain here in the United States. But through all of that she still managed to raise me and instill in me good morals and values that I live my life by now. I mean she pushed me to always strive for the best and to do well in school. Even though she started college in Africa to be a nurse, she had to start all over once we came to the States. She started taking CNA classes for nursing; then she became a Licensed Practical Nurse. She went to Butler [Community College] and graduated with her Associates Degree and now she is trying to go back to get her Bachelors in nursing. To be honest with you, once she finishes that, she may open up her own clinic or something. Yeah, my mom is a dreamer. That's what I love about her. She says that I'm the one that motivates her but she is the one that gives me the extra motivation because she just keeps going. You know, it's like a movie. I would sit there even though I was a part of it. I would watch my mom struggle but yet she always seemed happy and wanted to make me happy. She had this drive that a mother has for their son, you know what I'm saying? That's why whenever she's talking about "Oh, I can't seem to ever find a man." I would tell her, "I don't think there's a man out there that can handle all of you." She is independent, she has goals that she sets for herself and achieves them. She is my hero. I say this with meaning because the way I am right now, like my grades, how I act, who I am is because of my mom.*

**Trying to be cool in middle school.** *I remember middle school being an awkward stage for me because I was the guy who was still trying to fit in with the cool crowd. I started middle school with a 4.0 but by the time I got to 8th grade I purposely dropped my grades to fit in with the cool crowd. The cool crowd were mostly Black kids who had the special handshakes and they spoke a lot of slang. Yeah, growing up here, I didn't talk like everybody, like all the other Black kids. I would hear this slang that they had and I was like, I don't sound like that. So, I'd*

*purposely try to put it in my voice. And believe me, it didn't sound as good. Not at all. My accent actually went away within 2 years of being here but for some reason I still had difficulty pronouncing some words. So when I got to middle school, I got really confused because I was trying to talk like the cool crowd. The cool crowd were the ones doing their own thing in school and everybody wanted to be a part of that group. You know, they have all these girls around them and they're cracking jokes, making fun of teachers. I was kind of like maybe if I was like that I'd get more friends. Even though I had my share of friends, but I wanted to be with the cool people. Well, that's how I saw it back then. Yeah, I would like to forget about middle school.*

**Transitioning into high school.** *I would say that as soon as I transitioned into high school my life started getting better and better. There are a lot of good things about this school that stands out. I like the fact that it is a winning school, like the state titles in sports and it has a rich history you know. Urban Northeast is a very interesting school. It's a good school. You learn something new every day.*

*Well, okay, let me just back up minute. When I first started Urban Northeast, my freshman and sophomore year, I was kind of carrying on the same way like I did in middle school. I didn't have many friends for the first few weeks so I tried to find friends that would relate to me, or whatever. But then I was like, "this is not working." My grades started looking sloppy because I just kept messing around and my mom hated that. My mom set really high standards for me. Like, she raised that bar pretty high. So the second semester of my sophomore year, I had mostly all B's and I was like, "I can't do this." I really didn't care about the cool kids anymore.*

*I mean whenever you start high school you don't realize how fast it goes by and before you know it people are asking, "What college are you attending?" So that's when it hit me to*

*get my act together. I realized I was growing up and my life – well, I wasn't a kid anymore and it didn't matter if I was a part of the cool crowd or not. What did matter was that I needed to focus more on my grades and at the end of my sophomore year I finished with a 3.5. And that is when everything started to fall in place for me. My junior year I had all A's and one B and I took all advanced courses. I took advanced level courses because I know those classes would get me ready for college. I mean like my academics are on point and I have goals that I'm trying to achieve. So really, it's just the beginning and I'm excited about starting college and looking toward the future.*

*Now just because I have changed doesn't mean the environment has. I would have to say that you still will see the "ghetto nest" sometimes. Yeah it gets pretty intense. Ok, like these random fights that pop up and all these groups that linger in the hallways. They're just hanging out there, starting all the drama for no reason. It's like a mixture of girls and boys, specifically lower classmen, trying to be tough. That is so annoying to me now. I know my freshmen class wasn't the best but we didn't act nearly as bad. I think the maturity level for the freshmen these days is just so low. They just don't have no respect for anything. I mean they come to high school with a middle school mentality.*

**Friendships.** *The friends I have now are amazing. Like this year, we all just became close. It was various stuff that brought us together. We just went through the typical crazy teenage social stuff that made us all jell together. Let me see, in our group of 7, there are only 3 of us that are Black and that includes me. The rest are White you know. I get called an Oreo a lot because of that. You know, an Oreo means you're like White in the inside, but you're Black on the outside. You are Black but you act White. It's weird because I've never really seen that. They don't even call the other Black guys in the group Oreos, just me. I don't know how that*

*makes me feel. I just kind of want to be known as Simon because I don't want that label placed on me. I don't want people thinking I'm a fake or I act a certain way because this is who I am; I can't help it. I can't act hood like you would see other Black people try to act. I can't do that. I tried it before and that was a disaster. I'm happy just being myself. I mean, I can play around like that, but at the end of the day people are just like, "Dude, you are the Whitest Black guy I know." And I'm sitting there like, huh? After my sophomore year, I just got tired of putting on acts for people. So now I act the same way with all of my friends, at home and at school. I don't know, I guess I'm goofy sometimes.*

*Another reason I like hanging out with my friends is because they are also ambitious and have successful futures ahead of them. Even though some of them might not see it yet, I can see it in them. I'm kind of like the guy that will push you or nag at you until you get it done. Whenever I hear any of my friends say "Oh dude, I've got such and such to do." I'm like, "Dude, you can do it, seriously. It's only like 2 papers. You have to get that done because you got to graduate." Most of the time that's all it takes for them to get their work done.*

**AP classes.** *I do feel like I have been challenged in my AP classes, especially calculus and government. But whenever I feel challenged, I just set higher goals for myself. I am a pretty ambitious person too. So I know college classes will be ten times harder and I need to be able to handle those classes also. I have to say that my favorite subject is anything in the sciences; Anatomy and Physiology, Physics or anything relating to how the body works and functions. I mean whenever it's taught right, it's really interesting. But whenever you have a teacher that just makes you take notes and goes on about irrelevant stuff, it can be pretty boring. I had one teacher, Mr. Ruder, who was an awesome teacher who taught Physics. I learned so much in that class. As challenging as the AP classes were, I always maintained an A or B, never a C. I did*

*not want a C in any of my classes. If I got a C on a progress report, I would break down. Not really cry, but I would be depressed. I'm not used to failing and I know that sounds cocky, but to me a C just doesn't sit well with me.*

**Motivated to succeed.** *I'm passionate about my academics. To me high achieving means doing whatever it takes to be successful. Putting in the hard work you need to reach your goals. In this day and time, with so much distraction in school, you have to be hungry for success. When I do well in school, it feels amazing, especially in high school. I mean this is what I'm supposed to be doing. I didn't really care about the National Honor Society thing because I feel like I am achieving and this is right along the blueprints of my life. My Mother has already set the standards and as far as I'm concerned, whenever I bring my report card home and she gives me a hug and says "Keep up the good work," that is all I need.*

**Advice to peers.** *You hear about Black males struggling all the time in school. They don't have to struggle like if they put their mind to it, they can do whatever. I mean, I know that sounds really cliché and corny, but legitimately, anybody can be successful. It's up to you. You might say, "Oh, I don't understand this. I'm dumb." But you are choosing to be dumb. You could easily open up books, you know, spend more time studying, preparing and planning for your education. You have to balance your schoolwork with your social life and any other activities you have going on. You have to stop blaming others and start being more responsible about your poor choices. I mean if you come from a bad home life or something like that, I can understand, but at the same time you've got to work hard to get away from that and try to do better. You've got to better yourself in all bad situations you are put in. I just truly feel like whenever I just hear about my peers struggling or whenever they say that, "Oh man, this teacher is a racist or this class is hard, blah, blah, blah," I just want to say that they are making the*

*choice to give up. I know it seems cold but it's the truth. You can do whatever you want man. Don't make the choice to give. Make the choice to do better for yourself and who you are as a person. You are the only person who has control of your future, nobody else. And I would also tell them to keep their relationship with God strong because that will help them in the toughest times.*

## **Lionel**

Lionel is a 16 year old junior at Urban Northeast who is active in both school and community activities. He is a peer leader, active in student council, president of the Kappa Leadership League, and a member of the Jack and Jill Teams of America which are both non-school related. The Kappa Leadership League is a program that promotes the educational, occupational and social guidance of Black male students in grades 6-12. The program seeks to help young Black men set goals for themselves and make constructive contributions to their communities. It was created by Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, one of the largest fraternities in the United States for Black males. The Jack and Jill Club is an organization that was created by mothers of Black children. They wanted to provide social, cultural and educational opportunities for Black kids between the ages of 2-19 years old.

Lionel is tall with a slender build with a light complexion. He described himself as someone who is highly motivated, loves school and has been enjoying his past three years in high school. He is soft-spoken but not afraid to give his opinion or speak up for himself. He is also one of the most popular students in his grade. Lionel plans on attending Kansas State University and majoring in accounting and finance or ophthalmology. After graduating from college, Lionel plans on returning back to Gilmer to give back to the Black community.

**Lionel's family.** *I grew up in a middle class neighborhood in Gilmer. My family has a business that has been in the Gilmer community for over 50 years. I am the youngest of three boys. My oldest brother is 5 years older than me and my middle brother is 3 years older. Both of my brothers are at K-State. As a matter of fact I have a lot of family at K-State. So because I have so many connections there, K-State will probably be the college I attend. I feel like it would be a really good for me to take advantage of those connections. My mom went to K-State and got her degree in education; she's a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher. Currently she is about to graduate with her Masters. My dad has his degree in Business Administration and he is a contractor.*

**School experiences.** *I have enjoyed high school for the past three years. I've really enjoyed it and I think I've made the best of it. I feel sorry for people that sit around and say "Oh, I hate high school. I want to leave." I've enjoyed it and I always think high school is what you make of it. You know if you let things like this person or that person get to you, it is still your high school experience. If I want to slouch around and be angry all the time and hang out with bad people, well that's what my high school experience will be. And that will suck! So make the best of the only high school experience you will have in a lifetime. My high school experience so far has been a very positive experience for me. Once I graduate, I will never be able to relive this experience but I will have good memories.*

*I had the opportunity to go to Collegiate like some of my friends from middle school because they offered me a scholarship, but I believe I would have had a totally different experience. Some of my friends from middle [school] who are now at Collegiate don't get to have the experience that I get where I get to interact with people of all races, and all economic and social levels. They are kind of blocked off from the real world. In fact I remember taking the ACT test with some students from Collegiate and there was a student from another public*

*school who said, “Yeah, I sure hope I do well because I’m going to need a scholarship to help with college.” And then one of the Collegiate students said, “Well why don’t you just have your parents pay for it?” See, he is a White student that lives in a world where things are just handed to him.*

**Honors vs. AP classes.** *To be honest with you, I really don’t see the big deal with Honors classes. I think honor is kind of a loaded word. I don’t feel like there is an “honor” challenge there. I don’t feel like those classes are that difficult to where they should be called honors. Well, maybe because I have been taking Honor classes since middle school. I remember when I was in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades; I was placed in the advanced skill level groups and to me that seemed normal. I also remember the teachers telling me how well behaved I was for my age especially being with the upper level kids. Back then I really didn’t understand what that meant. But I do remember I was always the only minority in the group. Like I said, everything was normal to me. So taking Honor classes in high school to me is just like taking regular classes. Now the AP classes are more challenging and I think they live up to being “AP.” The AP classes are challenging because they get you ready for the college credit exam. For example, my AP History class is my biggest challenge right now because I will be taking the test in a month. But I feel pretty confident that I will do well. I didn’t realize it at first. Like I said earlier, I just kind of thought that making good grades in school was normal. I didn’t think I was doing anything extra; that was just the expectation.*

*Before I came to Northeast, I looked up the demographics on the USD 466’s website and I think it said something like 30% African Americans. When I got here and started going to my classes, I was like okay, all right, so many African American students but yet I’m still a minority in all of my classes. I mean I would see more like 50% in the commons areas or the lunchroom*

*but they definitely weren't any African Americans in my Honors and AP classes. They would be in regular classes. Like I was thinking, why don't you enroll in AP classes? It almost seemed as if they wanted to be below average! I mean, who wants to be below average, come on now. I sure don't want to be a part of that. I guess I was always taught to be a step ahead. So I figured it out; there's not a lot of African Americans enrolled in Honors or AP classes because most of them choose not to. And I didn't feel strange being one of a few minorities in my AP or Honors classes.*

**Teacher relationships.** *I like all of my teachers except for maybe one. Well, I mean, I've never had a teacher that I disliked, but maybe I didn't connect with them as much. Like my math teacher, he's somebody who I don't feel like I can talk to. But I think all of the students felt that way about him. Just about all of my other teachers here are great. I can always talk to them about personal things and things going on at school or outside of school. They all push me to do my best.*

*Like when I first started here in my freshmen year, I was making A's on all of my assignments, especially in chemistry and math. And I know the teachers really didn't know me too well so they were not expecting it. But now that they do know me and the type of grades I get, they have a different perspective of me. They're like Oh, okay. They begin to notice me, like the way I carry myself. I really respect my teachers for that because there are others who expect me to be a failure and I have to prove them wrong. Yeah, people are expecting me to be mediocre. "Oh here comes another Black boy, he's going to fail because he doesn't care about his grades or going to college." So when I do excel in my classes, it helps get rid of the stereotype that another Black student is going to fail or drop out of school. Last year I had a 99% in math all year long. And there were other Black students that didn't do so well. And at*

*first I thought it was purely because they were lazy. But after hearing the way the teacher would talk to the students, I could see why they wouldn't be motivated. I think it is really sad that as Black students we have to prove our abilities whereas White students don't. I mean if teachers don't know you, well, you have to prove that you can excel. I guess I have learned to accept this and it's okay, it's cool.*

**Peers whom I interact with.** *I've always had a diverse group of people around me even from elementary school. Here I have a lot of acquaintances; I wouldn't call them friends. They're people I say "what's up" to, and shake their hand. But would they give me a dollar, probably not. The people I hang out with the most are the students in my classes and the Kappa Leaguers. So I know this will sound funny but in a way I'm kind of disconnected from African Americans. Well, we just don't have the same interest. Like the commons area, where you see most of the African Americans hanging out. I mean, I tried to hang out with them when I was a freshman, but then I realized I really didn't want to because I felt uncomfortable. I felt like I was forcing myself to be accepted. They would just do stupid things and always get in trouble and I didn't want to be associated with a group that causes trouble. So I am very selective of who I associate with. I mean, I don't just totally block off African Americans just because they're not in AP classes. I talk to them all the time because I think it is valuable to interact with everybody. I learned my sophomore year that by interacting with everybody, you get to know them and understand their story instead of judging them negatively. So yes, I have both Black and White friends and most of them are motivated. Now there may be some things my White friends won't be culturally literate about. Like they won't understand what happened at this party. Then there are some things my Black friends may find boring at a party given by my White friends. But they would all accept it because of me. Those are the type of people I want to be around. Sometimes*

*we talk about grades. And I don't think anyone should ever really be satisfied with a "C." I'm not. I have friends that aren't in advanced classes but they'll think that C's you know "I got 5 B's and 2 C's, I'm doing good." Well for me, I'm thinking that's terrible. You've got to do much better than that.*

**Motivated by expectation.** *I have always been somebody that has been real motivated. As a Black male I think it is important that we stay motivated because society is looking at us. Society has low expectations for us and assumes we will not perform to the best of our abilities. So you have to stay motivated and you've got to perform if you want to have the same opportunities as the next person. I know that education is the key to success. Everyone in my family has an education. Growing up I always had this feeling that our family, the Brooks are expected to do well. And so I've always just done well. I have always done my best to live up to my family name because like I said that is what is expected.*

## **Kevin**

Kevin is a 17 year old junior at Urban Northeast. He is in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Program with a 3.4 GPA. Kevin actually started the AVID Program during his last year of middle school in which all of his core courses were Honors classes. Kevin reapplied for the AVID Program once for high school. Kevin has dark brown eyes with a trimmed faded haircut. He is a courteous and respectful young man with a great sense of humor. Kevin is highly motivated and has given significant thought to his future goals. Kevin played on the varsity football team and played the saxophone in the band his freshman year, but decided to quit at the end of the year due to his grades dropping. Currently, as an AVID student, he is actively involved in numerous community service projects.

Kevin faced a significant loss the summer before he started high school, which was the death of his maternal grandmother. Kevin and his grandmother were very close. Kevin stated that he wanted his grandma to see him get his high school diploma and then get a letter in the mail announcing his acceptance into Harvard because she was the first one to tell him, “Baby, I know you can do it.” Kevin has strong family values of which he credits most of it to his maternal side. Kevin plans on attending college (Harvard, John Hopkins) and medical school to be physician or orthopedic surgeon. His ultimate dream is to open up a clinic in Baltimore and come back to Gilmer to open one here in the Black community.

**Kevin’s family.** *I grew up in Gilmer. I am the oldest of four children; two brothers and a sister. I’ve known my dad, but he’s been in and out of my life so much, I normally don’t count him as part of our household even though he is there. So my normal household consists of my mom, my two brothers and sister. I have a strong family on both sides. I’m closer to my Mother’s side of the family.*

*During the summers I stayed with my grandma, even though she lived right here in Gilmer. I was extremely close to her. I remember times when no one wanted to be bothered with her, I would stay with her. She didn’t raise me but my grandma was just the type of person you would want to be around. Everybody else called her momma, but I called her grandma. Grandma had been sick for a while. Six months before she died, she came to live with us and my mom and Auntie was taking care of her. That was a hard process to see them go through that so I helped out a lot. Yeah, I know she would have been so proud of me if I could have shown her my acceptance letter to college. But then she passed. It was a hard transition. But her passing actually made me stronger.*

*I remember a story my mom would always tell me about when I was born. My mom said that there was something different about me when I was born because I was born premature. When I was delivered, my face was purple and I couldn't breathe. I was in the incubator for 3 months and was having all kinds of problems. The doctors had just about given up on me when one day I just started breathing on my own and they could take me out of the incubator. Do you know what they put on my bed after that? Warrior. My mom told me that story a thousand times. So whenever I face difficulty in my life I think about that.*

**School experiences.** *Well, I would say that when I first came to Urban Northeast it was kind of hard at first because I was transferring from middle to high school and I was still dealing with my grandma's passing. It was a hard step for me. I wanted to leave and go to another school like a Magnet High School but my dad wanted me to stay. It was very frustrating because my mom was in agreement with me. But she was like "Oh well we'll see how good he does at the end of the here." Like academic-wise. When I first got here I felt like the school was too sports minded. And yes, I did play on the football team. But I wanted to get more out of high school than just sports. At first I felt that everybody at the school including the teachers only cared about the sports. But toward the end of the year, I just let things grow on me and everything changed. I began to study more and participate in class and I worked harder. So I decided to stay. I didn't play football anymore and my grades really improved. I had more time to relax and I spend time reading and focusing on my assignments.*

**Teachers are supportive.** *Well starting my second semester of my freshman year, I have had a good relationship with all of my teachers. You see the first semester I wasn't doing too well so I wasn't coming in and asking for help. But once I started coming in a lot and asking for help especially in math, my grades went up. Now my teachers push me because they think I'm an*

*excellent student. They have become used to me doing well. Like right before spring break I didn't do too well on a test and the teacher was like "Maybe you could have just come in a bit more so we could have done more problems together." A lot of the teachers help me because they want me to succeed. They will say, "You can come in anytime, I'll explain to you, I'll let you make up the test." They expect me to do well and they will do anything they can to help. I have the best teachers. The staff here is really good. The AVID teacher, she pushes me in school and outside of school. I also like the one on one attention because that kind of support helps me to prevail and do better for myself.*

**AP classes.** *When I was registering for classes for my junior year, I told my advisor that I wanted to take AP English, AP History, Algebra 2, Chemistry, Spanish and of course AVID as the elective. She was like, "Don't you think you're putting a little too much on your plate?" I mean that is the reason I'm in AVID. I push myself to excel in more challenging classes. I could have taken a lower math class, like remediate Algebra, but I didn't because I don't want Math to be my weakness anymore. My parents said, "Go for it." I mean so far I've been doing well. Math has been up and down. My mom even said as long as I get a "C" in math that will be okay because she knows that is not my strongest subject. But I am really pushing for a "B." Yeah, I don't want a "C." Well, I also don't want to fail, but to me, even a grade like a "C" is just mediocre. I know it's going to be more challenging in college. Next year I will be taking College Algebra and hopefully I can get college credit for that.*

**Quiet, inspirational friends.** *I hang out with a wide variety of people at school; football players, wrestlers, people in my AP classes, people I've known since middle school. Most of the people I'm around are not loud; they have a sense of quietness like me. I probably take more advanced classes than any of my friends but it really doesn't matter because we all encourage*

*each other. I mean I feel like they're going to do what they want in their lives and they're going to take the classes they want to take. They have their strengths in certain subjects just like I have my strengths in certain subjects.*

*I believe the majority of my friends have aspirations to go to college. Their grade point averages ranges anywhere from a 3.0 to 3.5. I think they see me caring about my education and want to actually go to college and they also know I want them to succeed. You see, I will never surround myself with people who just want to slack off or cause trouble. I don't have time. So yeah my friends, we inspire each other.*

**Driven to succeed.** *High achieving is someone who sets goals and they achieve them by any means necessary. They excel in school. They do what they are supposed to do. They go that extra mile. They do extra-curricular activities that others won't. A high achieving student has the will and the drive and the determination to do what others might not want to do. And they also have goals they set out to achieve in the future.*

*I have always had the drive to succeed and always wanted to do something. I've known I wanted to be a doctor since I was 3 years old. And I've known where I've always wanted to go college since I was 13 years old. So, I've always known what I've wanted to do and I've always wanted to just have that achievement. I mean, I want to graduate from high school because I already know what I want to do in college. And it has always been pressed into me, "You can do it. Go get your dream." Some of my family members will be like, "I had the opportunity to live my dreams, but I didn't have anyone backing me like you do." They just keep supporting me and that makes me want to reach my dreams even more. I believe everyone has their spot in history and we all have a legacy that we leave behind in the world once we die, I want to leave my legacy before I die.*

## **Evan**

Evan is 16 years of age and in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade at Urban Northeast High School. Evan has a soft brown complexion with light brown, dreamy eyes. Although he is a junior, Evan can easily be mistaken for a freshman because of his soft baby like facial features. He has a warm and friendly personality and was quite pleasant to talk with.

Evan is a participant in the AVID Program with a cumulative 3.8 GPA. In 2007, AVID initiated the African American Males Project to provide educational opportunities and increase the number of African American males going to college. Evan has been enrolled in the AVID Program since his freshman year, something that he is very proud of. “If it wasn’t for the AVID program, I would not be as organized and more prepared for college.”

Evan can best be described as a student who is dedicated, hard-working, and extremely goal driven. He is incredibly focused and determined to excel in every class he is taking. Several initial interviews had to be rescheduled because Evan wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to attend tutorials set up in preparation for the upcoming Advanced Placement (AP) exams. AP exams are offered to students who have taken year long (AP) classes in high school. These exams are scored based on a scale from 1 to 5. The student must score above a 3 in order to get college credit for taking the course. Evan’s goal is to get credit for all of the AP classes he takes his junior and senior year. Despite the heavy class load, Evan continues to be enthusiastic about school and holds high standards for himself. Evan values his education and no matter what is going on, he stays true to himself and his academic goals.

Evan is a member of the National Honor society at school and is involved in community service work for AVID. He expressed a desire to be a part of the school’s Student Council but after two years of being nominated, he never received enough popular votes to win. After

graduation in 2014, Evan plans to attend Kansas State University, Kansas University, or Wichita State and pursue a career in the medical field.

**Evan's family.** *I'm the second oldest of 4 children. Since my oldest sister does not live in the home, I actually feel like I'm the oldest child. My sister is 24 and she still lives in Gilmer. My younger siblings are 9 and 10. I guess I consider myself the oldest because those two look up to me. I mean my sister comes around but I guess because of the age difference, I can relate to them more. I kind of like it because I know I am setting a good example for my younger siblings.*

*My older sister started college but she didn't like it, or that's what she said. So she just started working. I think she is doing okay because she has her own place. My dad went to Butler [Community College] for 2 years and my mom didn't go to college right away because she didn't think it was right for her. But then after some years she started at Friends then transferred to WSU but after my dad had to work 3<sup>rd</sup> shift, she stopped going to school. So yeah, I will be the first in my family to actually graduate from college. That's why I know I have to do well. That's a lot of pressure you know. But ever since elementary school, when I started bringing home all A's on my report card, my mom and dad started expecting me to do well in school. They have really high expectations. Even though sometimes they tell me I study too much and should relax a little, but let me bring home anything less than a "B" and I could just see the expressions on their little faces. They do not want me to fail. Really they don't.*

**High school experiences.** *High school is not that bad. Well, what I used to watch on TV is actually how I thought high school would be. Like with people getting shoved in lockers and getting bullied. And then I came here and I was like, that's not how high school is at all. I mean there's a lot to like about Urban Northeast. This school is so diverse. You get more opportunities to meet new people, especially in your classes. Well, I know the school is majority*

*White, but I get excited because I see other Black students who are trying to do the same thing as me. And yes, seeing that feels great because you don't see a lot of us on TV and the news and stuff. It's like you see a whole lot of White kids being out there. But like I said, you don't hear nothing about African Americans because they think we're ignorant, ghetto, and all of that, so it feels great to see other kids like me achieving in this school. It really does. But in some of my AP classes, you see Black kids trying to stay on top of their work and turning in assignments, and not gypping school. You don't hear about that because it isn't something that they want to focus on.*

*Our school is well known for sports and state championships, which is why so many people want to come here. I mean if I was big enough I probably would have tried out for football but I'm just too skinny. Now you will see all the Black athletes if they are helping the school win games because that is what's expected. But even the athletes can be portrayed as bad. Like that whole Michael Vick, quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles, situation when he got into trouble over the dogs. I mean it was a dog! I feel like with all the talent he has, it did not matter because he was a Black man. He went to prison for something he had no knowledge of and did not do. But Ben Roethlisberger, the White quarterback for the Pittsburg Steelers, sexually assaulted a woman and he didn't get into any trouble whatsoever, but Michael Vick did. I just don't understand that. So yeah, I guess the one thing about this school that I dislike is that sometimes, all the attention from outside is only focused on all the state championship teams and the athletes and most of the athletes are Black, but what a lot of people don't know is that a few of them are in my AP and Honors classes. As a matter of fact, Peris Washington, the All American Basketball Player who is now a starter at Kansas University, graduated last year as the class valedictorian.*

**The AVID Program.** *I have been in the AVID program since my freshman year. They were talking about it at open house and my momma wanted me to continue in it so I did. And even though sometimes I might say I don't like it, I know that if it wasn't for AVID, I would not feel as confident as I do about going to college. AVID has taught me so much about choosing a college, searching for scholarships, and earning credit for college while still in high school. I honestly feel like I have a better grasp of reality as I continue toward my future goals and I know this is because of the things I have learned from AVID. I like the AVID class we take as an elective because you are surrounded with like-minded individuals who are all hard workers and goal-oriented. We are more like a family because most of us have been together in the same AVID class for the last 3 years. We support each other's successes. I feel very comfortable with the kids in my AVID class. There is definitely no drama.*

*My AVID teacher, Ms Adam, she is one of my favorite teachers because she is more like a mentor to me. I mean she really has high expectations and expects me to do well in my classes. But she knows how to have fun with us and she knows how to be serious. I mean she has taught me to pursue my dreams no matter what and always aim for the stars. She knows how to make the things we learn in class relate to what we will have to deal with in the real world. Yeah, I get along with her really well. Even though she is White, she taught me that my success in life is determined by the steps I choose and not by the negative judgment of society.*

*Actually, all of my teachers like me because I'm a good student. Well let's just say I strive to be a role model student. I try to stay on top of all my assignments and be prepared for class. Every now and then I may get distracted by someone else in class and the teacher may have to call me out. That's understandable because I know you should always pay attention.*

**School friends, peers, and drama.** *I have some friends who are just friends and then I have some friends who I can trust, like my friends in AVID. I mean like I said earlier, it can get crazy around here because one minute your friends aren't your friends, and then they'll end up becoming your friends. You're like, wow. Really! That's why I try to stay to myself or only hang around my friends that I trust.*

*There was a time back in middle school when I could not talk to some of my friends, or people who I thought were my friends about my grades because some people would be like, "Oh, you got all A's. You're a nerd," and stuff like that. But I didn't really care because I was happy. But that was in middle school and this was a predominately African American school. I just think they were mad because they didn't have the same grades I had. Honestly, I believe everyone is smart. It's just how you utilize the talents you have and apply yourself.*

*Now in high school, as far as associates or having conversations with people, I talk to any and everybody. As long as you respect me, I'll respect you. I'm not discriminating about who I mingle with. I have some friends who like to talk about sports and I have some friends who are in theater and that's all they talk about. But that's cool. I like theater. I guess you can say I have a diverse group of friends.*

*I have friends that like to party, but I'm not the partying type. I'm the type of person who likes to stay at home because that way you don't get into trouble. You don't have to deal with all the drama that comes with partying and teenagers and all that messy stuff. My friends that do like to party are pretty cool though because even though they are not as smart as me or on top of their grades like me, they all want to go to college like I do. I'm not trying to sound cocky here, but you know, they always say like, "How is math so easy to you?" And I'll just tell them, "Math and science have always been easy for me. At least you can sing. I can't sing." I just*

*think everybody have their own special talents and gifts. Math and science have always been easy for me. That's why I want to be in the medical field.*

**Motivation: I have dreams.** *It feels good to achieve in school. I have dreams. I want to make something of my life. I want to have a career and be happy. I don't want to be sitting around on my momma's couch all day. I know the only way to make something of myself is to go to college. This high school is preparing me for college. Well, my experiences in high school, the classes I have taken, especially the AVID Program has given me the skills and strategies to handle college courses.*

*Academic success does not come overnight. It takes hard work and dedication, but the payoff is so worth it. I plan on applying for scholarships to college. Academic success also starts with belief in yourself, and the support of your family. I mean I know a person's family background or environment is not always the best, but you can overcome that sort of thing. Yeah, you do not have to be a product of a bad environment if you don't want to. Like I know I'm going to college. That's all I can really say.*

### **Urban Northeast Focus Group Discussion**

The following sections are written in dialogue form from the focus group discussion with three of the participants. I facilitated the group but limited my voice as much as possible. I grouped the conversations according to themes that emerged. The first theme involves the students sharing their feeling about the term “acting ghetto” which has become a negative stereotype for Blacks whereas the term “acting white” is not. The second theme involves the students' conversations regarding their appreciation of diversity and how they can easily navigate in and out of different cultures and groups. The third theme involves the conversations about how the school has prepared them for college. The fourth is advice for their peers.

## **Acting Ghetto / Acting Smart**

*Lionel: I don't feel like anybody couldn't enjoy this school. Ok, maybe there are some people, but I think the only people who wouldn't enjoy going to Urban Northeast are people that are going to pay attention to the negatives. You know like people who look for bad things and when they see one bad thing they will put everything in that category. Like if they see somebody that's ghetto, they'll be like, "Oh, the whole school's ghetto, but it's not. If you see like a Falcon scraped off a locker that does not mean every Falcon is scraped off a locker, that the school is ghetto.*

*Kevin: I think everyone has their own little set of ghetto, like their own standard for every race. As you can go back in history and look at everybody at their weakest point, you can see that every race has their poorest level. At this school we have a diverse group of Mexicans, African Americans, Asians and Whites.*

*Lionel: Yeah, but when I say ghetto, for the most part, it'll probably be related to Black, but that doesn't mean that there's not raggedy people that are White or Hispanic or Asian.*

*Derrick: Everybody has their own form of social and economic poverty. I came from Georgia, so it's pretty diverse over there. But down in Georgia, the Black people were essentially what people call ghetto. And they weren't ashamed about it because that was just the culture down there.*

*Lionel: Well, around here, if you see a Black male wearing sagging pants, underwear showing, earrings, tattoos and braids, that would be called ghetto and slightly confused. Ha-ha! I mean you can be cool and hang around whatever crowd you want and have a good GPA, but you still need to hold like a standard to yourself. You just can't be sagging. That is considered ghetto.*

*Right? On the inside, no. But that's what he's showing on the outside. So that's what people are going to judge him by.*

*Derrick: I feel like if you fake it long enough, it becomes real. So if you take up the habit of sagging and wearing do-rags, and all this other stuff like, let's say in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and by the time you're in 11<sup>th</sup> grade you're still doing it, the likelihood is that although it is not initially who you are it's slowly becoming you.*

*Lionel: Yeah, that's exactly what I mean when I say acting ghetto. That's acting ghetto. I get that a lot. Just like acting White. It's a mind set.*

*Derrick: Yeah, I get that too.*

*Kevin: Everybody will say that. Well, it really depends on the context of where I'm at. Like if I'm playing basketball, no one going to say, "Oh, you're acting White." But most of my friends just call me Kevin because I'm not Black or White, I'm just me.*

*Derrick: Well, I was actually called that a lot back in Georgia, before I moved here. Yeah, that's what the Black kids would say to me because I was actually acting-not acting, but actively displaying my intelligence and attitude and what not. I wasn't trying to, like conform to the social norm for Black people, which in that area was kind of ragged, or ghetto. They did not understand that. And because of that I got a lot of heat about that. But once I moved it kind of simmered down a little bit. Now here I get it from the White kids. They would be like, "Dude, you're acting White." Or "You're the whitest Black person I've ever seen."*

*Kevin: Well once again, I just think people should notice us acting, not based on color, but just by the way that shows we are gentlemen and we have class and we are accomplished.*

*Lionel: I hate it when people stereotype us and think we all act the same. I mean it doesn't surprise me when I see other Black males acting different because it's not like this is something*

*new. It's not like we all just woke up and this year we decided we're gonna act in a way that might not be the best. It's been going on for a while. I don't know when, but it just doesn't surprise me, though, the way some of my peers can act and we all take the blame.*

*Derrick: Yeah, like Lionel, I'm not really all too surprised. Nowadays I really don't think too much about it, or anything like that because I just realized they're going to do it regardless of what I think or say. Really, it's something that we as a people need to address as a whole, you know? And I can't say I feel sorry for them, but sometimes it just makes me sad.*

*Lionel: Can I say something else? Well, I've got a friend that sags all the time, however he has a 3.5 GPA. And I mean, even though he is motivated, he still takes regular classes. I think the main difference between us and them is that we show it way more. I think you will find more of us in honors and advanced skill classes from middle school to high school. I think we have been raised that way to not be afraid to show off; not be ashamed of our intelligence, our gifts. That is just something we like to do and they might not think that it's accepted to show off that you're a smart person; that you might not want to talk this way, but you can still be smart inside, too, at the same time.*

*Kevin: It doesn't surprise me that they don't want to show off their brains, but I know that most Black males are very actually pretty smart. It's just that they have been raised a certain way to keep it to themselves. I have a friend, well I had a friend I was really close with and he would call me and say, "Man, you act kind of White." But I looked at the way he lived and the way I lived and there were things that were so similar yet so different. The things that were similar were closely related to the culture like the foods we ate and the family dynamics. I would take and show him different things that he's never done before like something as simple as going to*

*Exploration Place. I didn't try to conform him to it or nothing, I was just being me and showing him who I was but I suppose it was just too awkward for him.*

### **It Is Better To Be In A School Environment With Diverse Students**

*Lionel: I owe a lot to my parents because they made sure I was exposed to a variety of things inside and outside my culture. I mean I can go into any environment and feel very comfortable. I have a lot of friends who attend Andover High School and you know they are about 90% White over there. And really, you want to talk about stereotypes coming out. Sometimes it can be funny, but I have never been offended yet. If anything, I feel sorry for them because they are so limited being in an environment like that. They are not getting the full variety. But yeah, I can go into an environment like that and its okay. But if one of my friends from Andover came here, then they might not be as comfortable as I am over there. Like if my friend was to say, " You want to come to our basketball game or do you want me to come to your school's?" I would probably tell them that I would come to theirs because I already know they're not going to be comfortable here.*

*Derrick: Like I said before, the school I came from in Georgia was pretty diverse. And I've never really had a real problem dealing with a very solitary crowd. But living in Georgia there's a lot of people everywhere you go. So you got used to handling crowds, despite the fact I don't like to handle crowds very much. So the high school that I went to there were about 3,000 students. I mean you had a large number of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and a small percentage of the population being Asian. So we had all sorts of cliques and social groups and everything. And personally, I never really fit in to any particular group of people so I learned to maneuver through each and every single one of them. Still, having learned to do that though, I've seen a whole wide range of people. So I can see the good, the bad, disgusting and horrible. So when I*

*came to Urban Northeast I found it very daunting, but refreshing. Although there weren't as many people, they were not as nearly as extreme like the students in Georgia.*

*Lionel: So do you think like we judge people more here in Kansas?*

*Derrick: No. God, No. Well, let's just say it's different. It's more mellow here. And I'd like to add that when I first moved here, I'm sure I did hate it. Not for any real reason other than the people just seemed different than what I was used to and I had to accept the situation. I worked hard to get to the place where I was both socially and academically in my school. Everything down there was always chaotic and I didn't like a lot of the kids down there, but I did like the fact that I don't have to be smart, entirely. I didn't have to like actively demonstrate my abilities and so on and so forth with them. Sometimes I could just cut loose and do things that you really would never do, logically under any real state of mind.*

*Kevin: So you're saying in down in Georgia it's more like, its less of norm. It's more like you said chaotic? It sounds like more like what you see in the movies about high school, right?*

*Derrick: Well, actually, it was one of the most academically achieving high schools, surprisingly. Yeah, it was one of the most achieving. It was the richest high school in the area. It was definitely within the top 10 or top 5 schools in the state. But despite that, the sheer amount of chaos that the kids would bring to the table was just astonishing sometimes.*

*Lionel: Although Urban Northeast is a big school, I am sure glad it is not chaotic. This is a pretty good school compared to some others high schools here. I don't know why anyone would not want to go to Northwest besides this school. To me, I wouldn't want to go; it's not diverse enough for me. But as far as academics is concerned, like strictly only looking at the education part, that's probably the school you might consider outside of this school. It is the richest school*

*in Gilmer so you know that have more educational resources. But once again you will still be missing the diversity, which I think is important.*

### **Urban Northeast Has Prepared Us For The Future**

*Kevin: I feel like because of my high school experience I can take on a lot of challenges and persevere and make right through it. In my first year of college I want to take a full 24 hours of credit and I feel like I can take it on and tackle it and get it out of the way so I can graduate early and start medical school.*

*Lionel: I think I'm really prepared. A lot of things that people are just now getting to, I've been exposed to since the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. And the funny thing is that I didn't realize how far ahead I was until I got up to sophomore year when I'm still hearing the same stuff. I'm like, I've already heard this, what's the next step? I'm waiting for the next step. They're looking at me like, well this is it. So yeah, now I'm looking for more scholarship opportunities because I think I'm well prepared for college after this.*

*Derrick: I'd like to think I'm prepared for college. There's no real guarantee that I am, but I'd like to think I am. I've had a pretty firm grasp on just how to buckle down on important things, since I have always worked better under pressure than anything else. And I've been looking forward to college as a test, almost, to see just what I can achieve; although personally, I see it as a massive hassle. A hassle worth taking; but a hassle nonetheless. I have people in my family who are kind of like, "Well, you know Derrick; you need to go to college. You need to do this and you need to do that." And they're to do always telling you what you need to do and so on and so forth. And I think it was in my sophomore year that I just kind of decided that I'm not doing it for them. No I'm not. I'm doing this for me.*

*Kevin: My goal is to know exactly what college I'm going to by the time I start the spring semester of my senior year and have everything in place like my essays for scholarships completed, reference letters and everything ready for me to go. All I want to do is to get through undergraduate school with no problems and start medical school. I really look forward to coming back here to Kansas and opening up a clinic.*

*Lionel: I'll let you be my doctor, no problem. For me, I just want to make sure I get to be a Kansas Scholar because I know that's going to look good on my college applications. All I've got to do is take the next two courses next year. I plan on improving my GPA by 3 points. And I don't think anything's going to stop me from being motivated as I've always been.*

*Derrick: Question. Just how motivated are you all to succeed on a scale from like 1 to 10? I mean. I just want to get through it.*

*Kevin: There are days I feel like I'm flying high and there are some days when it feels just right. So I guess what I'm trying to say is that I always feel motivated like a 9 or 10.*

*Lionel: If I was to say my overall, I 'd probably be like an 8.*

*Derrick: Yeah, probably like an 8 for me. I mean I want to succeed.*

*Lionel: I'm going to make sure it happens. I'm going to check up on all you guys.*

*Derrick: But in the end, I just want to be able to sit down in a nice comfy chair, away from all of the intricacies of dealing with social norms and all sorts of people trying to do things behind your back, and just live out the rest of my days in peace. You hear what I'm saying?*

*Lionel: You want to live in peace.*

*Derrick: Yes.*

## **Advice to their peers**

*Derrick: Be true to yourself, regardless. Work outside of the social norm if necessary, to achieve what you need to achieve. And don't get chained down by unmotivated people. Yeah, I think that's the most important, don't be chained down.*

*Kevin: Have something that motivates you. Have a long-term goal that you really want to reach and put some work into it. You're not going to ever gain anything if you don't put any work towards it.*

*Lionel: I'll say close to what Kevin just said. You have to stay motivated. And you cannot just talk about how "Oh I'm gonna do this and I'm gonna do that." No, you've got to do it. I used to do that all the time and get frustrated because I wasn't putting the work that was required to reach my goals. But you've got to make sure you do what is necessary to accomplish your goals because life decisions are being made right here in high school. So please stay motivated and do what your mind is set to do.*

*Derrick: To add onto what Lionel said, one thing I live by is if you want it, take it. You know what I'm saying? Like eventually, when I do end up getting a family that is what my family will live by. If you want it, go and take it. How you go about taking it, that's all up to you and everything like that. Now of course there are consequences of how you do that so its important you take the correct actions and so forth. But that's not my problem. My problem is just that first step forward. You see for a lot of Black males that's probably the hardest step there is, just to get going in a society that constantly expects so little from you. Yeah. That's the life of a Black male student, but we'll get through it and be successful.*

## **Urban Southeast High School**

Urban Southeast High is one of the largest of the seven comprehensive high schools in the USD 259 school district. The student enrollment of 1,558 is comprised of 29% Blacks, 25% Whites, 24% Hispanics, 23% other races, which includes Asian and American Indian. Approximately 73% of the student population lives in economically disadvantaged homes (Kansas State Department of Education, 2012).

Southeast offers an accredited comprehensive curriculum the same as urban Northeast. However, Southeast is a poorer school in terms of socio-economic status and is lower performing than Northeast. For the past 6 school calendar years, Southeast has not made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Approximately 98% of the teaching staff is full licensed and 95% of the core content courses are taught by highly qualified teachers (Kansas State Department of Education, 2012). Urban Southeast also offers the AVID program.

Three of the high achieving Black boys in the study attended Urban Southeast High School. The individual stories of Brian, Chris, and Devon are presented, followed by a group discussion which all three participated in.

### **Brian**

Brian is an 18-year-old senior in the AVID Program at Urban Southeast with a cumulative 3.4 GPA. Brian has a strong sense of self-confidence, both personally and academically, and is not easily swayed by what others think of him. As the oldest of four siblings, he is determined to raise the bar by showing them that a high school diploma is just a stepping stone to a college education. Brian is articulate and possesses a lot of knowledge and wisdom about life despite his young age. Brian is active in theater and drama at school. Brian described himself as an “experienced thespian with over one thousand stage hours.” He recently

accepted a theater scholarship to attend Cowley Community College. He admits that his love for theater did not start until his freshman year at Urban Southeast.

In addition to the community service work he does for the AVID program, Brian participates in three choirs and serves as the president for the drama and theater club at school. He is a three-year letter for thespians and centurion. He has received awards in his AVID class for being most involved and he is in the top third of his senior class. He works a part time job at a local grocery store to keep his parents from having to give him money, and he also helps out sometimes with his Mother's home day care business.

**Brian's family.** *I grew up in Gilmer and live with both parents and four siblings: 13 year old, 11 year old, 9 year old, 6 year old and myself. Yep, I'm the oldest. So I have a big responsibility on my shoulder for setting a good example for my younger siblings. But for me that's a good thing because I have a close relationship with my younger siblings and they all look up to me. And because my mom runs a daycare out of the home, I share a lot of the responsibility of transporting my siblings back and forth to school and other places they have to be. Now don't get me wrong, I absolutely love and adore my siblings, but at times I feel like I'm the third parent in my household.*

*My mom has always played an important role in my education. I just admire her for all she has gone through for myself and my siblings. You see, even though my mom had me in high school, she did finish and received her High School Diploma. Now my dad got to his first semester of his senior year and then stopped. My mom took her diploma and one child in tow and got a minimum wage job at a fast food restaurant. Unfortunately, my dad got lost in that transition. My mom did what she had to do. She worked her way up from the bottom to a management position, I mean I was little then so, I never knew she didn't have a college degree.*

*And during that time, I went to a predominately White elementary school where I was one of maybe five Black children in the entire school and my mom dressed me in Kohl's and Dillard's fashions just like the rest of the middle class students that went to that school. I didn't go to school in Wal-mart clothes or shoes. I had all the video games. We had cable. So she made the money like the White parents did. We took family vacations like the White families did. Well, my dad wasn't around at that time. Not one time did my mom say, "Oh he can't participate in this field trip or activity because we can't afford it."*

*My mom told me a long time ago that I needed to get a college education and that a high school education was just a building block for that. My dad on the other hand, well I don't allow him to tell me anything about school because he gave up and didn't finish his last semester of high school. I see my mom as my motivation to succeed and my dad as a goal to not throw away an education like he did. Now if you look at my dad's action over the years you can easily see that I was led by my mom's example. My dad hit rock bottom. I say that because he just gave up on bettering himself. I mean my dad was in and out of our lives. Yes, he is still present in our household and yes he does try, but what grown man walks around wearing sagging pants and big jersey shirts? My biggest deal is to be better than my dad could ever be. That's why it is so important to me to set a good example for my two younger brothers.*

**Experiences in school.** *High school has been great. I have had tons of fun in high school but now I am ready to get out. Don't get me wrong, I absolutely love this school. I wouldn't want to go to no other high school in this city or state. I came here to do what I was supposed to do. I met a lot of nice people along the way. Over the past 4 years the student body has grown closer. This school has more of a family environment here. The students, some of the staff, yeah, everyone is over the top, I look forward to coming to school. I picked up a talent that*

*I never knew I had. I mean if you would have asked me 5 years ago if I was interested in theater I would have probably laughed at you. But now I consider myself a centurion Thespian, which means I have put in over 1000 hours on and off stage Thespian and love it. You see, high school is about discovering yourself. It's not about doing what you have always done but taking those extra steps into those unfamiliar areas that you never knew about.*

**Defining academic success.** *I define academic success with doing the best you can in the class, not with just getting straight A's or A's and B's on a progress report. I mean it's not easy for everyone, but I believe academic success in school is more about when you come and try. It's a drive that you must keep going. Academic success means challenging yourself. I mean that is why I have always taken AP and Honors courses because I feel like it's redundant and meaningless to come to school to learn and do the things I already know. I'm coming here for a purpose; to achieve and move on to the next level. Academic success means believing in yourself regardless what others may think about you. If you believe in yourself and put in the effort to do well, then it will show and you will feel good knowing that you did your best.*

*Getting involved in school activities also helps with academic success because it motivates you to keep your grades up. It gives you drive. I mean if you have no coach saying, "Hey remember you need to keep those grades up to stay on this team" or if you didn't have a director saying, "I will not put you on this stage if you can't keep up with your classes," then there is no purpose.*

*I honestly don't feel that graduating from high school is going to be the greatest accomplishment I have ever done because that is just step one for me. I feel that graduating from high school is over exaggerated in the Black community. "What are you going to do next" is not asked enough in the Black community. You know, along with saying congratulations,*

*people should also be saying, “Hey, okay, what is your next step? What kind of job are you going to get now or what’s next for your life?” Those are important questions because if you haven’t made any plans beyond that point, well that should get your mind rolling. I mean you and I both know that if you stop at the high school level, then you’re done.*

**The “core” of a good teacher.** *I realize that every teacher has a different teaching style, but it is important for teachers to “know how to deal.” Okay, let me take you back a little to explain what I mean. My early learning experiences in 1<sup>st</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> grade was horrible. Things just didn’t come easy to me. I had trouble with reading and math and the teachers didn’t “know how to deal” so they just kept sending me outside the class for additional help but that wasn’t working. It wasn’t until I got to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and there was a White teacher who refused to send me out of the room for not getting it. Instead, she actually took the time to help me catch up with the other students. Her philosophy was nobody in the class would go on until we all got the lesson and that is when things started looking up for me. Because of her teaching style, I became a motivated student and began to love school. She cared about my academic success. She cared about every student’s success. That is the “core” of a good teacher.*

*Not just with students, but with Black male students I think the core is very important in education. Speaking as a Black male student, sometimes knowing that a teacher believes in you and will do whatever they can to help you succeed makes a big difference in your learning outcome. That nurturing I received from my 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher made all the difference in the world because at that time my mom was a single mother, with two kids and really didn’t know how to help me in school. Like I know you are not supposed to go back and compare teachers to my 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher who turned my outlook on academics around, but her method worked. So to this day, I look for that similar core in all of my teachers.*

*I will be honest with you and say there are some teachers here that I have had in the past that I did not like. I mean they just did not have that core to make me feel like I should want to be in their class. As a matter of fact, this problem occurred not too long ago. Okay, I won't say the teacher's name. However, this teacher came to class with an attitude that she was better than the students she was teaching. As a student, she gave her 100% in class, every assignment she turned in was perfect, and oh, let's not forget, she had a 4.0 GPA. This is what we had to hear every time somebody didn't turn in an assignment or didn't do well on a test. Literally, everybody in the class felt judged. My mother and I both sat down and told her, "You need to realize that the students in your class are not you and they will never be like you. Your job is not to tell the class how good you were as a student but to help them become better students. You get paid to come and teach not to judge and if you can't do that or don't know how to, then there is no point of your job as a teacher."*

**My friends are just like me.** *To me, friends come and go and I don't feel like I need them to move on in life. In high school, you have to be careful about who you consider your friends and who your associates are. I believe the more friends you have the easier it is for them to talk about you, stab you in the back, and dog you. So if you really want to be my friend, then you got to be true with me 'til the end.*

*I can honestly say that my friends here at this school mirror me. I have true friends not the fake ones. My friends work hard in school. Just like me, they come to school to work, to do a job, not horse around. Now if we want to horse around then we are not going to come to school to do that, we will meet at the corner to gyp. But that's not what we are about. We have similar styles because we shop at the same stores. We like the same music. I have a diverse group of friends and no matter what, we have each other's back. I mean we may come from different*

*backgrounds but we are not going to sit around and judge each other because that is not what friends do. Race has never been an issue to me. My mom raised me that we are all the same. Yes, there are prejudiced people out there, and nothing can be done to change that. But when I develop a true friendship with someone, I don't care about the color of their skin. Yes, we get mad from time to time, but that only last a minute and within a 24 hours we have made up. That's true friendship.*

*I get along with just about everyone. I have a real good friend that is a foreign exchange student from Sweden. I have friends that are on the football team, the bowling team, and of course I have a lot of good friends in theater. I think you have to have a variety of friends with different interests because you may not find that one person who will have all the passions and interests you have.*

*I mean a person can be my friend just by being their authentic self. What I mean is that I don't want anybody to change because I am not going to change who I am to be friends with you. I am not going to dress a certain way or talk a certain way so we can be friends and I certainly don't expect you to do it. Anybody at this school can tell you that for me not to be friends with someone means that person must have really done something bad because I will be with you all the way until I feel you are going to drag me down. And if I ever feel that way then yes, I will definitely get away from you. You see, I live by the old saying "You should never judge a person until you have walked in their shoes." I believe that to be so true. You should never dislike a person or judge them because you don't know their story. We all have different stories and our stories don't necessarily predict the outcome of our lives.*

**Making good connections.** *To be successful in life another important thing in addition to needing an education is about who you know. Yeah, it really is all about who you know. That*

*is just how the world works. So that's why it is important to make good connections as early as high school. I mean you can make a connection with a teacher, a theater director or you can be on a field trip and make a connection with someone in the community. When I meet people, I know those people have connections to possible opportunities that may benefit me or someone I know so I will always keep that connection going.*

*I applied and was accepted to Kansas University, Wichita State University, and Friends University. However, during one of my theater performances I met the Theater Director of Cowley County Community College and developed a good relationship with him and from that he offered me a 2-year Theater scholarship without me even applying. So I decided to attend Cowley and take the cheaper route and complete all of my pre requisites and gen ed out of the way. And then I will transfer to KU or WSU to get my 4-year degree.*

*I purposely chose to finish up my theater degree from a school with predominately White students who will be theater majors as well and show them that I can do just as much as they can do in this particular field. I chose not to go to a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) because I feel that the world is not an HBCU. So why would I only surround myself with African Americans and not learn to customize myself with everyone else?*

## **Chris**

Chris is a 17-year-old senior at Urban Southeast with a cumulative 3.5 GPA. Chris is a student athlete. As a linebacker for the football team, Chris stands 5 ft. 11 in., weighing 225 lbs, most of which is muscle. He is also on the golf team and track team. Although Chris is bi-racial due to his Mother is White and Father being Black, he identifies himself as Black. Chris has a dark brown complexion with jet black, baby fine curly hair that he wears in a neat ponytail.

Even though Chris is very popular at Urban Southeast with both students and faculty, he does not personify the typical jock image. He is very articulate and has a pleasant personality.

Chris has been involved in several school organizations such as the Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA) and Business Professionals of America (BPA). DECA and BPA are both high school clubs for students interested in pursuing careers in business management, marketing, computer science, and entrepreneurship. Chris has competed with other students across the state in various business events and competitions. Chris was also inducted into the National Honor Society his sophomore year. Chris has been a varsity letterer and first team offensive player for football for two years. He is also captain of the football team. He has been student of the month and is in the top third of his graduating class.

Chris received an athletic football scholarship to attend Missouri State University and is looking forward to starting during the summer after he graduates. He was also accepted to Kansas State University and the University of Kansas, but he decided to go to the school that was offering the most money to make it easy on his Mother. He plans on majoring in sports science or engineering.

**Chris's family.** *I have lived right here in Gilmer with my mom, my 2 brothers, and my sister. My sister is the oldest, 23, and my brothers are 12 and 16. I was raised by my mom my whole life. Yep, she raised all of us by herself. My dad just wasn't around much. I've just never really had a relationship with my dad. The funny thing is I look just like him. My mom is White and my dad is Black and I do not look like her at all. But people always see me with my mom. My mom supports everything I do. My mom is like the only person who has been there for me all the time. My mom raised us and started off with nothing and worked her way up. She went back*

*to school and got her Master's degree and got a good job to support us. I guess that's why we have a real strong relationship.*

*My mom put me in everything. I played baseball as a little kid. I played Bidy Basketball at the Y. I played little league football. You see my mom liked to put us in a lot of activities to keep us out of trouble. When my little brother started playing basketball and football, my mom volunteered me to run the clock. During my freshman and sophomore year of high school, I coached his little league football team for 2 years. Yeah, I mean, when his team had games and we'd go places, people wouldn't believe that I was the coach, so some of the parents had to come out and tell the officials that I was the coach so they would let me in. It was only because I was so young. Here I was 14 years old coaching 10-year-old boys. So my mom started me off early with community service work.*

*When my brothers and I were younger, I remember how my mom would like never let me and my brother quit if we started something, we always had to finish it no matter what- if we wanted to or not. That's just how my mom was. But I guess it paid off because none of us ever got into any trouble. So that's a good thing.*

**School experiences/school pride.** *I have had some good experiences in high school. I've done a lot of activities. I've been involved in school a lot. I am proud to be a Trojan (school mascot). I like this school because it's more like a family environment here. I mean I know you hear a lot of bad things about Urban Southeast, but most of it is not true and it is a totally different environment than what people hear about. Like the support that the school has for everyone. For instance, no matter how our teams do, there's always people there supporting us. I know during the football season, we didn't do too good, but we always had people in the stands. The people here have pride for this school. I believe that's important and that makes a*

*difference in a person's school experience. I have pride for my school and know what opportunities I have had here.*

*When I was competing a lot in those business competitions with DECA, I got to travel around the state and represent my school and that was pretty fun. We went to Kansas City and other places. The event I entered was a business competition where, like you go sit in a room with the person who actually owned the business and they would give you a situation and you had to tell them how to handle it. There would be these judges who always looked so serious. But I got a chance to meet other students from other schools. It was pretty much like a diverse group of people and everybody got along. There were older students and younger students, but everyone was pretty cool. We all just hung out in each other rooms after the events. I've done a lot of fun activities at this school.*

**Strong relationships with teachers.** *In all of my classes, AP and regular, I usually I have a strong relationship with my teachers just because they notice how hard I work in class and they see that I want to achieve in stuff that I do. And usually every teacher tells me that I'm a pleasure to be in class with just because of how I participate in class and usually I'm always the first one to answer a question, even if I'm wrong, I really don't care. I just try to participate in class so I can learn more things. And the teachers usually like that about me. I mean they are used to me doing well on assignments and stuff so they tell me "good job." I know it sounds kind of corny. But if I were to do badly they usually say something to me and my mom. My mom is real involved; she gives all the teachers her email. She knows before I know when I get a bad grade on an assignment. She checks my report card online every day and will text me sometimes while I'm at school about a grade. Then I'll see my advisor, Miss Heaton, and she'll say the same thing my mom told me. Sometimes the teachers act like I'm their son too.*

**Friends at school.** *Most of my friends here, we all do just about the same stuff. I have a mixture of friends. So it's really not a difference when we hang out together. We don't treat each other differently. That's why we usually never get into trouble or do anything bad because we're always doing pretty much the same activities and most of the time they are at school. All of the people I hang around are either in my classes, on the football team, in DECA, or got something going for them. A lot of my friends do play sports. But what people don't realize is that if you don't have good grades, you can't be on the teams. And when you're on the teams, the coaches get your report cards and if we didn't do stuff right, we had to stay at practice and do homework instead of practice. So yeah, we talk about grades and sometimes we even do homework together. I don't mind helping my friends figure out something especially math because that is my favorite subject. I realized a long time ago that I "got" stuff better than other students did and it wasn't as hard for me in school as it was for my friends so I would do whatever I could to help them. I just don't like to see people, especially people I know, fail.*

*A lot of us talk about owning businesses and stuff when we get older, so I know school is important to all of my friends. Like I have a few peers that are going to the Air Force. They're not really going to college, but they're still going somewhere next year. But the rest of my friends are going to college.*

**Importance of achievement.** *It really important for me to do well in school because I want to show my little brothers that it's good to do good in school and achieve. My little brother looks up to me a lot. He is in gifted classes. He reminds me of myself when I was his age. When he was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, he was doing 8<sup>th</sup> grade work in all of his classes just because he saw that I was doing all of my homework. And now that he's in middle school, he takes all the 8<sup>th</sup> grade*

*classes with the upper level students. It makes me feel good to know that my siblings are working hard in school because they see me achieving. I know I am their role model.*

*Everyone has to have an education no matter what your race is because things don't come easy. If you want anything in life, you will have to go to school and do your best. Sometimes to work at McDonald's you have to have a certificate from high school. School achievement leads to so many positive things in a young person's future; scholarships: college: high paying job: owning a business and taking care of your family. So this is just a start to my future and I don't want to look back and be that person who messed around and didn't do anything in school and only cared about being the cool kid. Besides, my momma would be all over me if I didn't do right.*

## **Devon**

Devon is a 16 year old in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade at Urban Southeast. Devon is an AVID student with a cumulative 3.5 GPA. Devon has a slim build, standing 6 feet, 2 inches tall. Devon is a bright, energetic, and carefree young man. Devon described himself as a “Giant nerd who loves art and school, that’s me.” When Devon walked into the room for our interview, he had the most inspiring smile I have ever seen. Devon has an outgoing personality and is fun to be around.

Devon is a member of the student council and actively involved in community service projects with the AVID Program. He also participates in a fairly new club at Urban Southeast called Potential African American Student Scholars (PAASS). PAASS is a group of high achieving African American students who meet once a month and participate in leadership seminars and workshops. They also explore various careers interest and invite guest speakers from the community to come and speak to the group. Devon is also a freshmen mentor and in the

top ten percent of his junior class. Devon works part time as a cashier at the Dillons near his home. Due to his full schedule at school, he usually works on the weekends.

Even though Devon plans to attend college after high school and major in Studio Art or Design, he feels his biggest challenge is deciding which school to apply to. He is concerned about how to turn his love and passion for art into a career that will sustain him financially after college. “I don’t want to major in something that I love but then have to work a job that has nothing to do with what I went to college for. Yeah, I will have one of those tricky majors.”

**Devon’s family.** *I was born and raised in Gilmer, Kansas. My parents are divorced and my dad lives in Texas. I see my dad during the summers and holidays. My mom has her master’s degree in nursing but my dad doesn’t have a degree. He went to college for a while but had to quit because he started working at a manufacturing job. I have two older sisters. One who is 24 and lives in Texas with her two children. She started going to Butler Community College before she moved to Texas but I don’t think she finished. My other sister is 18 and she is a senior here at Urban Southeast. She wants to go into nursing like my mom. She plans on going to Butler Community College after she graduates this May and then transfer to a university.*

*So I live with my mom, my sister, and my dog. Yeah, my dog is a part of our family. Even though my sister and I are close in age and attended the same schools most of our lives, we are complete opposites. I mean, we get along like sister and brother and argue and stuff. And okay, she is kind of loud like me, but we just have different perspectives on things. Like she makes good grades but her way of getting good grades is taking easy classes. And that’s fine, but that is not me. And my mom, it irritates me to this day how she will say to my sister, “Oh, why don’t you get grades like your brother?” My mom likes to hold me to a high standard and sometimes that bothers me, especially when she compares me and my sister’s grades. Ugh, it*

*makes me feel like I'm putting her down and I don't ever want to put anybody down. Like when my mom sees my sister's progress report and there's a bad grade on it, she's like "Oh okay, just get it up." But then when she sees mine, it's like, "What is this? What's going here?" Once I got a "C" in Algebra 2 and oh Lord, my mom thought the world was going to end! She actually came to my job and was like, "Why do you have a "C"? You're going to have to quit this job." And all she tells my sister is "Oh, okay, get it up." Yeah, talk about a lot of pressure for a brother. Like I don't want to be held to a high standard because then I wouldn't be Devon. I just want to be Devon, you know. I mean, I'm going to make mistakes. I may not get good grades all the time. I know that sounds crazy huh?*

**Devon's school experiences.** *High school is what you make of it. I started my freshman year all serious and everything because I knew I was now preparing to go to college. Like I wanted to be valedictorian, but I got so discouraged when I got a "B" in Algebra. I was so close to an "A" but I didn't get it. I guess that's when it really hit me that I needed to put more effort into school because before high school, things were pretty much easy for me. Like I remember in middle school they were really strict about wearing uniforms. And now I see the significance of it because by wearing uniforms you don't have to worry about being judged about what you wear to school. Now when I wake up, I'm not thinking about school; I'm thinking about what I'm going to wear. People in high school judge you on your appearance. That's the first thing they say. "Oh, why are you wearing that?" But I'm not into fashion and name brands and stuff like that so I wouldn't mind just wearing a uniform again like middle school. I mean, it's not like I'm going on a date or on a job interview. But it's probably like that at any high school, you know, people judging the way you dress. I feel like high school is what you make of it, the classes you take, and the activities you participate in.*

**Friendships.** *Well, I don't, I mean, I have Black friends, don't get me wrong. It just that they're not my main crowd of friends, you know what I'm saying? Also, some of the Black kids at Urban Southeast, they're really not the best crowd to hang out with. I know I could never fit in with that group. Like most of them are in sports and stuff and play basketball and stuff. I did try to play basketball my freshman year, but I quit a month later. And then, yeah, I realized sports aren't for me. Like it's school and art, that's me. Yeah, I feel like the oddball with them. Because it's like, "oh let's watch that game." And I'm like, "what's the game about?" It's just odd. I tried to hang out with the typical jocks.*

*Another challenge I had when I first started this school as a freshman was trying to figure out exactly who I was as a person, you know, just weeding through all my different friends and stuff and hanging out with a lot of different people. Like I remember trying to sit with some of the Black kids at lunch and it would just be so awkward. You see, everybody thinks I play basketball because of my height. But I'm not athletic at all and after playing on both the football and basketball teams my freshman year, I realized that I do not like sports.*

*So my friends are mostly like other races than Black you know. I don't judge by color. Like most of my friends are Asian or White, stuff like that. Now they're into sports, but they're more grade-wise. We talk about who may be the class valedictorian. It's always about grades and stuff. Yeah, I guess you can call me a nerd. I'm a giant and stuff like that. I'm into cartoons and comic books. And most Black athletes are not. They're into Madden and stuff like that.*

*There is a new group that I participate in called Potential African American Student Scholars (PAASS) Club. It is a group that just started at our school and it's for African American students who are high achieving. There is a group for male students and a group for*

*the female students. Like we got to tour various colleges and attend a leadership seminar at K-State. I really like being in this group because it has given me a different perspective on some of the Black male athletes here. I mean, I would see these same students in the hallways passing for classes but it would be a quick nodding of the head. I mean I didn't realize how many athletes had high GPA's. It is about 30 students in the group and I was probably the only non-athlete person in the group. During some of the field trips, I had a chance to bond with the other members and listen as they talked about their struggles of being stereotyped as a "dumb jock." For the first time since I started here as a freshman, I felt a connection. It was really good.*

**AVID Program.** *AVID has helped me a lot. I mean it's really hard to describe. I'm not afraid to take challenging classes because I know I will get the help I need and like getting a "B" in an AP class is equivalent to getting an "A" in a regular class. So yeah, in AVID I have tutors and stuff like that but I also know that I need to apply myself more. Being in AVID just helps me get in the right mindset. Since I've become an AVID student, it just helps me be me, if that makes sense. I'm looking forward to being a senior next year and I'm looking for longevity after high school. Like what college I want to go to and the things I will need to do to start preparing myself for that transition. I don't know, I guess I could have been prepared for college even if I wasn't in AVID.*

*I know there are some teachers who come to school just for the paycheck. But my AVID teacher has been with me since freshman year and he knows the type of students we are. He's like, "Why do you have these grades? You can do better!" Sounds like a parent huh? Sometimes I get nervous because I know that every week he checks my grades and of course I don't want him to see my grades and be disappointed. But he is really cool. My AVID teacher*

*has high expectations for me just like my mom. He cares about me and wants me to continue achieving. I would say I'm pretty lucky to get that kind of support.*

**Relationships with teachers.** *Well, sometimes my math teacher irritates me sometimes because when I go, "ugh" I don't understand what he's teaching. And of course I'm not the only one in the class that feels this way. But I know I can't fault the teacher. I have to take the blame and just work harder in that class. But okay, overall, I have a good relationship with my teachers, especially the courses I have the most. Well, no. Okay. When I first came here, I did have this one teacher in biology who really got the wrong impression of me the minute I walked into the class. You know, I'm a really loud person. I mean, I have a very loud personality sometimes. I'm just a typical kid. So she gave us our first lab report to do and she was like, "If you type it you get extra credit." So, I'm like, of course I'm going to type it because I wanted the extra credit. Those extra credit points could turn a "B" into an "A" at the end of the year. So I typed the assignment and turned it in. When I got the paper back, she wrote, "Wow, I'm seeing the type of student you are, Devon." Like she was surprised that I was the only one in the class to turn in the assignment and get the extra credit. Yeah, it kind of caught me off guard because all my teachers in middle school knew what kind of student I was. So I think because I had a loud personality, she just thought I was a bad student, but I'm not.*

*The following year I had this same teacher for chemistry and now we have a great relationship. She is so nice and sweet, so I knew she didn't mean any harm then. As a matter of fact, she is one of my favorite teachers, beside my AVID teacher. All of the teachers here are awesome, especially my Art teacher. She knows how much I love art so she is always encouraging me. Like I have been struggling with these last two art projects because of a lot of schoolwork and stuff like that. She is very lenient with me. She's like, "Oh just take your time*

*with it and do your best. Turn it in when you can.” She trusts me, you know. Like if I tell her I need to go back and get additional notes from one of my AP classes or meet with another teacher, she will just let me leave. That makes me feel good, that a teacher trusts me like that, especially at Urban Southeast.*

**Breaking stereotypes.** *There are stereotypes around races and stuff and I want to be the one to be the person who like breaks through the stereotypes. I always hear how smart Asian people are and I have a lot of Asian friends. But I make “A”s just like my Asian friends. And then you hear about White people doing well and getting good grades. But I don’t ever hear anything about African American kids getting good grades. It is always negative things about African Americans. I think it is wrong to stereotype people based on race.*

*Like, all African American boys in school play sports. So because I’m tall everyone’s like, “Oh you play basketball.” And I can’t dribble a ball to save my life. Or African American boys sag, use the N word. And they all, you know, use slang and stuff like that. Yeah, stereotypes like that. And that’s not true. Not everyone is like that. That is just the stereotype society has put on the different races and it is very unfair. Like no one should have a stereotype on anything because everyone’s going to be their self.*

*When you think about this study that you are doing, none of us fit the stereotypes that society has. I know I don’t. I’m just Devon. School is important to me. Oh my gosh, I could never sag my pants. I would rather read a book than throw a ball. It makes me proud when I get recognized for doing well in school. I feel like all this hard work is paying off.*

### **Urban Southeast Focus Group**

The following sections are written in the form of a dialogue from the focus group conversations of the participants. The themes that emerged from the focus group were; what’s

race got to do with it: administrative support, who needs it: getting involved in extra-curricular activities: high school and our mothers' have prepared us for college: and what it means to be a Black male.

### **What's race got to do with it?**

*Brian: In my opinion, going to Urban Southeast is not about race. I have never felt the urge of oh "he Black" sort of thing. I mean we are all friends. We have different backgrounds. The really cool thing about going to this school is there are a lot of foreign exchange students that come in and out. They are friends with everyone not just other exchange students. So race has never been a big issue Urban Southeast.*

*Chris: I feel the same way about our school. I talk to other people about their schools and they say like they're separated at school. Like especially during lunchtime. But our school at lunchtime, you could walk down the hallway and everybody sits together. It's like a big family. Nobody really have any problems with each other. Everybody's just friends and that's how it is at our school.*

*Devon: Yeah, I feel the same way. Urban Southeast is very diverse. You can walk down the halls and find different groups of people standing together one day and then the next day it is a different group.*

*Chris: Really, it's not so much that you have different groups, but you can go and fit in with these groups. I mean, nobody in the group is going to look at you funny if you walked up to them and said hello. When you see groups of students in the hallways they are usually talking about what happen that day. It's just different days, different stuff happens, and you can talk to anybody about it without feeling uncomfortable.*

*Devon: I think it's natural to have a really close group of friends but they don't necessarily have to be of the same race or gender.*

*Brian: Right. Like I said earlier, one of my best friends is a foreign exchange student, and although Devon and I have mutual friends, his sister is also one of my best friends.*

*Chris: At the school, I mean, everybody is their own person; no one acts the same. There are people who do the same stuff as me and there are some who don't. There are some who look like me and there are some who look totally different. I don't discriminate against people just by the way they act or the way they look. People go through life situations everyday so if they act different it could be because of something that happened to them or the way they were raised. I'm just glad that our school environment promotes an atmosphere of acceptance and togetherness, you know.*

*Brian: A couple of months back, our drama group did an activity called "I know your name, not your story." So I might know that kid's name, but again, I don't know their story. Like Chris was saying, we don't know their background. And like I told you before, I have success in the classroom. That kid might have success on the street. I wouldn't know that because I don't know their story. I think the problem with society is they focus more on what they can see as a person's success. I mean they should be like "Wow, that kid's not in the system so they must be doing something right." I think we all have strengths; some of us are able to show it more than others. And I'm not just talking about Black males; this is the same for White males and any other race.*

*Devon: Yeah, I guess I can agree somewhat. I mean of course I'm not going to discriminate and I really wish I could always say race didn't matter at this school but sometimes I have been thrown in with the bad just because I was the same color as them.*

*Brian: Have you ever been made fun of or put down Devon?*

*Devon: No, not made fun of. I know it shouldn't matter but sometimes it does for me. People have to come into their own in high school. People change; some people are still trying to find out who they are. We all take different life paths anyway.*

*Brian: Well for the most part, the word "clique" doesn't really exist at this school. Yes, you have students who have different backgrounds, different interests, but no one is ever brought down or made fun of for having different interests. In movies, like me and Chris would never get along because he's an athlete and I'm a performing arts student. But since we met here at Urban Southeast, we get along just fine. We've never had any conflicts. And I really believe that's the blessing that comes from attending this school. It's time that people realize that even though we're Black males, we can do a lot more and having that title does not define us.*

*Devon: Well I agree with you on that one Brian. I mean, like people always look at the color of your skin as the baseline. I get it all the time, "Oh, you're dark Devon." Like really? It's like rude, but I'm like, "Okay. Anyway, look at me. My grades are good. Why should that matter?" Like I said earlier, I don't have a lot of Black friends. I have a few. But I've chosen to go a different pathway, and they can't do the same thing. It doesn't matter because your color doesn't define you and your race doesn't define you either.*

*Chris: Yeah, like Devon was saying, a person's race shouldn't define them. But I've also had comments with teachers that weren't too long ago. One day I was sitting in class and just finished the assignment that the teacher left for us to complete and turn in to the substitute. I was laughing and stuff because that's just how I am, I'm a happy person. And the substitute teacher walked up to my desk and stared down at me and picked up my assignment. She was like "I'm surprised you completed your work." And I was like "I always do my work. I'm in the*

*National Honor Society.” And then she was like, “No you’re not.” She didn’t believe me. I told her to go down the hall and ask the advisor for the National Honor Society. But after class she told me that after looking at my work she believed me because she was impressed with the assignment. I think she judged me because of the way I looked.*

*Devon: Yeah, I’ve had a similar experience with my chemistry teacher. I can be a very loud person especially when I laugh and I could tell she immediately judged me like, “Oh he’s like the other low achieving African Americans.” You see we can tell when we are being put in that category. But when I started getting good grades on my labs, she was like, “Oh my gosh, you’re really good at this. You know like she was surprised to see that I did my work. She was shocked to see that I was an A student just because I’m Black and loud. She just expected the opposite.*

*Brian: Hey Chris, aren’t you bi-racial? And you wouldn’t ever guess. And you wouldn’t ever guess Devon’s home life or mine for that matter. I have two parents at home; Devon has one but you would never know. You would never know that Chris’ mother is White because it is not about this anymore. And it shouldn’t be. I get it that back in the day that’s what it was about, but it’s time people step forward and move around issues like that. That’s why I think this study is important because people will think that the Black males of this generation aren’t doing anything and they’re not going to succeed. That is how society looks at us. It is time for everybody to grow as one because if we don’t, can you imagine what it will be like when it is time for my kids.*

### **Administrative Support-Who Needs It More?**

*Brian: In my field of interest, theater and performing arts, I feel like the support from administration is not all the way there like it is for the athletic teams. I will see an administrator at every football, basketball, and baseball game. I will not see an administrator at a show or*

*concert and things like that. Now we get contacted and get all kinds of request to perform, whether it's singing or music and they expect it to just happen. They don't understand the processes that it takes, and it's not Glee. I don't walk around with an entire band following me around and break into songs. However, when I participate in plays, it does take a lot of work. I have the placement, my project, notes, and all of these things have to happen at one time. It is not easy. Now it's fun, don't get me wrong, but it's not as easy as people make it seem. I've played football before and I know that's not easy, so I'm not knocking on Chris at all. And even Devon can attest this, when it comes to the Arts section, it's not as big because the administration just don't show too much interest in it. We all know that high school sports are really big and if you can't get into college playing sports, people usually forget about you. So you have to take your passion and do something with it without the big support because if you stick with it someone down the road will love it and support it.*

*Devon: Yeah Brian. I feel the same way. Like when I was in a meeting with a group of African American men, everyone did sports except me. That's like the first thing people asked, "Oh, are you on the basketball team or do you play football?" And when I would say no, they would look at me like, "You're over 6 feet tall, Why aren't you in that?" So I would tell them I do Art. "Oh that's cool" with a strange look on their faces. This is from the administration. I mean they don't put it down, but they sure don't highlight it as much as the sports team. So like Brian said, it doesn't matter, you just take your passion and go with it.*

*Chris: Like Brian and Devon were saying, at all the sports activities there are always administrators. I mean they travel with us and they go to all the activities that we do. So I feel that we do have a lot of support in the athletic side of things. I even see the security guards at our football games. So yes, being an athlete I think we do have a lot of support but I also think*

*the reason is because they have to be there. So much crazy stuff go on now a days, I believe it is mandatory for at least one school administrator to be at a sporting event. I also think that since most of our administrators are males, they just like to attend the sporting events.*

*Brian: Well I'm not saying Mr. P never talks to us. The administrators know who we are and know what we do. Mr. P actually paid for the theater bus to go to Emporia to see a contest and that was really nice of him so we didn't have to take it out of our budget. So they are getting better at it. I will say this, Mr. P knows all of his kids in this school, but sports are going to be his first priority, and that's just the way it is.*

### **Getting Involved In Extra-Curricular Activities**

*Brian: Being involved makes you get those good grades. You see the philosophy around here is if you do not give us good grades, you do not get to do extra-curricular activities. Right Chris? I mean he knows if his name came on the F list, he's not going to start. So having that in mind, he's like okay, I'm going to class every day, I'm not going to gyp and things like that. The same goes for me. If I'm on the F list, I cannot perform. So that's why those students who do get involved always have the better grades and the better high school experiences. If you're one of those students who don't come on time, or spend most of your time at home, you're not likely to graduate and you're not likely to enjoy your high school career.*

*Chris: I agree with Brian. Being involved in extra-curricular activities makes you get good grades and stuff. And I couldn't say that being an athlete because I've never been on the other side. I have to work even harder being an athlete. Like you said, if I'm on the F list, I can't play, no exceptions. And our coach doesn't even let anybody with a D play. So he gets a list of our grades before the games and for the ones who have D's, they have to run after practice. So*

*getting involved in activities at school helps you stay focused on your grades because you know you can't play or start unless you make the grade.*

*Brian: And trust. Your teachers do know what you do and they are not lenient on us. If anything, they are more likely to get on us if our grades start dropping because they already know we are looking forward to participating in an activity for this week. We have all had classmates in our activities where it's like, are you serious? Did you really do that? Because when you don't do what you're supposed to do in the classroom, you let your whole team down.*

### **High School And Our Mothers Have Prepared Us For College**

*Chris: I hear a lot of people say that high school did not prepare them for college and all this other stuff. And I really don't know how college is going to be because I've never been there. But I think this school has prepared me well or the experiences I have had here has prepared me along with the support of my mom. I mean my AP classes were hard at times but I still managed to play sports and maintain A's and B's. My mom always told me that I have to depend on myself in class to get the good grades, not my classmates or friends. She stressed the importance of staying in control. Well that's probably how it is in college, to be independent and not be afraid to go to the professor or teacher if you need help.*

*Brian: I believe that Urban Southeast has prepared me most for college. Not everyone is college bound. And high school can only give you so much. I believe high school teaches you to be in control of you. Just like what Chris' mom said. "You do what you want to but make sure you get the grade you need to get. You make sure you stay in control." I feel that I'm ready to go away to school because I stayed on track in high school, of course with the support of AVID making sure you stay on track. Yes, I feel I am extremely ready to go to college because what I've learned here and what my mom has taught as well.*

*Devon: Yeah, I feel the same way. Not only does high school prepare you for college, but it's your parents too. Well, my mom, yeah she pushed me a lot. Like my mom would always tell me, "AP classes may be preparing you but at the end of the day, it's going to be up to you because nobody is going to hold your hand."*

### **What It Means To Be A Black Male**

*Brian: Would you guys say that being a Black male has slowed you down or stopped us in any way?*

*Chris: In certain situations, people like knock you down just because you're Black, but it really never has affected me, or made me stop trying to do anything that I do. I'm not a quitter. I always finish whatever I do. So being a Black male really hasn't made me or knocked me down in this environment. I haven't experienced college yet.*

*Devon: I feel the same way. It hasn't bruised my ego. Of course, I get looks from everyone like "Oh, your color, you're Black." Of course it's going to be a factor in life, like everyone is going to look at you just because. That's every race. It's like whenever. I don't know sometimes. I just think people are going to judge you because you are human. I guess that's just what humans do, we judge people.*

*Brian: We all, I've noticed, we all speak proper English and it always comes to a shock that at first glance we're Black and we speaking correctly. That's always a big deal. I feel that what we have done these past 4 years, or 3 in Devon's case, has not been hard. We've had challenging classes, but I feel that everyone can do what we have done. Don't you guys agree? We all agree that what we have done is not the end, but yet the beginning to a new chapter of our lives. And hopefully, one day a study will be about why some males do better in school than other males, which will include all of the races. I mean we can see, well what is it really? Is it a*

*race thing? Or is it a home training thing? Or is it a mental thing? I feel that everything that we've done is not impossible at all.*

*Devon: There's like 7 billion people in the world and there's 20 different races. But at the end of the day, we are just ourselves. And just because you're a certain race doesn't mean you're going to act a certain way as society stereotypes you to be. You will just be yourself.*

*Chris: Well I will just say that being a Black male should not slow you down. And if you ever feel like it does, my advice is to keep on trying and never give up. I mean you're going to always have struggles in everything that you do. I've stayed up late doing homework because of game nights and kept telling myself that if I don't finish my work I won't be playing in the next game. I feel like if you quit stuff when you're young, it only teaches you bad habits to quit later in life. You shouldn't let what people say or do slow you down or the things you are trying to accomplish.*

Table 2

## Study Participants

Name	Age	Grade	GPA	School	Race	Salient Characteristic
Darryl	18	12 <sup>th</sup>	3.5	Urban Northeast	Black Bi-racial	Attended IB program for one semester; Father is Nigerian & Mother is White
Derrick	17	11 <sup>th</sup>	3.5	Urban Northeast	Black	AVID participant; Live with grandparents
Simon	18	12 <sup>th</sup>	3.8	Urban Northeast	Black African	Born in Kenya; Mother is his hero.
Lionel	16	11 <sup>th</sup>	3.4	Urban Northeast	Black	Most popular
Kevin	17	11 <sup>th</sup>	3.4	Urban Northeast	Black	AVID Grandmother passed away the summer before he started high school
Evan	16	11 <sup>th</sup>	3.8	Urban Northeast	Black	AVID participant
Brian	18	12 <sup>th</sup>	3.4	Urban Southeast	Black	AVID Theater Scholarship
Chris	17	12 <sup>th</sup>	3.5	Urban Southeast	Black Bi-racial	Athlete Football Scholarship
Devon	16	11 <sup>th</sup>	3.5	Urban Southeast	Black	6'2 - Art major

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusions and Implications

This chapter includes the conclusions and implications of this study about the lived school experiences of nine academically high achieving Black male high school students in an urban school district. Previous research focusing on the underachievement of Black males has created the perception that only a few, if any, Black males are performing well in urban high schools. Most Black males in urban schools never have a chance to be thought of as potentially bright or capable of achieving academic success (Swanson et al., 2003).

In this narrative inquiry these students provided rich data on their perspectives of how they have successfully navigated through the educational system and achieved academic success. Narrative inquiry allowed me to explore my participants' thinking beyond their external behaviors and create meaning from their school experiences. Each story expressed events, emotions, thoughts, and interpretations unique to the individual lived experience (Chase, 2005). As a researcher, it was an honor and a privilege to spend time with these young men and seek answers to my research questions.

Overall, the Black males' in this study viewed their high school experiences positively and believed that education plays a key role in their pursuit of upward economic mobility. The students exhibited a strong belief in who they were, what they wanted to achieve, and what direction they needed to take in order to realize their goals. The participants were highly motivated and driven to succeed in school because they recognized the attainment of their high school diploma as a prelude to a college degree. Getting good grades was important to these Black males because they understood doing so increased their chances for scholarships to

college. They displayed enthusiasm, pride, commitment and self discipline. The students were intrinsically motivated and willing to do what it took to excel academically.

The findings from this study supports previous research completed by Noguera, (2001, 2003) which concluded that most Black male students are motivated to perform well academically because of their aspirations and dreams to be successful. All nine of the participants acknowledged that they faced some personal challenges and racial stereotypes. However they demonstrated resilience and refused to allow those constraints to keep them from achieving academic success.

### **Discussion of Findings**

There were a number of themes that emerged during the data analysis that provided insight into the narratives of the nine academically high achieving Black male students. The primary themes from comparing the narratives were (a) they have a high sense of self-efficacy, (b) they are resilient, (c) they believe that high school is not the end, but a step to higher education, (d) they have positive relationships with peers and teachers, (e), they participate in the AVID Program, (f) they are involved in extracurricular activities and (g) they have high expectations from family. The themes will be discussed below followed by a brief summary of the theoretical framework that supports the findings.

#### **High Sense of Self-Efficacy**

According to Bandura (1995), self-efficacy is a person's belief in his ability to succeed in specific situations. It is a strong predictor of achievement. Self-efficacy is a personal judgment about one's ability to perform a task. As a result, self-efficacy beliefs determine the level of accomplishments a person can attain. Bandura asserted that there are four primary sources that

influence self efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and emotional/physical reactions.

Mastery experiences are identified as the most effective way of creating a strong sense of efficacy in students (Bandura, 1994, 1995). When a person experiences success, it will strengthen his confidence and increases his self-efficacy. A vicarious experience is when an individual observes or witnesses another individual successfully completing a task. This creates confidence in the observer that they too can be successful with completing a task. Social persuasion is the conscious and deliberate attempt of one party to influence the behavior of another party to accomplish a goal. Bandura posits that people can be persuaded to believe they have the skills and capabilities to master a given task and succeed. Emotional and physical reactions also influence self-efficacy. Stress levels, moods, and physical reactions can impact how a person feels about their capabilities in a situation. In order to increase self-efficacy, a person must learn how to minimize their stress level when facing challenging tasks.

The level of self-efficacy observed in all nine students in this study was high. I found that these young men had a strong belief not only within themselves, but also in their academic abilities. Self-efficacy plays an important role in academic self motivation (Zimmerman, Bandura & Martinez-Pons, 1992). In the school context, students with high sense of self-efficacy tend to perform well.

Simon, a senior at Urban Northeast, clearly demonstrates how all four of Bandura's primary forces of self-efficacy have influenced his academic achievement. Simon demonstrated Bandura's mastery experience, which is the most effective way of creating a strong sense of efficacy. At the end of his freshmen year, Simon was not pleased with his grades, so he decided he needed to focus more on his academics to improve his GPA because he had plans for college

and he knew there were only three years left for high school. Simon enrolled in a couple of advanced placement classes his sophomore year and received A's. By the end of the spring semester, his cumulative grade point average was raised to a 3.5. This gave him the confidence to enroll in more advanced placement classes for his junior year, and he enrolled in four classes. He finished his junior year with a cumulative GPA of 3.8. Experiencing success can add to one's confidence and abilities. Simon noted in the narrative, "I feel good about my grades and my academics are on point. I have goals that I'm trying to achieve." For vicarious experience, Simon credits his Mother for instilling in him the drive and motivation he has to succeed. He witnessed his Mother go through domestic abuse and fight to stay in this country so they could have a better life. Simon is proud that his Mother went back to school to get an associate's degree and is currently working on her bachelors for nursing. As Simon noted in his narrative about his mother, "She says that I'm the one that motivates her but she is the one that gives me the extra motivation because she just keeps going." When it came to social persuasion, Simon discussed on several occasions about the high expectations and standards his mother always had for him. According to Simon, his mother's expectations are one of the things that motivate him to excel in school. As it concerned emotional/physical reaction, Simon is a religious person with a strong belief in faith. Whenever he is faced with a challenging situation, he turns to his religion to help reduce some of the stress and anxiety he may be experiencing. Simon feels that his faith in God is what helps him get through tough situations.

High efficacy students' perceive themselves as competent to regulate their learning, so, in turn, they are able to set challenging personal goals. Kevin, a junior at Urban Northeast, set goals for his academic achievements beyond high school the summer before he enrolled as a freshman. Kevin's goal was to have his grandmother, to whom he was very close, see him

receive his high school diploma and then get a letter in the mail announcing his acceptance into Harvard University. Unfortunately, Kevin's grandmother passed away right before he started high school. Kevin admitted it was a hard transition but her death actually made him want to work even harder in school. Students with high self-efficacy are willing to take action when barriers and obstacles are presented (Bandura, 1994). Kevin's strong sense of self efficacy was expressed by focusing on achieving his goals to honor his grandmother who passed away. Additionally, the more efficacious a student feels, the more resistant they will be to the impact of failing a course or getting a lower grade than they would usually get (Bandura, 1986). For example, just about all of the participants struggled the first semester of their freshmen year in high school, however, by their sophomore year, they were able to get back on track and overcome the academic setback.

### **Resiliency**

Resiliency empowers Black males to succeed despite the adversity they may face during their high school experience. High achieving Black males who are resilient to the negative stereotyping in school, defy expectations by learning to be well-adapted individuals (Grantham, 2004). Resilient students surround themselves with both positive peers and adults interactions and have a positive sense of self (Grantham, 2004). Resilient students often have at least one adult in their lives who is concerned about their education.

The participants in this study all had the tools needed to face their challenges: a strong sense of self-efficacy; a positive attitude; and a good support system. The data revealed that these students believed their academic achievement came from working hard and staying focused and not giving in to the personal setbacks or failures they may have experienced along the way. They were self-starting and willing to be held accountable for their outcomes. These students

were motivated by the desire to succeed. Their stories demonstrated empowerment and perseverance and they spoke of positive plans for the future. They also had a strong support system that set high expectations for them to achieve. Besides a caring and supportive family, their teachers and peers at school played a vital role in the resiliency of these students. Winfield (1994) speculated that resilient students have an internal locus of control, and are inherently motivated and driven which enables them to succeed despite negative circumstances.

Darryl, who is biracial, shared how he was stereotyped by the students and teachers when he enrolled in the IB program at another high school. He was the only Black male in his grade level in the program. Darryl described how he sometimes likes to wear his pants a little saggy and put an earring in his ear just for style. However, he always felt judged because he did not dress preppy like the other kids in the program. Darryl felt like he was not seen as an individual with high intellectual abilities, but instead they saw him as “some Black kid.” Darryl decided to transfer back to Urban Northeast the following semester where he felt more accepted and excel in his academics again. He did acknowledge in his narrative that he should have challenged the thinking of the students and teachers in the IB program when the negative judgments were made instead of allowing it to affect his academic ability.

Derrick, a junior at Urban Northeast, also faced adverse circumstances that could have prevented him from excelling in school, but instead, this young man viewed his situation as “just a part of life” and he believes “life’s problems and experiences only makes you stronger.” During his sophomore year, Derrick’s mother became ill, and could no longer take care of herself or her son. His relationship with his mother was already fragile before this happened. So Derrick and his mother had to relocate to Gilmer to live with his grandparents. Derrick admitted this was a difficult transition for him because he had to adjust to a new school, new friends, new

home, new city, and his mother's deteriorating health. His biggest adjustment was the social aspect because he described himself as a "loner" and "sad." When he went through middle school he had to endure name calling and teasing so he mostly kept to himself. The teachers just thought he was depressed. But he just thought the kids were too rowdy and he didn't want to be a part of "those people." Derrick credits his grandparents' guidance for helping him persevere all these years because they have always believed in him and advocated for him when it came to his education.

Brian, who is the oldest of his five siblings, has shouldered the responsibility of helping to take care of them because his mother was working long hours and his father was never around. Along with his involvement in school activities and community service work, Brian also works a part time job. Brian stated that he sometimes feel like a "third parent" but he feels after all the sacrifices his mother made for him, it is important to be there for his family and be a role model for his siblings.

### **High School is Not the End, but a Step to Higher Education**

Each of the nine participants had aspirations to obtain a college education after high school and pursue a meaningful career that will provide adequately for them and their families. They believed that thriving in high school also sets a good foundation for later on in life.

To these young men, a college education represents economic mobility and success; a guaranteed future. Lionel and Kevin expressed a desire to return after college and give back to their communities. Lionel's goal is to volunteer as an adult for some of the organizations he has been involved in because he observed on many occasions the lack of Black male role models. Kevin's goal is to return once he receives his medical degree and open up a health clinic in the Black community. After spending some time with the participants and reading their stories, it is

evident that these young men are hardworking and incredibly goal driven. They have a desire to achieve great things beyond high school.

Brian seemed to minimize the high school diploma and put more emphasis on his plans of obtaining the college degree. Brian applied to four different colleges around the state but ultimately he decided to accept the theater scholarship that was offered to him by a community college and get his general education courses out of the way. After two years, Brian plans on transferring to a 4 year university to get his bachelor's degree. His goal is to return to his home town and teach Theater and Drama at the current school he will be graduating from.

Lionel, a junior and is very active in school and the community, feels that everything one does in high school is important because extracurricular activities look good on college applications and once one graduates, those experiences can never be relived. Just like most of the other participants, in Lionel's family going to college was something that was always expected. High school is just a means to get there. Going to Kansas State University is also another expectation since most of his family members are alumni. Lionel grew up going to a lot of Kansas State University functions so he is more than ready to follow in the footsteps of his family members. His goal is to become an accountant and return to Gilmer to help manage the family business and give back to the community.

Chris, a student athlete, is looking forward to starting college a semester early at Missouri State University on a football scholarship. Chris plans on majoring in sports science. His ultimate goal is to become an entrepreneur after getting his degree and open up a sports medicine clinic. Chris believes that high school is the prep work for any type of future regardless if you plan on pursuing higher education or not. Chris perceives that his academic achievement in high

school will lead to a positive future which includes a college degree, a lucrative career, and taking care of his family.

Evan has dreams beyond high school also. He plans on attending Kansas State University, University of Kansas, or Wichita State University and pursuing a career in the medical field. Although he is not sure exactly which career in the medical field, he does know that a medical career is something that will make him happy because he loves science and math. Evan believes that high school is preparing him for college. He also believes that excelling in high school will pay off in the long run when he starts applying for scholarships to college.

### **Relationships**

The study participants managed to build a network of positive relationships within the school environment. They purposely surrounded themselves with positive peers who supported their achievements and also set future goals for themselves. They formed and maintained positive relationships with teachers and other faculty members at the school because those relationships played an important role in the participants' lives as they excelled in their academics.

**Surround themselves with positive peers.** The students at both schools perceived themselves in positive peer relationships which contributed to their academic success. The participants purposely surrounded themselves with positive peers who supported them, encouraged them, and who had similar goals. The students believed that their relationships with peers, who at least valued earning their high school diploma, were committed to staying out of trouble and avoiding any negative influences that may impede their educational goals. For most of the participants, their peer relationships, regardless of race or ethnicity, appeared to be significant to their schooling experiences. These findings were consistent with Sullivan's (2002)

research that found positive peer relationships made the difference in the academic success of Black male students.

Darryl shared that he spends more time with his White friends than his Black friends because they have been in his AP classes the last 3 years and they have formed study groups together. Darryl admitted that some of his Black friends do not put a lot of effort into their academics and they are usually satisfied with a passing grade of “C” or “D.” However, Darryl feels that all of his Black friends respect him and do not consider him as “acting White” because he is excelling in school and spends most of the time with friends from his AP classes.

Kevin, who also has a diverse group of friends from football players to wrestlers, believes they all encourage each other to excel. He feels that his friends have certain strengths just like he has certain strengths and they can help each other. Kevin does not care if none of his friends are in his AP classes because he believes they still encourage each other no matter what classes they are taking. Kevin knows that the majority of his friends have aspirations to go to college and he knows they want him to succeed also. Kevin stated that the one thing he will never do is hang out with people who causes trouble.

Evan spends most of his time with his friends from his AVID elective class because they have been in the same class for the past 2 years. Evan noted in his narrative that he enjoyed being in his AVID elective class because there he was surrounded-by like minded individuals who were hard workers and goal oriented. Evan shared this in the narrative, “We support each other’s successes.”

**Good relationships with teachers.** Teachers played a vital role in the academic achievement of the participants. Despite a strong sense of self efficacy and motivation to succeed, Black males require validation from their teachers to succeed in advanced placement

classes (Rascoe and Atwater, 2005). Having a trusting and supportive relationship with their teachers seemed to be important to the students. Effective teachers, as perceived by Black adolescent males, inspire students by getting to know them and showing a personal interest in their academic achievement (Noguera, 2003). Black male students respond positively in school environments when they believe educators care and have high expectations. This will also help them overcome any academic challenges.

Consistent across the narratives, all nine participants spoke of at least one teacher who had a positive impact on their schooling experiences. Most of the participants felt that their teachers expected more from them and pushed them to succeed beyond their potential. Some of the students described their teachers as caring, setting high expectations, and having confidence in their academic abilities. Some of the participants also expressed that having their teachers trust made them feel valued and they were then willing to work harder to achieve a good grade for class.

Evan stated that he had good relationships with all of his teachers but he described the relationship he had with his AVID teacher as more like the role of a mentor. This particular teacher, according to Evan, has taught him that success in life is determined by the individual choices a person makes and not by the negative judgment of society. Evan also expressed his AVID teacher sets high expectations for him even though she is White.

Although Lionel spoke positively about the relationships he had with his teachers and how they pushed him to do his best, he did share the initial reactions of some teachers when he started his freshmen year. Lionel explained when he first started at Urban Northeast the teachers did not have high expectations of him and they were surprised when he began getting A's on his assignments. Lionel commented: "Now they know me and the type of grades I get, so they have

a different perspective of me.” Lionel was aware of how his teachers judged him based on the color of his skin but he has learned to adapt to the stereotypes and racist attitudes that still exist in the public school system.

Brian spoke about his 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher who gave him the nurturing he needed to turn his learning challenges into academic accomplishments. Brian struggled with reading his first 3 years of school and all the teachers would send him out of the room so they could continue with the class. However, Brian’s 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher refused to send him out of the classroom for not understanding. Instead, she took the time to help him catch up with the other students. Her philosophy was nobody in class would go on to the next lesson until everybody understood it. This was significant to Brian because to him it showed that she cared about his learning outcomes and his academic success.

Chris appreciated the relationships with his teachers because they noticed how hard he worked in class and most importantly, they supported him as an athlete as well as a scholar. He further explained how some of his teachers “acted like I was their son” and would get on him if he missed an assignment or got a bad grade. Chris felt the same way about his football coaches. He believed the coaches cared more about their academics because every Friday they would get a copy of the teams’ grades and if anyone had a “D” the coaches would make them sit out the following week of practice and study to bring that grade up. Chris believed the football coaches not only taught them about the sport but also about life.

### **High Expectations From Family**

The value of family support in a Black male’s educational experience can have a tremendous impact. It can be the driving force that pushes them to do their best. Previous research studies on the impact of parental influence for achievement of Black males found that

when parents encourage and show interest in their academic, the students excel (Tomlinson, Gould, Schroth & Jarvis, 2006; Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Goldsmith, 2004; Jordan & Cooper, 2002). While some studies focus on the “family unit” as being the key to the success of Black males excelling in school, others point to the mother as having the most influence (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Kunjufu, 2000).

Four of the participants in the study were products of a single parent upbringing which consisted of their mothers. One out of the four came to live with his grandparents at the age of 15. The other five participants grew up in a two-parent household, although two out of the five do not acknowledge their father’s presence. Historically, in the Black culture, the family always acknowledged the central role of the mother as the nurturer, and keeping the family together. She was always the core of the family unit that everyone revolved around. Most fathers worked outside of the home and would usually leave before the kids left for school and returned just in time for the family dinner hour.

Although four of the participants grew up in a non-traditional American household, this did not have any effect on their academic inspirations. As a matter of fact, the participants with single parent upbringings who would have been considered the most at risk received the same parental support and encouragement as the participants with two parent families. The participants developed a strong and close relationship with their mother’s. All nine of the participants shared that the value of getting an education was stressed in their households no matter what the circumstances were. The participants noted that at least one adult member in their household encouraged them to excel in school as far back as kindergarten. They were told to work hard, do their best, stay focused, and work toward their dreams. The students stated that this type of encouragement gave them the drive to succeed.

Most of participants shared that they did not feel pressured by the high expectations of their parent(s); instead, they welcomed it because it motivated them. The stories of these academically high achieving Black males clearly revealed that their parent(s), or grandparents influenced their academic achievement by stressing the importance of education, exhibiting faith in their abilities, setting high expectations, monitoring their progress, and making frequent contacts with the school.

Chris described how his mother made sure he was involved in every type of sport when he was younger because it kept him busy and out of trouble. His mother stressed education and extracurricular involvement. He stated that his mother would never let him quit anything he started and that is how he lives his life today. Chris's mother made sure all of his teachers had her email address and once a week she would check online to see if he was missing any assignments. Chris is also proud of his mother for raising him and all four of his siblings alone. He remembered when his mother had to quit school to support the family so was elated when she went back to school and eventually got her Master's degree. For Chris, his mother's return to school was another motivational factor for him to excel in school and college.

Although Devon's mom holds him to a high standard when it comes to school, he expressed frustration because she does not hold his older sister to the same high standard. Devon explained that if his sister has a "C" on her progress report, his mother tells her she can do better next time. However, if he has a "C" on his progress report, his mother acts as if that is the worst thing to happen to him. Devon did admit in his narrative that he and his sister have two different views on academic achievement because his sister would be satisfied with a "C" as a passing grade and he would not.

Brian shared how his mother has always had an important role in his education. He stated that she told him a long time ago that he needed a college education and a high school diploma was just a building block for that. Brian admires his mother because she had to drop out of high school to have him but she managed to go back and get her GED. Freeman (2005) asserted that parents without college degrees push their children to excel beyond what they have achieved. This encouragement positively influences first generation Black students to pursue higher education. Kevin, who shared the dream he had for his grandmother before she passed away, referred to his extended family that has also supported his academic achievements throughout the years.

### **Participation in AVID**

Five of the participants in this study were involved with the AVID program between the two schools and included one senior and four juniors. Their stories revealed how AVID has had a positive impact on their academic achievement. The participants expressed how AVID has helped them become more focused on their academics, more prepared for college, and more successful in school. The students spoke of a sense of belonging and feelings of a family atmosphere within the AVID classroom. The narratives portrayed unique relationships that were established with the AVID teachers, which some of the participants referred to as “mother/son roles. The students described the role of their AVID teachers as caring and nurturing. Not one student said anything negative about the AVID program and most of them acknowledged how AVID changed their overall attitudes about their education.

For the participants who were involved with the AVID program, AVID reinforced the value of an education and motivated them to not only take advanced placement courses and pursue college but to plan for the transition. They all expressed how AVID prepared them for

their future goals beyond high school. Some of these students even participated in AVID during middle school. Nelson (2007) posits that high school should not be the start of college preparation; it should begin in middle school.

Evan and Kevin have participated in the AVID program since middle school; something they are proud of and did not feel discouraged when they had to reapply for high school. Evan expressed that being a part of AVID has given him a sense of belonging and the confidence to pursue higher education and all of his other future goals. The AVID program created a family environment among teachers, students and tutors, which provides a strong social and academic support needed for school achievement.

Devon asserted that the AVID program pushed him to apply him-self more to the courses that challenged him because in college those same type of courses may be a part of the curriculum. Devon feels that AVID has taught him how to start thinking like a college student which has helped in preparing for the transition. Devon also expressed his appreciation for his AVID teacher. Here is what he shared in the narrative: “He cares about me and wants me to continue achieving. I think I’m pretty lucky to get that kind of support.”

The AVID program, according to the stories shared by the participants, reinforces the fact that young Black males need to have a college education if they want successful futures and this program will give them the support they need to excel in school and put them on track for college admissions.

### **Involvement in Extra-curricular Activities**

Despite their rigorous schedules, all of the participants used their time wisely by their involvement in school and other extra-curricular activities. During one of the focus group meetings, the students shared how their participation in activities “makes you get good grades”

because it is a school related activity and if his name shows up on the weekly “D” or “F” list, he cannot participate in that activity. McMillian and Reed (1993) posited that extracurricular activities in school promotes a student’s self confidence and belief in their ability to succeed. It also gives the student reasons to feel proud and get recognized for their accomplishments.

When the participants spoke about their extracurricular activities, some expressed how their busy schedule actually helped them learn time management skills while others stated that it helped them to stay engaged in school. The students noted that participating in these activities allows college admission recruiters to learn more about their long term commitments outside of school.

All of the AVID participants were required to complete community service work. Brian kept a busy schedule with both in and out of school. In addition to his involvement in some of the school clubs, he also held a couple of leadership positions. Most of Brian’s participation in school activities center on his college and career interest, which is performing arts. Brian believed that getting involved in extracurricular activities is good for making connections and networking. He feels that making these types of connections in high school could open up more opportunities that may benefit him in the future.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to shed light and understand how academically high achieving Black males manage to attain academic success when so many of their peers do not. In this section I will discuss my analysis of how the students were able to succeed in school which includes maintaining a healthy racial identity, possessing dominant cultural capital, living between the worlds of dominant and non dominant cultural capital and grappling with matters of “authenticity.” This data in this study also support what other studies on high achieving Black

males have revealed, although there were some commonalities across their stories, there is no monolithic profile for Black high achieving males in urban schools.

### **Healthy Racial Identity**

Racial identity has been defined as the degree to which race influences a person's self-concept and behavior (Cross, 1991; Tatum, 1997). In a society like the U.S. that emphasizes racial group membership, the development of racial identity takes place in some form in everyone, regardless of race (McGee & Martin, 2011). For a Black child, the integration of one's personal identity with one's racial identity into a group membership is a necessary and inevitable developmental task of growing up Black in White America (Watson & Protinsky, 1988).

The study participants maintained a healthy racial identity while enacting achievement oriented behaviors in school as they understood it. The students viewed themselves as role models for their racial group and did not feel pressured by their Black peers to reject their racial identity in order to excel in school. They did not associate achievement with "acting white." This presents a far different relationship between group identity and academic success than Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) theory of "the burden of acting white" which means students giving up their Black identity to achieve in school. These students had a strong sense of self and their intellectual abilities. They saw themselves as successful students. The students held definite aspirations for the future and believed that success is possible for anyone through hard work and perseverance. The participants believed their academic achievement will ultimately lead them to high paying jobs and a successful life in the future. The participants in this study were all keenly aware of the negative stereotypes and racial biases that still exist in educational settings and recognized how they could serve as barriers to their success. Foster (2005) described these type

of students as race conscious achievers. The students in my study were aware of the racial barriers that could prevent them from succeeding but they have adapted strategies or skills to overcome those barriers. For example, when Lionel, started high school he knew his chemistry and math teachers' initial response was not to expect him to do well. However, once he started getting high grades on assignments, they had a different perspective of him. Here is what he shared, "I think it is really sad that as Black students we have to prove our abilities whereas White students don't." A Black student with strong racial pride and sensitive to negative stereotypes about his or her racial group may take on a "prove them wrong" approach and excel in school where the stereotype exist (Carter, 2005). Black youth who are successful in school cannot disregard their racial-ethnic identity in negotiating and navigating their educational experiences (Wright, 2007). Thus, ethnic identity can relate to a meaning-making process that affords members of historically oppressed ethnic minority groups an opportunity to define their racial membership in such a way that academic success can be seen as valuable despite structural- and individual-level barriers (such as stigma and racial discrimination) to academic success (Harper, 2007).

When Black students enter into the public school system, they bring their own cultural identity and understanding which may not always be acknowledged by middle class ideologies. So young Black males therefore face many challenges unique to them as students in urban schools because of their social and cultural identity as being Black and attending school where the dominant cultural patterns such as speech and dress are deemed "normal" (Carter, 2005; Noguera, 2002). Students who enter school with dominant cultural capital are seen as having an advantage over the students who do not for several reasons. One is exposure to the dominant cultural capital may prepare a student to engage in higher level thinking via enrollment in

advanced level courses. Another is students who possess dominant cultural capital are more apt to be recognized by teachers as potential achievers. Finally, these students develop positive relationships with their teachers and administrators. Below I will provide more insight on how the study participants employed dominant cultural capital to achieve academic success in an educational system that is dictated by dominant White middle class ideologies.

### **Possession of Dominant Cultural Capital**

Some of the findings from this study are consistent with Prudence Carter's research on demonstrating how some Black males employ dominant and non dominant cultural capital in the educational context to achieve academic success. In this study, these students demonstrated more dominant cultural capital than non dominant cultural capital. The students in my study demonstrated their dominant cultural capital by taking the initiative to develop a network of positive relationships in and outside of school which included their peers, teachers, and other staff. For example, Brian received his performing arts scholarship through a relationship he established with a community college instructor who came to see a performance at the high school. Kevin shared how the majority of his friends had aspirations to go to college and how they encouraged and supported each other. Most of the interviews were scheduled right after lunch and all of the participants arrived on time and prepared. During the initial scheduling of the interviews, the participants promptly returned my phone calls and negotiated times that would not interfere with their classes. Each of the participants came to their interview sessions neatly dressed, articulate, polite, and prepared. These students chose to take advanced level classes in high school which required them to develop college level critical thinking and calculating skills. These students were knowledgeable about college admission requirements, scholarships, and college academic programs. Evan, Chris, and Darryl were members of the

National Honor Society at their schools. Lionel was a member of two elite national Black youth clubs because of his parents' affiliations of club memberships. The students were involved in extra-curricular activities and spoke about how they were able to network and use some of their volunteer work as references for jobs and college applications. As noted earlier, Brian and Devon were both passionate about the arts. Some of the participants expressed how the value of education was instilled in them at an early age while other participants did not take school seriously until middle or high school.

### **Living Between the Worlds of Dominant and Non dominant Cultural Capital**

Although the students' academic achievements and engagement in this study identified more closely with Carter's description of "cultural straddlers," it is difficult to place them in one specific category. These young Black males had to participate in multiple cultural environments which include family, school, peer groups, youth organizations, community and neighborhoods, and for some, the workplace. They utilized their dominant and non dominant cultural capital to successfully participate in these multiple environments. Darryl described the differences between his White peers and his Black peers who he hangs out with both in and outside of school. He described his Black peers as "disliking school" and his White peers as putting more effort into school because they have taken the AP classes together the last three years. Darryl stated that when he hangs out with his Black peers outside of school, they do not discuss "school stuff." Evan, Chris and Kevin also discussed how they interact differently with their diverse group of friends at school and in other settings. These students demonstrated how they possessed both dominant and non dominant cultural capital to navigate through various socio-cultural settings. They used different speech codes to effectively communicate with their friends. Carter (2005) refers to this as cultural codes or code switching.

Code switching is when a person temporarily changes his or her behavior such as language, dress, etc., to adjust to the norms of the person they are interacting with. High achieving Black males employ code switching in the school context without culturally assimilating (Gibson, 1988). The study participants were able to speak, think, and interact in the ways that were deemed appropriate in their school environment. The participants in this study showed that high achieving Black males do have the ability to be multicultural and move easily across cultural borders while performing well academically. The students learned how to simultaneously embrace their own ethnic identity and academically achieve.

### **Grappling with Matters of Authenticity**

Some of the participants avoided using the non dominant cultural capital to strengthen group alliance or connectedness with some of the Black students at the school they refer to as “ghetto.” For Black students, Carter (2003, 2005) posits that non dominant cultural capital codes are used to foster group membership or ethnic authenticity. Ethnic and racial groups create boundaries to distinguish between “authentic” members and “inauthentic” members. According to Peterson (1997), students, who frequently judge the legitimacy of group members, use the cultural codes or non dominant cultural capital to determine a member’s “authenticity.”

Authenticity of group membership seemed to be a slippery and complicated slope for the participants. For example, Darryl, who knew how to “walk the walk” and “talk the talk” believed that he had authentic membership as a Black male because of his style of dress on occasions. He stated that sometimes he may sag his pants a “little” and wear an earring in his ear. However, during the interview session he was neatly dressed. Brian represented the cultural straddlers, who knew how to navigate back and forth between their usage of dominant and non dominant cultural capital. Simon, Derrick and Lionel made a point of distancing themselves from Black

peers whom they viewed as “ghetto,” which meant they were rowdy and disruptive, sagged their pants, hair braided and skipped school. Other participants shared the same sentiment. To the participants, “ghetto” or “those people” affirm society’s negative stereotyping of young Black males. Neither did they see themselves as acting white, even though some of their peers levied that accusation toward them. It is significant to note that the charge of acting white did not come from their Black peers but from White peers. Expressions used by their White peers included pejorative terms such as “Oreo,” “nerd,” and “you’re the whitest Black person I ever met.”

When I asked Simon how he felt being called “Oreo,” his response was. “I don’t know how that makes me feel. I don’t want people thinking I’m acting fake because this is who I am. I can’t act hood like you see other Black people try to act.” Devon described how he played sports his freshmen year and tried to fit in with his teammates during lunch period but it was “awkward.” He realized that even though he is tall and slender, he does not like sports. He calls himself a “nerd.” The study participants rejected their Black peers’ cultural ways if they saw it did not meet their non dominant codes. In contrast, the study participants were also teased at times when their White peers accused them of acting white because of the dominant cultural codes they emulated. These types of statements did not offend the young men in the study because they had a strong sense of self and carefully calculated which cultural capital they would utilize as they lived between these two worlds.

### **Implications**

In spite of the dismal statistics and pervasive status of Black male underachievement and disengagement in urban schools, there are some who are achieving academically and are successful in school. Rather than give the usual expert stance on educational experiences of high achieving Black males, this study highlighted their perspectives on how they have achieved

academic success. This study offers hope to the Black males who are underachieving in the U.S. educational system. The findings of this study can contribute to the ongoing dialogue about the pervasive problem of Black males underachievement and disengagement in urban schools. As the lived school experiences of high achieving Black males were explored in this study, it is important that stakeholders listen to the participant voices and reframe from “reinventing the wheels” by developing new programs or implementing new initiatives; building new schools; change existing federal and state policies; or eradicate racism and stereotyping in school to address the problem. Noguera (2003) believes that if we want to improve the academic achievement of African American males we must recognize “that Black males are not merely passive victims but may also be active agents in their own failure” and “interventions designed to help them must take this into account” (p. 437). He further states that educators must “actively engage Black males and their families in taking responsibility to improve their circumstances” (p. 437).

Too often, policymakers, school administrators and other stakeholders take empirical analysis for granted and think they know the best possible solutions based on their own experiences. However, what is loud and clear in this study are voices of nine academically high achieving Black males in urban schools who very candidly, shed light on how they managed to successfully navigate through the educational system and achieve academic success. Noguera (2003) suggests that the best way to improve the academic achievement of Black males is to recognize that they cannot just be passive victims but they must be actively involved in interventions. He further stated that the family must be actively engaged in taking responsibility to improve the situation also.

Indeed, this study supported Carter's (2005) dominant and non dominant cultural capital because the participants understood how to incorporate the skills necessary to participate successfully in multiple environments between school, home and community, without compromising their own cultural values. Although these young men were conscious of the negative stereotyping and low expectations from some teachers, they maintained a healthy racial identity and high self-efficacy. It is suggested that educators, administrators, and other stakeholders take heed to what was revealed from the narratives of this study and begin building on to what the student consistently noted; a) positive relationships: b) AVID: c) extracurricular activities. By utilizing some of the same strategies as the students in this study, the underachieving Black males in urban schools may have the opportunity to maximize their potential and attain academic achievement.

### **Develop a School Culture of Nurturing Relationships and High Expectations**

Croninger and Lee (2001) suggest one of the reason Black males students are not successful in high school is because of the lack of support they receive from teachers and administrators. The study participants consistently acknowledged the positive relationships they had with their teachers, peers, and other school faculty. Teachers impact student learning (Lewis and Kim, 2008). The students indicated that they respond well in school when the teachers demonstrate an interest in their learning by setting high expectations and encouraging them to achieve. These students created a supportive networking community at their school. The narratives revealed the teachers being supportive and caring, believing in the students' academic abilities, and pushing them to succeed.

Urban schools need more teachers like the ones the study participants described to help create a culture of trust and mutual respect. Some of the participants described their

relationships with teachers as “motherly like.” That is a powerful statement. A teacher’s misconceptions and low expectations have been shown to reduce the motivation of Black males in school (Harry & Anderson, 1994). Educators need formal training to increase their knowledge on the experiences Black males have in the public school system. Educators who can connect with Black males and serve as role models can make a positive impact on the school their school experiences. In the school context, Zimmerman (2000) postulates that adults who provide encouragement and serve as role models may increase a student’s self-efficacy.

Developing a positive school culture also sets the tone for maintaining a healthy racial identity for some Black males in the urban school settings. Racial identity plays a significant role in student achievement for Black students. In order for Black males to excel, they need a positive school culture where they can have a strong sense of self and be comfortable with their identity. When Black males feel more connected to their environment, they tend to have higher levels of racial identity (Munford, 1994). It is important for Black males to surround themselves with like minded peers who share common values and goals. One suggestion is to create more peer mentoring programs in urban schools that involve high achieving Black males serving as mentors to other Black males. Sullivan (2002) suggests that positive peer relationships impact the academic success of Black male students. Programs specifically designed to help improve Black males self efficacy could be beneficial for school educators. In an earlier study completed by Oyserman et al. (1995) with minority students, they found that students with a positive feeling about their racial identity and a sense of connectedness to a group provides them with meaning and purpose and promotes school success.

## **Implement AVID Model in Regular Curriculum**

Five out of the nine participants were involved in the AVID program. Data from this study revealed how AVID has had a positive impact on the academic achievement of the students. Participants expressed how AVID has helped them become more focused on their academics, better prepared for college, and more successful in school. The AVID participants also took advanced level courses that prepared them for college and they had extensive knowledge of the college admissions processes including financial aid. The students spoke of a sense of belonging and feelings of a family atmosphere within the AVID classroom. In the AVID program the students did not allude to negative stereotyping, educational racism, or low teacher expectations.

The AVID elective teacher serves as a role model and builds meaningful relationships with the students through trust and respect. They encourage the students on their road to success. Smith (2005) posits this is critical for Black student achievement. The students' spoke of their AVID teachers as mentors and role models, adults in the school who would have high expectations for them and always pushed them to reach their potential. Research suggests that when teachers hold high expectations for students that are marginalized, their school experiences and learning improves (Ferguson, 2004). School districts should focus on expanding more programs like AVID that value individual diversity; that helps students resist stereotype threats to classroom learning and raise the academic expectations for Black students. These young men noted how instead of being discouraged from taking AP courses by their counselors they were encouraged to take the courses through the AVID program with additional support. Building leadership should expand some of the required AVID teacher training to all teachers who work with minority students. AVID reinforced the value of an education and motivated the high

achievers to not only take advanced placement courses and pursue college but to plan for the transition between high school and college.

### **Make Extra Curricular Activities a Requirement**

McMillian and Reed (1993) posited that extracurricular activities in school promote a student's self confidence and belief in their ability to succeed. It also gives the student reasons to feel proud and get recognized for their accomplishments. Student participation in extracurricular activities increases self esteem. When students participate in activities outside of the classroom, they learn time management and organization skills. Involvement in extracurricular activities also helps students stay engaged in school. Students have opportunities to establish relationships outside the school context and gain experiences that may not have had otherwise.

Once again, let us take a look at another obvious benefit that the study participants noted in their narratives, dominant cultural capital. If school would consider building partnerships with more community organizations and businesses, they could expand extracurricular activities and school engagement for Black males. There are several organizations within the Black community in Gilmer Town that provides mentoring for young Black males in school. The leaders in some of these Black organizations possess both dominant and non dominant cultural capital and can demonstrate how to be adept and move through the various cultural settings as an adult and have a successful life. These role models and mentors are what Carter (2005) calls "multicultural navigators." Multicultural navigators possess some of the appeal like the hip hop stars, but not the fame. Multicultural navigators are successful Black adults who serve as mentors and role models to Black youth by keeping them invested in the dream of upward mobility and teach them how to maintain their social and cultural identity.

## **Personal Reflections**

When I first began this research, I had to acknowledge my own perceptions on the pervasive trend of Black males underachievement in urban schools. My personal beliefs and biases regarding negative stereotyping some Black families had to endure from White educators teaching their Black sons was greatly influenced from my own past experiences. As noted earlier, I have raised a high achieving Black male who graduated from an urban high school and I have always instilled in him the value of an education. As a single parent, my top priority was making sure my son received a good educational foundation that would prepare him for college. I was actively involved in all of his school activities and considered myself his educational advocate. I created an environment in the home where expectations were high, academic achievement was always emphasized and valued, and accomplishments were cherished. Initially, when my son started school, I faced some of the same barriers Black parents are dealing with today from White urban educators who fail to encourage and engage Black students talents and intellectual capabilities.

I allowed these students to become the experts and authors of their stories and I became the co-author. The students were comfortable and opened up because someone cared about their experiences and they believed I would have some understanding of their world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As I listened to their stories I learned that these young men are not only aware of the inequities and social injustices in school but they have learned how to overcome and excel in their academics. They utilize their mind, strength and courage to endure and persevere. They recognize that their peers who underachieve may face some of the same barriers they have faced but they don't waste time blaming, instead they pay it forward and try to set an example for their Black male peers.

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## **Appendix**

## Appendix A



Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership, Educational and School Psychology  
Campus Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142

### Parent Consent Form for a Minor Child

Your child is invited to participate in a study that explores the lived experiences of academically high achieving Black males in an urban secondary school district. I am conducting this study as part of the requirements for completing my doctoral dissertation research for the Wichita State University Educational Leadership program. The purpose of the study is to understand how some Black males in urban secondary schools manage to achieve academic success when others do not. I am a past instructor at Wichita State University and have worked as an intern graduate student in the Wichita Public Schools, USD 259, in Parent and Community Support.

Approximately 8 students from two of the seven comprehensive high schools are expected to participate in this study. There will be one interview that will take about 45-60 minutes and possibly a follow up interview session with each individual that may last from 30-45 minutes. Since it will be such a small sample, there will be 1 group discussion that will be approximately 60 minutes. All interviews and group discussion sessions will be conducted at the students schools at an agreed upon time that is convenient for each participant and does not interfere with class time. With permission, all sessions will be audio recorded so an accurate transcript of the conversations can be created. This will allow for accurate examination of responses. Only my advisor and me will have access to the recordings and transcripts.

Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because of his academic achievement and a Black male student attending Heights or Southeast High School. Your child's participation in this study will be kept confidential. Your child is invited to be open in his responses, which might make him feel vulnerable during the study. To minimize these feelings, any identifiable information will be removed from the transcripts.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect your family's future relations with Wichita State University or Wichita Public Schools. If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw your child from the study at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions about this research project, you can contact me at: Yelando Wilcoxson, 4907 E. Arlene Street, Wichita, KS 67220, phone – 316-371-2548, or email at [yelando.wilcoxson@wichita.edu](mailto:yelando.wilcoxson@wichita.edu). You are also free to contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Jean Patterson. She can be reached at: Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership,

Educational and School Psychology, 1845 Fairmount, Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142, phone – 316-978-6392, or email at [jean.patterson@wichita.edu](mailto:jean.patterson@wichita.edu) If you have questions pertaining to your child’s rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, or by phone at 316-978-3285.

You are under no obligation to allow your child to participate in this study. Your signature indicates you have read the information provided and have voluntarily decided to allow your child to participate in this study. Your child may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Thank you for assisting us in this important study.

Sincerely,

Yelando Wilcoxson  
Wichita State Doctoral Student

Please keep a copy of this consent form.

I agree to allow my child to participate in this study as outlined above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of student**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Parent/Guardian Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Witness Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**



Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership, Educational and School Psychology  
Campus Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142

### Student Assent

I have been informed that my parent(s) have given permission for me to participate, if I want to, in a study concerning the experiences of academically high achieving Black males in an urban secondary school district. My participation in this project is voluntary and I have been told that I may stop my participation in this study at any time. If I choose not to participate, it will not affect my grade in any way.

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Student Signature

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Date



Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership, Educational and School Psychology  
Campus Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142

### **Consent Form**

**Purpose:** You are invited to participate in a study of the experiences of academically high achieving Black male high school students in an urban school district. I want to understand on how some Black males in urban schools achieve academic success when others do not.

**Participant Selection:** You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a high achieving Black male who is a junior or senior, has taken advanced level courses in high school, has a GPA of 3.3 and above, and ranks at the top of your class. Approximately 6-8 high achieving Black males will be invited to participate in the study.

**Explanation of Procedures:** If you agree to volunteer for this study, your participation will consist of 1-2 interviews that will last approximately 45-60 minutes each, and a 45-minute group discussion with the other study participants at your school at times that are convenient for you and approved by school personnel. At the interviews, you will be asked to talk about your experiences as a high achieving Black male and how you have attained academic success when many of your peers have not. Based on the interview sessions regarding your school experiences, you will have the opportunity to ask your peers questions in a group discussion. With your permission, the interviews and discussion group will be digitally recorded.

**Discomfort/Risks:** During the interviews, you will be encouraged to be open in your responses. As the researcher, I will keep all responses confidential. If at any time you experience distress related to the study, please let me know and we can stop the interview immediately. All participation is voluntary. There are no anticipated risks to you for participating in this study.

**Benefits:** Your experiences and perspectives may have tremendous value to understanding how Black males are able to achieve academic success in urban public schools.

**Confidentiality:** Any information obtained in this study in which you can be identified will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Because I believe what I learn from the study will benefit others, I plan to present the results of this research at national conferences and publish it in scholarly journals. No names will be used in any document produced from this study.

**Refusal/Withdrawal:** Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University and/or

Wichita Public Schools. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

**Contact:** If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me, **Yelando Wilcoxson, 316-371-2548 (cell) and [yelando.wilcoxson@wichita.edu](mailto:yelando.wilcoxson@wichita.edu)** or my advisor, **Dr. Jean Patterson at 316-978-6392 and [jean.patterson@wichita.edu](mailto:jean.patterson@wichita.edu)**. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, and telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have voluntarily decided to participate.

Please keep a copy of this consent form.

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Signature of Subject	Date
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Signature of Witness	Date
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## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your childhood growing up.

Probes: Tell me about your family life.

- Where did you grow up?
- Who lives in your family's household?
- What schools did you attend?
- What was your experiences like in the schools you attended?
- How much education does your parents or guardians have.

2. How would you describe your experiences in high school?

- What do you like most about your school?
- What do you like least about school?
- What do you see as your biggest challenge in school?
- What motivates you to do well in school?
- To what do you attribute your success in school?
- Tell me about any extra-curricular activities you have participated in.
- Describe your relationships with your teachers?
- How do your teachers respond when you do well on tests or assignments?
- How do your teachers respond when you don't do well in school?
- Describe the peers you interact with the most at school?

3. You are a part of this study because you are high achieving, what does that mean to you?

- How do you feel when you do well in school?
- How important is it to do well in school?

4. How do your friends feel about school? About getting good grades? Do they get good grades?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding your high school experiences and academic achievement?

### Group Discussion Questions

1. Based on the interview sessions we have had regarding your school experiences, what questions do you have for your peers?
2. How does being a Black male affect your school experience?
  - How did that affect your behavior?
3. What has been some of your biggest successes?
4. What advice would you give to school age Black males on how to be successful in school?

## Appendix C

Table 1

Racial Identity Development Models

Model Name	Author(s)	Stages
Nigrescence	William Cross (1991)	<p>African Americans progress through a series of stages to develop their racial identity. The final stage has a positive impact on academic achievement.</p> <p>Five Stages:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pre-encounter</li> <li>2. Encounter</li> <li>3. Immersion/Emersion</li> <li>4. Internalization</li> <li>5. Internalization-Commitment</li> </ol>
Afrocentricity	Molefi Kete Asante (1988)	<p>Focuses on African values and perspectives. Shifts the lens from viewing the world from a whiteness perspective to a Afrocentric perspective.</p> <p>Five Levels of Awareness:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Skin Recognition</li> <li>2. Environmental Recognition</li> <li>3. Personality Awareness</li> <li>4. Interest-Concern</li> <li>5. Afrocentric Concern</li> </ol>
Multidimensional Model of Race Identity (MMRI)	Robert Sellers (1998)	<p>Four Components of Racial Self</p> <p>Concept:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Racial Centrality</li> <li>2. Racial Salience</li> <li>3. Public Regard</li> <li>4. Private Regard</li> </ol>

