High Performing African American Students: Defying the Achievement Gap

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ABSTRACT

The achievement gap is commonly associated with high poverty urban schools, however, in suburban, middle class America, the achievement gap still manifests itself (Ogbu, 2003). Commonly referred to as an excellence gap, this gap is the discrepancy between high performing African American students and their peers (Rambo-Hernandez et al., 2019). However, there are high performing African American students who achieve success in schools.

This mixed methods study explored the lived experiences of high performing African American students in a suburban school. The two-part study included a survey with quantitative questions, Growth Mindset scale, and Grit scale, as well as qualitative interviews. There were 18 participants for the survey and 10 participants for the semi-structured interviews. The findings identified challenges for high performing African American students including isolation, microaggressions, curriculum, representation, recommendations, and competition. To combat these challenges, high performing African American students identified family, friends, engagement in school, and the ability to code switch as personal factors in their academic success, while school factors for success included the school environment, supportive staff, relationships, and extracurricular activities.

This study provides a counternarrative to the underperforming African American students in public schools. By studying high performing African American students in schools, school leaders can focus their efforts to create a school environment where all students succeed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I reflect on my dissertation journey, I realize how much my life has changed in the last five years. I began this journey with excitement and anticipation for reaching a lifelong goal of mine. However, a cancer diagnosis just two months after beginning doctoral classes provided a temporary roadblock for me. After taking a semester off for my surgery, I proceeded on this journey while continuing cancer treatment. I remember telling my mother, "If I don't go back now, I will never finish." The road to the finish line took longer than anticipated, but I am glad that I persevered. I am grateful to all of the support I received during these past five years.

To my parents, you were the inspiration for me to achieve my doctoral degree. As immigrants to this country, you valued education and worked tirelessly to ensure that all five of your children had the educational opportunities that you did not have. Through your example, you taught all of your children about grit, determination, and hard work. This degree is dedicated to you.

To my children, Sam and June, you were my motivation to finish. The most important title in my life is mom. I wanted to show you that despite any roadblocks, you are capable of achieving great things. Watching you excel in school and life is one of my greatest joys.

To my husband, John, you are my rock. I could not have completed this program without your love and support. You were the constant these past five years. In sickness and in health, you always provided encouragement and understanding. Your unwavering belief in me was the guiding force that I needed.

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Finally, to the high performing African American students, thank you for sharing your experience with me. I am in awe of you. My hope is that this work will make schools a more welcoming place for all students.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Suburban public high schools are predominately institutions with high rates of academic success as measured by graduation rates and college entrance rates (National Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). These college preparatory high schools are characterized by a multitude of Advanced Placement (AP), College Credit Plus (CCP), and Honors courses. However, when taking a closer look at these high performing schools and advance coursework, one notices a clear divide within the racial makeup of the students. Typically, the advanced courses consist of a majority of White and Asian students with a relatively small number of African American students (Sampson et al., 2019; Scott, 2012).

The typical achievement gap between African American students and their White and Asian peers is well documented and researched at the minimum proficiency level (Watson & Wiggan, 2016). The achievement gap is commonly associated with high poverty urban schools; however, in suburban, middle class America, the achievement gap still manifests itself (Ogbu, 2003). Commonly referred to as an excellence gap, this gap is the discrepancy between high performing African American students and their peers (Rambo-Hernandez et al., 2019). The challenge for suburban high schools is to narrow or close this excellence gap.

Statement of Problem

Much of the research surrounding the performance of African American students highlights the persistent, well-documented achievement gap. In 1966, the Coleman Report first documented the achievement differences between Black and White students in public schools. John Coleman, a John Hopkins social scientist, embarked on one of the largest social science surveys of the time (National Center of Education Statistics, 1966). The report revealed that

average Black 12th grade students in the rural South had similar achievement levels as White 7th grade students in the urban Northeast (National Center of Education Statistics, 1966). Currently, the National Assessment of Educational Progress measures the achievement of students and the gaps between Black and White students (National Center of Education Statistics, n.d.). The achievement gap narrative is a deficit lens approach to examining the academic achievement of African American students (Perry et al., 2004).

High performing African American students do not fit the typical achievement gap narrative that is commonly found in research. While examining the literature on high performing African American students, themes of racial identity, growth mindset and grit appear. High performing African American students demonstrate a strong sense of racial identity (Leath et al., 2019) and tend to embrace a growth mindset theory of intelligence (Harpalani, 2017). For African American students in particular, grit is a predictor in college success (Buzzetto-Hollywood & Mitchell, 2019; Strayhorn, 2014). In this study, the experiences of high performing African American students were examined through these theoretical frameworks.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this mixed method case study was to explore the lived school experiences of high performing African American students as well as their self-assessment of racial identity, growth mindset, and grit. The study sought to understand the barriers and challenges that high performing African American students face in a suburban high school environment as well as the self-identified strategies for success in navigating the school environment. School leaders could utilize the results of this study to understand the experiences of high performing African American students in order to create a supportive environment for African American students.

Research Questions

Research questions were generated from themes of the literature on racial identity, growth mindset, and grit (Duckworth, 2016; Dweck, 2016; Tatum, 2017). Four research questions served as the foundation of this research study to examine the achievement of high performing African American students and their perceptions regarding their educational experience. The following research questions related to high performing African American students were examined in this study:

1. How do high performing African American students describe lived experiences in a suburban high school?
2. What school factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success?
3. What personal factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success?
4. How do high performing African American students score themselves on the Growth Mindset and Grit scales?

Overview of Methodology

The mixed methods design with AB format was utilized to explore high performing African American students' lived experiences, school, and personal factors impacting academic achievement. For Part A, a survey was distributed to high performing African American graduates utilizing Survey Monkey. The survey consisted of demographic questions, racial identity questions, a Growth Mindset scale, and a Grit scale and were generated from themes of the literature on racial identity, growth mindset, and grit (Duckworth, 2016; Dweck, 2016; Tatum, 2017). Convenience and snowball sampling were utilized to distribute the survey.

Descriptive statistics were applied to the survey results. The measures of central tendency, mean, median, and mode, were utilized on the demographic questions. The Growth Mindset scale and Grit scale were scored according to the established protocols.

Participants from the survey were invited to be considered for Part B, the semi-structured interviews. Ten participants were elected to participate in the semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview questions were designed to explore the K-12 experiences of ten high-performing African American college students in search of common themes of high student achievement and high student engagement. The interview questions were reviewed by a panel of educators. The focus of the semi-structured interviews was to allow the participants to provide rich, detailed personal accounts of their lived experiences in a suburban high school. After the interviews, member checks were conducted with the participants to ensure accuracy in the transcription of their responses. Open and axial coding was utilized to analyze the semi-structured interviews from common themes.

Rational and Significance

The achievement gap is a persistent problem in schools today (Watson & Wiggan, 2016). The majority of current research is grounded in the deficit lens of the failures or shortcomings of African American students compared to their peers (Perry et al., 2004). In fact, it is quite easy to study and document what is not working for African American students in schools today. However, there are high performing African American students. Because the current body of research is limited, there is a need for further research in the areas of what is working for African American students. By studying high performing African American students, insights will be made to help benefit all African American students succeed in schools. School leaders can learn about the necessary supports to foster student achievement for all African American students.

Role of the Researcher

The role of a researcher is "the primary instrument of data collection and analysis" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). For Part B, the semi-structured interviews, I was the primary interviewer for the participants. I followed strict protocols of the interview process as outlined in Appendix A. In order to ensure accuracy, member checking was achieved by sending the transcripts of the interviews to the participants. I conducted the analysis of the interviews, Growth Mindset survey, and Grit scale through a process of triangulation. Analyzing data from multiple sources allowed me to identify themes from the interviews and survey responses.

Twenty-five years ago, I began my career as a teacher of high school mathematics. After spending just seven years in the classroom, I leaped into the leadership role both as assistant principal and principal at the middle school and elementary school level for the next fourteen years. Currently, I am the Director of Curriculum & Instruction.

My journey as an educator provided me with a unique perspective since I have worked with all levels of students throughout my career. In high school, I found that students already establish their paths as students and learners while middle school students experiment with their identities and abilities as learners. However, at the elementary level, I found the most critical juncture of students' educational careers. At the elementary level, all students tend to thrive at school in the early primary grades. But for some students, the excitement of learning begins to flicker in grades four and five. As an instructional leader of a school district, I have been passionate about helping students keep the joy of learning throughout their entire school careers.

As a building administrator of all age levels, I witnessed the achievement gap of African American students compared to their peers at all levels. However, there are African American students that are highly successful and engaged in school. These students do not match the

overwhelming statistics and stereotypes that are evident in the achievement gap. My research focus was to examine the student achievement and educational experiences for high-performing African American students in hopes of identifying common themes.

Subjectivity is the personal qualities of an investigator that affect the outcome of research by unconsciously communicating bias. When researching the achievement gap, I needed to assess my subjectivity as a researcher. First, I needed to explore and define my own bias and privilege as a white educator. Implicit bias exists for everyone. As a white female conducting research about African American students, my implicit bias could potentially influence my research. Due to my race, I have been a direct benefactor of white privilege. This privilege could affect my perspective during a research interview or observation. To counter the bias and privilege, I utilized research tools like an audit trail to monitor my research practices. As an outsider to the community of African American students and families, trust needed to be established. The research was not approached with a deficit lens, but with the lens of understanding the common themes for high performing African American students. Limitations that I faced in my research included being an outsider to the African American community as well as my implicit bias and white privilege throughout the research process.

The achievement gap is a persistent problem in all schools today. In order for schools to narrow or close the gap, it makes sense for schools to examine high performing African American students. These students have a wealth of information regarding how to be successful in school today. As a researcher, I wanted to hear the stories of these students and learn from them. As an educator committed to closing the achievement gap, it was imperative that I learn from our most successful students to help those not experiencing success in schools.

Researcher Assumptions

There was an assumption that the participants of this research study would answer questions about their school experience in a truthful and honest manner. I established rapport with the participants prior to beginning the interviews by engaging in polite, general conversation. Establishing a rapport with the participants prior to the interview helped establish trust so that the participants could comfortably share their educational experience. The second assumption was that high performing African American students would share experiences rooted in racial identity, growth mindset and grit.

Definition of Key Terminology

Achievement Gap

"An achievement gap occurs when one group of students outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant" (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2013, p. 210). The achievement gap often refers to the differences between African American students and their White and Asian peers (Pitre, 2014).

Excellence Gap

The excellence gap is characterized by the gap in achievement for high performing students. The excellence gap is "differences in academic performance at the 90th percentile of subgroup" (Rambo-Hernandez et al., 2019, p. 383).

Growth Mindset

Growth mindset, also known as incremental theory of intelligence, is where intelligence is perceived as something that can be increased (Dweck, 2016). High performing African American students tend to embrace the growth mindset theory of intelligence (Harpalani, 2017).

Grit

Grit is simply defined as passion and perseverance for long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016). Grit is a predictor for success in education: graduating from high school and obtaining an advanced college degree (Duckworth, 2016).

High Performing

High performing African American students are those students who graduate at the top of their class, consistently enroll in advanced placement, honors or gifted classes, and participate in leadership roles (Chambers et al., 2014). High performing African American students in suburban schools can be defined as students with a grade point average of 3.2 or higher (Andrews, 2009).

Racial Identity

All people have a racial identity that develops in predictable ways (Tatum, 2017). Racial identity is at the core of the adolescent experience where students desire a sense of belonging and affirmation (Tatum, 2017). High performing African American students will often challenge their racial identity because high achievement is associated with whiteness in society. There are five stages of racial identity: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment (Cross, 1991).

Stereotype Threat

Steele (2010) defines stereotype threat as a threat to a person where their performance will be judged by preexisting stereotypes. High performing African American students report instances of stereotype threat in their advanced classes.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study was designed to examine the lived experiences of high performing African American students in a suburban setting. In Chapter 2, a historical perspective of school policies and testing has been examined. Additionally, a focus has been included on gifted education and African American students that highlights the underrepresentation of African American students in advanced courses as well as excellence and opportunity gaps. Finally, the literature review examined the racial identity, opportunity costs, and stereotype threat for high performing African American students. In Chapter 3, the methodology of the mixed methods study design has been explained. This mixed methods case study utilized demographic surveys, Growth Mindset scales, Grit scales, and interviews to provide a comprehensive analysis of high performing African American students. The results of the study have been presented in Chapter 4, while findings of the study have been summarized in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A well-documented achievement gap exists between African American students and their peers (Watson & Wiggan, 2016). In 1966, the Coleman Report first documented the achievement differences between Black and White students in public schools. Currently, the National Assessment of Educational Progress measures the achievement of students and the gaps between Black and White students (National Center of Education Statistics, 1966). The achievement gap is often associated with underperforming students in underperforming urban schools (Fantuzzo et al., 2012). However, high performing suburban schools face different manifestations of the achievement gap also known as the excellence and opportunity gaps (Young et al., 2017). The excellence gap is the academic differences of high performing African American when compared with their peers, while the opportunity gap outlines the differences in opportunities in schools such as advanced and honors courses (Young et al., 2017).

The school environment in suburban America is grounded in White culture (Chambers et al., 2014). An overwhelming majority of teachers are White. According to the Department of Education Statistics (United States Department of Education, 2016), only 18 percent of educators are teachers of color, furthermore Black male teachers represent 2 percent. African American students must navigate the predominately White institutions. While navigating the school environment, racial opportunity costs of stereotype and stereotype threats lead to feelings of isolation (Perry et al., 2003; Wasserberg, 2017). High performing African American students exhibit bicultural abilities to code switch within the school environment (O'Connor et al., 2011). A strong network of community, family, teachers and peers help provide high performing

African American students with the support they need to succeed in schools (Corley et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2019; Wallace, 2013).

High performing African American students face barriers and challenges in schools, yet they still achieve success. This study examined the gaps in the literature regarding the barriers and challenges for high performing African American students as well as their skills and strategies that lead to success in school.

Theoretical Framework

High performing African American students must navigate successfully between both White and African American cultural norms. African American students face unique challenges in school due to the devaluing of their social identity as African Americans in society (Perry et al., 2003). To successfully navigate the cultural landscape of schools, high performing African American student need to establish a strong racial identity, growth mindset and resiliency (Duckworth, 2016; Dweck, 2016; Perry et al., 2003; Tatum, 2017;). The theoretical framework for this research as it relates to high performing African American students focused on the racial identity theory, the growth mindset theory, and grit theory.

Racial Identity Theory

Tatum examines how racial identity, shaped by one's interaction with others, manifests itself in schools (2017). Racial identity is at the core of the adolescent experience where students desire a sense of belonging and affirmation (Tatum, 2017). African American students move through five stages of racial identity development: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment (Cross, 1991).

Table 1

Cross Five Stages of Racial Identity Development (1991)

Pre-encounter	Encounter	Immersion/ Emersion	Internalization	Internalization-Commitment
Absorbed many beliefs and values of the dominant White culture, including the notion that "White is right" and "Black is wrong"; de-emphasis on one's racial group membership; largely unaware of race or racial implications	Forced by event or series of events to acknowledge the impact of racism in one's life and the reality that one cannot truly be White; forced to focus on identity as a member of a group targeted by racism	Simultaneous desire to surround oneself with visible symbols of one's racial identity and an active avoidance of symbols of whiteness; actively seek out opportunities to explore aspects of one's own history and culture with support of peers from one's own racial background	Secure in one's own sense of racial identity; pro-black attitudes become more expansive, open, and less defensive; willing to establish meaningful relationships with Whites who acknowledge and are respective of one's self-definition	Found ways to translate one's personal sense of blackness into a plan of action or a general sense of commitment to concerns of Blacks as a group, which is sustained over time; comfort with one's own race and those around them

During these stages, African American students solidify their racial identity so that they translate their personal sense of race to action (Tatum, 1992). To affirm students' racial identity, schools should create a welcoming environment where all students are represented (Tatum, 2017).

High performing African American students must develop a strong sense of racial identity. In the academic setting, being a high performing African American student can be perceived as acting White (O'Connor et al., 2011; Tatum, 2017). Therefore, high performing African American students must frequently code switch between White culture and African American culture (Yu et al., 2017). In order to effectively navigate the school setting, African American students must develop a strong sense of self and reach the internalization-commitment

stage of racial identity development (Tatum, 1992). Considering the racial identity of high performing African American students will expand on the current research of these students and provide insights for schools to establish the welcoming environment where all students are represented (Tatum, 2017).

Growth Mindset Theory

After decades of research, Dweck (2012) summarized her findings in the book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success.* The premise of mindset theory is that people tend to fall into two categories of mindset: growth mindset or fixed mindset. A growth mindset, also known as incremental theory of intelligence, is where intelligence is perceived as something that can be increased (Dweck, 2016). In contrast, the entity theory of intelligence, fixed mindset, is when intelligence is considered an unchangeable trait (Dweck, 2016). The main premise of the growth mindset theory is that people with a growth mindset tend to flourish and accomplish difficult things. Students with a growth mindset tend to embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks, set goals, see effort as a path to mastery, and learn from criticism. Students with growth mindset take risks and view failure as vehicle for learning (Dweck, 2016).

High performing African American students tend to embrace the growth mindset theory of intelligence (Harpalani, 2017). These students viewed intelligence as flexible with an importance on intellectual abilities (Harpalani, 2017). For example, high performing African American students tend to take challenging course work, such as honors and Advanced Placement classes and achieve good grades. In addition, high performing African American students are academically more successful with teachers that possess growth mindset (Canning et al., 2019). A growth mindset has been shown to have a major impact on grade point average (Vuong et al., 2010). By examining high performing African American students through a lens

of the growth mindset theory, schools can better understand how to foster these malleable traits of mindset for all students.

Grit

Grit is simply defined as passion and perseverance for long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016). Talent is often considered a natural ability; however, skill develops talent through consistent effort which leads to achievement (Duckworth, 2016). The grit theory emphasizes that effort and determination is twice as important as natural talent (Duckworth, 2016). In fact, grit positively influences achievement in a challenging environment as opposed to talent (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Grit is a predictor for success in education: graduating from high school and obtaining an advanced college degree (Duckworth, 2016). For African American students in particular, grit is a predictor in college success (Buzzetto-Hollywood & Mitchell, 2019; Strayhorn, 2014). African American males with high ratings of grit earned higher grades at predominately White college institutions (Strayhorn, 2014). At an Historically Black College/University (HBCU), there was a significant positive correlation between high grit scores and both GPA and persistence to graduation (Buzzetto-Hollywood & Mitchell, 2019).

Analyzing high performing African American students through the grit theory will provide insights on how they attain such high levels of academic achievement. This knowledge can be utilized for the development of academic programs for African American students to foster high academic achievement. Some researchers caution the relationship of grit and African American student performance. Dixson et al. (2017) found that grit was not related to academic achievement in a study of high school African American students. Through an individual case study, Golden (2017) stated that grit is not enough to overcome the systemic inequities that the

student faced. According to Love (2019), grit is anti-black since it does not take into consideration the institutional barriers that African American students face.

Literature Summary

The literature review examined school policies, support, school environment, and student and teacher roles for high performing African American students. The school policy section provides insights to the predominately White institutions in which high performing African American students must navigate. Within schools, gifted programing and testing often foster excellence and opportunity gaps for African American students. Extra and co-curricular activities are other areas that help shape the environment for African American students in schools. The classroom section examines teachers' expectations, culturally responsive teaching, professional development, and multicultural curriculum. Community, family, and peers are essential support system for high performing African American students in schools. Finally, the student section reviews the racial opportunity costs, biculturalism, and the growth mindset as it relates to high performing African American students.

Segregated & Desegregated Schools

After the Civil War, separate public school systems were created to educate both Black and White students in the South (Walker & Archung, 2003). The Black schools received less state expenditure per child, maintained poor facilities, and received little or no transportation for students (Walker & Archung, 2003). This discrepant model for public schools was upheld by the *Plessy v Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court decision. The court ruled that "separate but equal" schools were constitutional (Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896). Despite the lack of resources and funding, these segregated Black schools provided a nurturing learning environment for Black students (Walker, 2000). Exemplary teachers, affirming curriculum and extracurricular activities,

parental support, and strong leadership were characteristics of the segregated schools (Walker, 2000). For example, the Casewell County Training School is highlighted in Walker's 1996 book, *Their Highest Potential, An African American School Community in the Segregated South.* The school was an integral part of the community with strong parental support. The teachers and principal developed strong relationships with students which led to motivation to learn. Finally, the school also had numerous extracurricular activities so that learning would occur both inside and outside of the school.

In 1954, the Supreme Court's landmark case *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) overturned the *Plessy v Ferguson* (1896) decision. Justice Warren wrote that "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place" and that segregated schools are "inherently unequal" (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). The decision urged the end of segregated schools with "all deliberate speed" (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). However, the Supreme Court did not specify how schools should be desegregated.

There were several unintended consequences to the Brown decision for African American students. At all-Black schools, African American students had the opportunity to define themselves, while they faced students' stereotypes at all White schools (Richardson, 2012). Many African American students were forced out of the caring, nurturing communities into White schools (Marcucci, 2017). Today, African American students are disproportionately placed in lower level classes or suspended from school compared to their White peers (Eberhardt, 2019; Marcucci, 2017). The Brown decision also had a significant impact on the number of African American teachers. The number of African American teachers was drastically reduced by half within a decade (Gladwell, 2017). Furthermore, a third of African American teachers were fired 20 years after Brown (Marcucci, 2017).

Policy and Testing

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion or national origin. A small section in this groundbreaking legislation required the Federal Government to conduct a survey and report to the president and congress regarding lack of equal educational opportunities in public schools. In 1966, the Equality of Educational Opportunity report, commonly known as the Coleman report, was released (National Center of Education Statistics, 1966). John Coleman, a John Hopkins social scientist, embarked on one of the largest social science surveys of the time. The 737-page reported documented for the first time the achievement gap between White and Black students in public schools in the United States. The report revealed that average black 12th grade students in the rural South had similar achievement levels as White 7th grade students in the urban Northeast (National Center of Education Statistics, 1966).

Also in 1964, an Exploratory Committee for the Assessment Progress in Education (ECAPE) was established. As a result of this committee, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, designed to measure students' achievement nationally, was first administered in 1969 (National Center for Education Statistics [NAEP], 2019). NAEP reports on student data for different demographic groups including, gender, race, and socio-economic status. NAEP reports most frequently in the areas of Reading, Writing, Mathematics, and Science. The NAEP highlights achievement gaps across student groups with reports, such as the Black-White Achievement gap. In 2020, long-term NAEP trend data showed that the achievement gap between Black and White students had narrowed; however, an achievement gap still exits. The NAEP 2019 reported that 43% of White students scored proficient in grade 8 Mathematics and 41% of White students scored proficient in grade 8 Reading. In contrast, only

13% of Black students scored proficient in Math and 15% of Black students scored proficient in grade 8 Reading. The achievement gap between Black and White students is still present 54 years after the initial Coleman report in 1966.

President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) published the landmark report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. This report placed a spotlight on the public schools in America, highlighting failing test scores and declining rates of student achievement. Minority youth illiteracy was projected to be as high as 40% (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). In regards to gifted education, it was reported that "over half the population of gifted students do not match their tested ability with comparable school achievement" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p.11). The report was a call to action to improve public schools in the United States. *A Nation at Risk* often is considered one of the preceding factors of the modern educational accountability movement (Schneider, 2018).

NCLB Testing

In 2001, the federal government authorized the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. This bipartisan federal legislation sought to eliminate the achievement gap for all students through a testing accountability for students in reading and math. There have been many criticisms to the fall out of NCLB and mandated testing. Bias in the testing and accountability system leads to a false narrative about African American student achievement (Perry et al., 2003). As a result of mandated NCLB testing, schools tend to limit their curriculum focus to the reading and math test preparation in lieu of a multicultural curriculum (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). African American students recognize that standardized exams and grades are not accurate measures of achievement (Wiggan, 2014). In addition, African American students have a narrow perception of education

as test preparation, which leads to anxiety related to the test (Wasserberg, 2017). The achievement of African American students is not accurately measured by the existing accountability system (Perry et al., 2003).

Gifted Education

In 1988, the Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act (JAVITS) was passed by the Federal Government as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The JAVITS program is the only federally funded program for exclusively gifted students with the purpose "to coordinate evidence-based research, demonstration projects, innovative strategies, and similar activities designed to build and enhance the ability of elementary education and secondary schools nationwide to identify gifted and talented students and meet their educational needs" (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The major focus of the program was serving gifted students from underrepresented backgrounds, such as economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient, and disabled students. According to the National Association for Gifted Children's (2019) *Parenting for High Potential*, the JAVITS program research-based interventions has led to thriving gifted students from minority and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Despite the efforts of the JAVITS program, African American students are underrepresented in gifted education services (Ford et al., 2011). The lack of representation leads to feelings of isolation for African American students in schools (Walls & Hall, 2018; Chambers et al., 2014; O'Connor et al., 2011). There are several barriers for African American students' access to gifted education, including teacher referrals, students' differential performance on assessments, outdated policies and procedures for gifted identification and placement, and social-emotional concerns (Ford et al., 2011). Teachers are more likely to refer White students for

gifted education (Fish, 2017). Student ethnicities impact teacher referrals for gifted education which has led to an underrepresentation of African American students in gifted programs (Elhoweris et. al, 2005).

To combat teacher bias in the referral process, Manning (2018) suggested professional development and support for classroom teachers in the identification of gifted African American students. The school counselor can also play an important role in advocating for gifted service and course placement for African American students (Spencer & Dowden, 2014). Universal screening of all students is one way to address the role of teacher bias in the gifted referral process (Yaluma & Tyner, 2018). The National Association for Gifted Children also recommends universal screening for gifted children as a way to combat teacher bias in the referral process (2019).

Another way to combat the underrepresentation of African American students in gifted education is to create high achieving cluster classes with African American students. High achieving Black and Hispanic students placed in a gifted high achiever class showed a gain in 4th grade reading and math scores (Card & Giuliano, 2016). In addition, there was no spillover or negative effects on the other African American students who were not selected to participate in the cluster class (Card & Giuliano, 2016). Schools could capitalize on this strategy to provide opportunities for high achieving African American students to show demonstrated growth.

School Environment

Schools are a microcosm of society. Barth (2001) suggested that the primary function of schools is to foster ongoing learning of all members and the culture directly impacts that function. In most suburban schools, White culture is the dominant culture, and thus it is important to look at the environment of predominantly White institutions as it relates to African

American students (Chambers et al., 2014). In schools, African American students rarely walk into a classroom and have a teacher of the same race. According to the Department of Education Statistics (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015), only 18 percent of educators are teachers of color, furthermore black male teachers represents 2 percent. High performing African American students navigate the racialized spaces in predominantly white institutions. As a result, African American students experience racial opportunity costs (Chambers et al., 2014). For example, African American students report of isolation and tension (Walls & Hall, 2018; Chambers et al., 2014; O'Connor et al., 2011). Navigating the white space of school for African American students requires the ability to successfully code switch (Yu et al., 2017).

There are predominately White institutions that demonstrate success in providing supportive learning environments for high performing African American students. Institutions that foster a campus culture, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, holistic and integrated support systems, and a sense of belonging are institutions where African American students thrive (Museus & Liverman, 2010). Examples of these support systems include cultural centers, equal opportunity programs, and mentoring programs (Museus & Liverman, 2010). For example, The University of Maryland is a model institution as the top producers of the African American doctoral and masters degreed students. The four pillars of this highly regarded program are setting high expectations, community building, cultivation of culture with engaged faculty and student research, and commitment to ongoing evaluation and improvement (Hrabowski III et al., 1998). Examining the university programs that are successful for high performing African American students provides insight for K-12 schools to learn about the factors that improve the school environment for African American students.

Excellence and Opportunity Gaps

Within a school, there exists a variety of educational tracks for students. Tracking is a way for schools to group students by ability for certain courses, such as vocational or college preparatory courses. The ninth-grade year is an important year for high performing African American students in determining course placement (Kotok, 2017). Placement in advanced coursework or track impacts the trajectory of a student's high school career and beyond. African American students are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP) classes. According to the Education Trust (2020), African American students account for 15% of the high school students nationwide, but only 9% of African American students enrolled in at least one AP class. This underrepresentation of African American students leads to student reports of isolation in advanced classes (Walls & Hall, 2018; Chambers et al., 2014, O'Connor et al., 2011). Course tracking, self-efficacy, peer engagement, and socio-economic status for the African American students as well as the socio-economic status of the school contributed to widened excellence and opportunity gaps (Kotok, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2011).

In response to the typical tracking systems found in high schools, some schools are moving to a de-tracked system of classes. For example, Freehold Regional High School District in New Jersey, a high performing high school, eliminated the remedial Math, English and Social Studies courses in an attempt to de-track classes and increase representation of African American students in advanced classes. In addition, teacher recommendations were no longer a part of the AP course requirements. A de-tracked system for advanced classes places the responsibility on the parents and students to take the advanced courses (O'Connor et al., 2011). In Freehold Regional High School District, the school counselors focus was to promote rigorous course offerings with students and parents. Within five years, the district doubled the number of

students in AP classes, from 1,540 students in 2012 to 2,658 students in 2017, despite a decrease in enrollment numbers (Sampson et al., 2019).

Engagement

High performing African American students are highly engaged in learning in school. African American high school students' engagement in school is attributed to lesson engagement, teachers' attitude towards students, and teacher expectations (Miller, 2015). Engagement in learning is a critical part of the warm demander theory (Sandilos et al., 2017). Museus and Liverman (2010) suggested that engagement in educational purposeful activities require academic challenge, active and collaborative learning environment. As a result of high levels of engagement, Fantuzzo et al. (2012) suggested that African American students performed significantly better on both reading and mathematics tests.

For high performing African American students, engagement also expands outside of the regular school day with academic and extracurricular programs. Academic and extracurricular programming contribute to the success of African American students in schools (Yu et al., 2017; Corley et al., 2020). Participation in extracurricular activities provides opportunities to travel, exposure to new experiences, provides mentors and prepares students for college, and fosters the development of leadership skills (Yu et al., 2017; Corley et al., 2020). An example of such programming is the Shaker Schools Minority Achievement Committee, a student support organization for African American students that provide mentoring and academic support (Yue et al., 2017). The student-led Minority Achievement Committee focuses on normalizing the counternarrative of high performing African American students through peer training and educational experiences (Yue et al., 2017).

Support Networks

The African proverb of "It takes a village to raise a child," refers to collective efforts of a community to support a child. In 1996, Hillary Rodham Clinton published a book titled *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us*. The book highlighted the shared responsibility of a community in supporting children (Clinton, 1996). Epstein et al. (2019) developed a framework with the six types of parent involvement for assisting schools to build partnership programs.

Table 2

Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement for Comprehensive Programs of Partnerships and Sample Practices

Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Decision Making	Type 6 Collaborating with the Community
Help all families establish home environments to support children as students	Design effective forms of school-to-home & home-to-school communications about school programs & their children's progress	Recruit & organize parent help & support	Provide information & ideas to families about how to help student at home with homework & other curriculum-related activities, decisions, & planning	Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders & representatives	Identify & integrate resources & services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, & student learning & development

(Epstein et al., 2019)

The Epstein Framework illustrates the comprehensive level of supports for students from home, school, and community. The levels of partnerships range from basic individual parent support to expansive community outreach programs. For high performing African American students, a

comprehensive system network including community, parents, and peers is essential for student achievement (Jones et al., 2019; Wiggan & Watson, 2016).

According to the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans (2014), the investment of educational excellence through learning and development opportunities for African Americans must begin at birth. Establishing school-community partnerships builds trust. Supporting community engagement by creating opportunities for parents, grandparents, guardians, and caring adults increases the number of African Americans who graduate from high school prepared for future success (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans, 2014). School community is an important factor related to the success of African American students and gaining trust of African American families (Jones et al., 2019; Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Providing a supportive community for African American students will positively impact the family support for the students.

Family and community factors are vital to promoting or inhibiting academic success (St. Mary et al., 2018). Schools need to focus on engaging families instead of parent involvement (Leithwood et al., 2010). The higher levels of engagement correlate to Type 5 and Type 6 of Epstein's framework of involvement. Parental involvement is a key to academic success for students. A positive family and home dynamics has an effect size of .53 on student achievement (Hattie, 2008). An effect size of 0.5 or greater is considered large (Cohen, 1988). African American students demonstrated a positive sense of self, strong belief in their abilities, and motivation for academic success with the support of their single mothers (Corley et al., 2020). Parents are frequently regarded as one homogenous group, which ignores the varied experiences, visions, and values of ethnic minority parents (Wallace, 2013). Schools must partner with parents

in authentic ways to support learning. Such partnerships should include the community partners as outlined in Type 6 of Epstein's framework.

Peers

Another support system of high performing African American students is their peers. Positive peer influence has an .53 effect size on student achievement (Hattie, 2008). Positive social-relational peer supports are important for academic success. High performing African American students frequently described their positive relationships with similar friends critical to academic success (Corley et al., 2020; Jones, 2012). For example, African American students reported having great success with peer support when transferring from two-year colleges to four-year colleges (Berhane, 2017). Peer support through school organizations provided mentorship and guidance for African American students (Yu et al., 2017). The reality was that high performing African American students were most likely to socialize with students outside of their courses (Kotok, 2017). A negative peer pressure to underperform exists for African American students (Card et al., 2016). In fact, minority high achievers tend to underachieve in the regular education class (Card et al., 2016). High performing African American students must be able to navigate both their academic and social environments. Establishing a solid network of positive peers helps African American students navigate these two competing environments (Corley et al., 2020; Jones, 2012;).

Teachers

Teachers are another support network for high performing African American students. Teacher–student relationship has a .52 effect size on student achievement (Hattie, 2008). Teachers can facilitate the emotional condition that establishes high expectations for all students regardless of barriers (Leithwood et al., 2010). Students who perceived teachers as demanding

with high expectations demonstrate positive student growth (Sandilos et al., 2017; Walker 2011). Lesson engagement, teachers' attitudes towards students, and teacher expectations can be attributed to the academic achievement of African American students (Miller, 2015).

In addition to high expectations for students, teachers need to demonstrate a profound belief in student capabilities (Pitre, 2014). The idea that all students can learn was a critical factor in the effective school movement (Edmonds, 1979). The effective school movement highlighted five characteristics of effective schools: strong leadership, clear emphasis on learning, positive school climate, regular and appropriate monitoring of student progress, and high expectations for students and staff (Edmonds, 1979). Teachers with the underlying beliefs that African American students are brilliant and fully capable of learning, provide instructional practices and curriculum that are aligned with these beliefs (Delpit, 2012). Providing students with high quality curriculum and instruction is linked with high achievement for African American students (Wiggan & Watson, 2016).

In order for teachers to provide quality curriculum and instruction, teacher leaders seek continuous professional development (Lieberman & Miller, 2004). Professional development for teachers is essential with regards to teaching African American students. Teacher professional development is needed to foster an environment conducive to meaningful discussions related to race (Walls & Hall, 2018). In addition, professional development is needed for teachers to prioritize a caring, conducive environment with classroom management and academic rigor (Sandilos et al., 2017).

Teacher professional development is needed to mitigate teacher bias (O'Conner, 2011). High performing Black students are being overlooked by education professionals because of the presumptions made about their academic capabilities, while those presumptions are not

connected to the students' actual performance (Faulkner et al., 2017). As a result, teachers can be viewed as gatekeepers (St. Mary et al., 2018).

Finally, teachers need to be intentional about making connections between information that is being presented and students existing knowledge and cultural frameworks (Pitre, 2014). For African American students, a nurturing learning environment and access to high quality education can lead to student success (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Culturally responsive teaching is the practice in which teachers embed their student's culture into the curriculum and teaching styles. Providing students with high quality curriculum and culturally responsive instruction is linked with high achievement (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Embedding the student culture in the classroom practices is beneficial for all students (Love, 2019). Ford et al. (2011) suggested that a culturally responsive framework makes all students feel a sense of ownership and empowerment in their classrooms. Being able to draw connections and relationships between the students' lives and the material being taught is essential for African American student achievement (Pitre, 2014). Scott (2012) suggested that teachers need to understand the five stages of racial identity transitions to develop a frame of reference for culturally responsive teaching. Teachers can leverage a cultural background to develop strong relationships with their students (Sandilos et al., 2017).

Multicultural Curriculum

Students need to see themselves in the curriculum so that it is culturally relevant to them (Flennaugh, 2016). High-performing African American students reported a multicultural curriculum as a factor contributing to their success (Watson & Wiggan, 2016). A multicultural curriculum increases student engagement and motivation (Ford, 2011). In addition, the use of

multicultural curriculum has a positive impact on the social, cultural, and academic achievement of the students (Wiggan & Watson, 2016).

The Ford-Harris (2011) Matrix Model for Multicultural Education outlines four steps of the Bank's Multicultural Infusion Model (2009) with the Bloom's Taxonomy for Education Objections (Bloom, 1956). The Bank's Model has levels of multicultural education: contributions, additive, transformation, and social action. Bloom's levels are ranging from knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The resulting model leads to a transformative look at multicultural education.

Table 3

Blooms-Banks Matrix: Multicultural Gifted Education Quadrants 1 & 2

		Quadrant 1			Quadrant 2	
Contributions	Students are taught & know facts about cultural artifacts, events, groups, & cultural elements.	Students show understanding of information about cultural artifacts, groups, & so forth.	Students are asked to & can apply information learned on cultural artifacts, events, & so forth.	Students are taught to & can analyze (e.g., compare & contrast) information about cultural artifacts, groups, & so forth.	Students are required to & can create a new product from the information on cultural artifacts, groups, & so forth.	Students are taught to & can evaluate facts & information based on cultural artifacts groups, & so forth.
Additive	Students are taught & know concepts & themes about cultural groups.	Students are taught & can understand cultural concepts & themes.	Students are required to & can apply information learned about concepts & themes.	Students are taught to & can analyze important cultural concepts & themes.	Students are asked to & can synthesize important information on cultural concepts & themes.	Students are taught to critique cultural concepts & themes.

(Scott, 2014)

Table 4

Bloom-Banks Matrix, Multicultural Gifted Education Quadrants 3 & 4

	Quadrant 3		Quadrant 4			
	Knowledge	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Synthesis	Evaluation
Transformation	Students are given information on cultural elements, groups, & so forth, & can understand this information from different perspectives.	Students are taught to understand & can demonstrate understanding of important cultural concepts & themes from different perspectives.	Students are asked to & can apply their understand-ing of important concepts & themes from different perspectives.	Students are taught to & can examine important cultural concepts & themes from more than one perspective.	Students are required to & can create a product based on their new perspec-tive or the per-spective of other groups.	Students are taught to & can evaluate or judge important cultural concepts & themes from different view-points (e.g., racially, & culturally different groups.
Social Action	Based on information cultural artifacts, students make recommenda-tions for social action.	Based on their understanding of important concepts & themes, students make recommenda-tions for social action.	Students are asked to & can apply their understand-ing of important social & cultural issues, they make recommend-dations for & take actions on these issues.	Students are required to & can analyze social & cultural issues from different perspec-tives: they take action on these issues.	Students create a plan of action to address social & cultural issue(s); they seek impor-tant social change	Students critique important social & cultural issues & seek to make national &/or inter-national changes.

(Scott, 2014)

The Bloom-Banks matrix model moves multicultural curriculum from the basic understanding to evaluation of contributions to social action. For high performing African American students, providing a curriculum in quadrant four allowed for a pairing of their academic, social, and racial needs.

Students

High performing African American students face various challenges in their predominately white school environment including stereotypes and stereotype threat. African American students are underrepresented in honors and advance placement courses (Chambers et al., 2014). As a result of the underrepresentation, high performing African American students face stereotype threat (Wasserberg, 2017). African American students' racial identities play a significant role in their ability to navigate or code switch between home and school environments. Finally, the section will examine the roles of engagement and growth mindset for high performing African American students.

Racial Opportunity Cost

Racial opportunity costs are defined as the missed opportunities for students of color to achieve academic success in predominately White institutions (Tabron & Venzant Chambers, 2019). Racial opportunity costs manifests in three domains for students of color: psychological costs, representation costs, and community costs (Tabron & Venzant Chambers, 2019). Feelings of isolation and racial identity struggles are psychological costs for high performing African American students in predominantly White schools (Chambers et al., 2014; McGee 2013). The representation costs manifest itself through the pressure to represent all African American students (Tabron & Venzant Chambers, 2019). Being the representation voice of a minority group, singling out the Black perspective simplifies the Black experience (Walls & Hall, 2018).

Finally, due to the isolation in school, high performing African American students may also suffer from loss of connection to the larger African American community (Tabron & Venzant Chambers, 2019; McGee, 2013).

Stereotypes and Stereotype Threat. High performing African American students face stereotypes and stereotype threat in schools. The common stereotype or narrative is that of an academically underperforming African American student that excels in athletics (Harpalani, 2017). High performing African American students look to disprove this stereotype and prove intellectual worth (Wasserberg, 2017). African American college students face stress and strain when having to deal with racial stereotypes (McGee, 2018). For example, if an African American does well on an assessment, the student is considered a genius or anomaly. The students attempt to counteract the stereotypes by working relentlessly (McGee, 2018). For high performing African American students, facing stereotypes is part of their daily routine in schools.

Stereotype threat is defined as a threat to a person where their performance will be judged by preexisting stereotypes (Steele, 1997). Stereotype threat impact Black students at an early age (Perry et al., 2003; Wasserberg, 2017). Stereotype threat is evident with performance on high stakes testing (Ford et al., 2011; Wasserberg, 2017). High performing African American students fear of being judged as intellectually inferior causes stress, which leads to them not being able to complete the task to their best ability (Steele, 2010). At four-year college institutions, African Americans identified that stereotype and stereotype threat were barriers to academic success (Johnson-Ahorul, 2013).

There are a variety of intervention strategies to mitigate stereotype threat for students. Reframing tasks as non-intelligence based is a simple way to eliminate stereotype threat

(Spencer et al., 2016). For example, tests and written assignments should be about the current knowledge instead of aptitude (Platts & Hoosier, 2020). Incorporating anonymous grading practices minimizes stereotype threat by eliminating hidden bias (Wilson, 2017). Positive affirmations and exemplars lead to feelings of connectedness and belonging for under representative groups (Walton & Carr, 2011). In order for any stereotype threat interventions to be successful, trusting relationships between teachers and students must exist (Wassberg, 2014).

Racial Identity

Racial identity is the sense of collective identity with a racial group along with individual and others' perceptions of race (Helm, 1984). A strong sense of racial identity can buffer the impacts of discrimination on African American students in schools (Leath et al., 2019). Tatum (1992) examined racial identity development in the classroom utilizing the Cross Model for the five stages of racial identity: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. In the pre-encounter stage, African American students seek assimilation and acceptance from Whites while distancing from the African American race. In the encounter stage, African American students face an event rooted in racism that impacts them. In the immersion/emersion stage, African Americans students are actively seeking out symbols of racial identity and avoid symbols of Whiteness. In the internalization stage, the African American students are secure in their own racial identity and develop meaningful relationships with Whites. Finally, in the internalization-commitment stage, African Americans translate a personal sense of race into a plan of action. High performing African American students with strong racial identities are motivated to achieve in schools (Carter-Andrews, 2009).

Biculturalism

Biculturalism is the unique experience of individuals living in two distinct cultures (Bell, 1990). O'Conner et al. (2011) suggested that African American students establish bicultural competencies by learning how to properly operate within the dominant White culture. These bicultural competencies are often to referred to as code switching. Code switching is the double consciousness that African American students must navigate in schools (Chambers et al., 2014). Yu et al. (2017) reported the ability to code switch as a primary reason for African American student success at a suburban high school. Harpalani (2017) suggested that high performing African American students have a strong racial identity to cope with the racial stereotypes in academic settings in predominately White institutions. In addition, high performing African American students described themselves as confident, focused, competitive, determined, and leaders (Corley et al., 2020).

Through a qualitative research study, Yu et al. (2017) examined 11 high performing translocated African American graduates of Shaker Heights High School, a suburban school just east of Cleveland, Ohio. Participation and extracurricular activities and the ability to code switch were essential to the students' successful navigation of the Shaker Schools. They also reported the successful students' commitment to take advantage of the myriad of resources that the school offered. They suggested an in-depth orientation program to provide students with the tools necessary for a successful transition as well as student support programs. A limitation of the study was the small sample size. Another limiting factor was the participants were graduates from 1984 - 2004, thus they were reporting on thoughts and perceptions from several years prior. This study provided insights into high achievement African American students and their

adaptability to a new environment. The ability to code switch and participation in extracurricular activities are key factors to their success in a new school.

Often times, high achieving African American students have to navigate or code switch between two different worlds. In a phenomenological qualitative investigation, Chambers et al. (2014) conducted individual and focus group interviews with 18 high achieving African American and Latina college students in order to examine the racial opportunity costs. High-achieving students were defined based on their acceptance to highly selective colleges, being in the top ten percent of their graduating class, consistently enrolled in AP, honors and gifted classes, and participating in leadership roles. The racial opportunity costs findings were categorized into the major themes of psychological costs, community costs and representation costs. The 18 students were from different high schools and reported varying degrees of racial opportunity costs. A weakness of the study that the authors acknowledged was that racial opportunity costs do not impact all students of color. This study provided an awareness for schools to consider the challenges for high achieving African American students navigating the school environment. With this awareness, schools can strive to create an environment conducive to meeting the needs for high achieving African American students.

Race continues to play a primary role in high performing African American students' educational experiences. African American students face stereotypes and stereotype threats as they navigate school settings (Steele, 2010). In order to combat these threats, high performing African American students must develop a strong racial identity (Carter-Andrews, 2009). A strong racial identity allows for high performing African American students to navigate or code switch between both White and Black cultural norms in a school setting.

Summary

This literature review examined the five areas related to high performing African American students: policy and testing, school environment, support networks, teachers, and students. Since 1966, the achievement gap in public schools between Black and White students has been measured and documented by the Federal Government. The school environment impacts African American students' opportunity to access rigorous instruction, such as gifted programs, and honors and advanced classes leading to excellence and opportunity gaps (Ford et al., 2011). African American students face racial opportunity costs, such as stereotype and stereotype threat. Despite these barriers and challenges, high performing African American students are demonstrating high levels of achievement in schools. They are surrounded by a supportive network of community, family, teachers, and peers. A strong sense of racial identity and ability to code switch between cultures are two important factors in their success in schools. This mixed methods study will examine the barriers and challenges for high performing African American students while highlighting their strengths and skills.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In schools across America today, a pervasive and persistent achievement gap is well documented between African American students and their White counterparts (National Center of Education Statistics, 2019). Even in suburban middle class communities, evidence of the achievement gap for African American students can be found at all levels of instruction (Brown, 2020; Chandler, 2008; Ogbu, 2003). In comparison, there is very little research regarding high performing African American students in K-12 schools. High achieving African American students in suburban schools can be defined as students with a grade point average of 3.2 or higher (Andrews, 2009). High performing students also have a rigorous course load of honors and Advanced Placement classes on their transcripts. The purpose of this mixed method research study was to examine high performing African American graduates of suburban high schools to identify key factors that influence their academic achievement in K-12 schools. The study will help school leaders understand the perspectives and experience of these students and assist leaders in establishing and providing a supportive school environment.

This chapter outlines the methodology that was utilized for this mixed method study with design in an AB format. In the chapter, detailed explanations are provided for the following sections: research questions, research design, the role of the researcher, subjectivity statement, target population, procedures, data analysis, validity, and limitations. The end of the chapter will include a summary section. The explanations are designed to provide the reader with a clear picture of the mixed methods research design.

Research Questions

Research questions were generated from themes of the literature on racial identity, growth mindset, and grit (Duckworth, 2016; Dweck, 2016; Tatum, 2017). Four research questions served as the foundation of this research study to examine the achievement of high performing African American students and their perceptions regarding their educational experience. This study examined the following research questions related to high performing African American students:

1. How do high performing African American students describe lived experiences in a suburban high school?
2. What school factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success?
3. What personal factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success?
4. How do high performing African American students score themselves on the Growth Mindset and Grit scales?

Research Design

A mixed methods research design utilizes a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and provides a greater understanding of the research problem as opposed to a singular qualitative or quantitative research study (Trochim et al., 2016). By providing both qualitative and quantitative elements of research methods, the mixed method maximizes the advantages and curtails the disadvantages (Greene & Caracelli, 1997). A mixed method study also provides an opportunity to provide confirmatory and exploratory questions within the same study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). For this proposed mixed method study with AB format, a quantitative survey

questionnaire was sent to high-performing African American graduates utilizing convenience and snowball sampling. For part A, the quantitative survey consisted of demographic questions, Growth Mindset scale, and Grit scale. Interested participants for Part B were recruited from the part A survey. For part B, the qualitative section consisted of semi-structured interviews of ten participants. The interview questions were designed with the theories of racial identity, growth mindset, and grit in mind. The hypothesis of the study was that high performing African American students possess a strong racial identity and demonstrate growth mindset and grit throughout their educational experiences.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "a case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 37). Furthermore, case studies have the following characteristics: the researcher as the data collector and analyzer, an inductive investigated strategy, and a rich descriptive end product (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Yin (2003), there are three types of case studies. The exploratory case study defines questions and hypotheses. The descriptive case study describes a particular phenomenon in context. Finally, the explanatory case study explores cause and effect relationships and how events happen.

Case studies are frequently found in social science disciplines such as education, psychology, and sociology (Trochim et al., 2016). An advantage of utilizing a case study design is that the cases are real and offer rich descriptions. Yin (2018) suggests that a case study provides the ability to understand a real-world case within its contextual conditions. A second advantage of a case study is the ability to gather a wide depth and breadth of data. Finally, the ability to study a single entity such as an organization or a community is another advantage of the case study. Despite the advantages, case studies are suspect to the question of relative rigor and the ability to generalize from a single case (Yin, 2018). Due to this fact, a mixed methods

study allows for the researcher to provide numerical data to support the descriptive language in a qualitative case study design. This research study attempted to gather general quantitative data regarding Growth Mindset and Grit from high performing African American graduates and follow up with rich descriptions through interviews from a sample of ten participants.

In quantitative research, scaling is the process of providing quantitative units to a qualitative judgement (Trochim et al., 2016). A scale is designed to measure an abstract concept with a single score (Trochim et al., 2016). Dweck created a 3-item Growth Mindset scale to measure how much people believe that they can get smarter if they work at it. Duckworth created a 12-item Grit scale to measure how people self-evaluate their grit and resilience. Both of these scales are freely available and well-established measures.

The mixed methods design with AB format was proposed to study ten high-performing African American students. The mixed methods study design provided a rich, detailed personal account of student achievement and the educational experience from recent graduates as well as a self-assessment through established Growth Mindset and Grit scales. Although a singular survey could be distributed to African American graduates to collect data regarding performance in school, it would not provide the opportunity for participants to describe in their own words their K-12 school experience. Therefore, the researcher attempted to gain a richer understanding of the students by utilizing the mixed method research design. Much can be learned from the students by their personal description of their experience and their self-assessment of growth mindset and grit while attending a suburban high school.

Role of Researcher

The role of a researcher is "the primary instrument of data collection and analysis" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). I was the primary interviewer for the participants. I followed

strict protocols of the interview process as outlined in Appendix A. In order to ensure accuracy, member checking was achieved by sending the transcripts of the interviews to the participants. I conducted the analysis of the interviews, Growth Mindset survey, and Grit scale through a process of triangulation.

Subjectivity Statement

Twenty-five years ago, I began my career as a teacher of high school mathematics. After spending just seven years in the classroom, I leaped into the leadership role as both assistant principal and principal at the middle school and elementary school level for the next fourteen years. Currently, I am the Director of Curriculum & Instruction. Subjectivity is the personal qualities of an investigator that affect the outcome of research by unconsciously communicating bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to assess my subjectivity as a researcher, I must first explore and define my own bias as an educator.

My journey as an educator provides me with a unique perspective since I have worked with all levels of students throughout my career. In high school, I found that students already establish their paths as students and learners while middle students experiment with their identities and abilities as learners. However, at the elementary level, I found the most critical juncture of students' educational careers. Students at the elementary level tend to thrive at school in the early primary grades. But for some students, the excitement of learning begins to flicker in grades four and five.

As an instructional leader of a school district, I am passionate about helping students keep the joy of learning throughout their entire school careers. As a building administrator of all age levels, I witnessed this gap at all levels. However, there are African American students that are highly successful and engaged in school. These students do not match the overwhelming

statistics and stereotypes that are evident in the achievement gap. My research focus was to examine the student achievement and educational experiences for high performing African American students in hopes of identifying common themes.

When researching the achievement gap, I examined my own bias and privilege as a White educator. Implicit bias exists for everyone. As a White female conducting research about African American students, my implicit bias could potentially influence my research. Due to my race, I have been a direct benefactor of White privilege. This privilege could affect my perspective during a research interview or observation. To counter the bias and privilege, I utilized research tools like an audit trail to monitor my research practices. As an outsider to the community of African American students and families, trust needed to be established. The research was not approached with a deficit lens, but with the lens of understanding the common themes for high performing African American students. Limitations that I faced in my research included being an outsider to the African American community as well as my implicit bias and White privilege throughout the research process.

The achievement gap is a persistent problem in all schools today. In order for schools to narrow or close the gap, it makes sense for schools to examine high performing African American students. These students have a wealth of information regarding how to be successful in school today. I was interested to hear the stories of these students and learn from them. As an educator committed to closing the achievement gap, it is imperative that I learn from our most successful students to help those not experiencing success in schools.

Target Population

The target population for this study was high performing African American students that recently graduated from a suburban high school. There is much research about failing inner city

schools, however there is little research on African American students in upper-middle class, suburban settings. I wanted to investigate how high performing African American students excel in a suburban education setting. More specifically, I was interested in learning about how participants navigate the suburban high school environment.

Sampling Methods

This mixed methods study utilized convenience and snowball sampling methods. A convenience sample of recent African American graduates served as a starting point for this research study. I sent the Part A survey questionnaire to high performing African American graduates of Greenland High School. Greenland High School is a small suburban community just 15 minutes outside the city limits of a major midwestern city. The small school district is just five square miles and serves approximately 1,550 students in grades K-12. The demographic makeup of Greenland Schools is 49% White, 20% African American, 20% Asian, 6% multiracial, 4% Hispanic, and 1% Native American. According to the United States Census of 2019, the median household income in the city of Greenland was $89,200. In addition, the survey was sent utilizing snowball sampling methods to other high performing African American graduates. Through the survey questionnaire, I asked for volunteer participants in the semi-structured interview process. There were ten participants that elected to be interviewed for the semi-structured interview process.

Procedures

Types of Data

There were four data sources utilized for this mixed methods research study with an AB format. For Part A, the quantitative survey question was composed of demographic surveys, Growth Mindset survey, and Grit scale. The demographic survey questions were designed to

gather some basic information regarding the current status of the high school graduates. A Growth Mindset scale and Grit scale were embedded in the Part A survey questionnaire so that participants can self-assess their Growth Mindset and Grit. Part B was a semi-structured interview of ten participants from Part A. The interview questions are designed to provide rich, thick descriptions of the African American students' school experiences. These multiple sources provided me with both qualitative and quantitative data to analyze.

The Youngstown State University Institutional Review Board reviewed the demographic survey, the interview questions, Growth Mindset scale, and Grit scale. The participants completed an informed consent form to participate in Part A and Part B. The informed consent form identified potential psychological/emotional risks. Participants may experience uncomfortable feelings regarding their high school experience while participating in the study. Confidentially of the participants was highly guarded throughout the study and the participants' identity were protected with the use of pseudonyms. The interviews were conducted virtually and recorded.

Data Collection Methods

For Part A, the participants were asked to complete a survey through convenience and snowball sampling methods. Through the Part A survey, I requested interested participants for Part B, the semi-structured interviews. There were ten participants that elected to participate in Part B. Once I had confirmation of their interest, individual interviews were set up by email. The interviews were scheduled virtually for convenience of the participants. The interviews were scheduled to be an hour in duration. Each participant was asked each interview question in order. I also asked clarifying questions or follow up questions based on the interview. After the

interview, I provided a transcript of the interview questions and answers to the participant for member checking.

Data Tools

A survey was generated and distributed to the participants prior to the interviews through SurveyMonkey. The survey had three sections: demographic information and questions (Appendix B), a Growth Mindset scale (Appendix C) and Grit scale (Appendix D). The interviews followed the interview protocol listed in Appendix A. The interview questions are listed in Appendix E. During the interviews, I kept field notes on the responses of the participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy.

I developed the demographic survey to gain some basic background information about the participants. The survey was designed to gather information about the participant, such as high school grade point average, college trajectory, degree attainment, recognitions, employment status, and aspirations. The questions were reviewed by a panel of educators prior to being used in the study.

The 3-item Growth Mindset Scale was developed by Dweck (1999, 2006) to measure how much people believed that they could become smarter if they worked at it. This scale has been utilized in a variety of research projects (Aronson et al., 2002; Card, 2001; Claro et al., 2016; Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016). African American college students with a growth mindset reported greater enjoyment of the academic process, greater academic engagement, and obtained a higher-grade point average (Aronson et al., 2002). The instrument was reported to have a high internal reliability $\alpha = 0.94\text{-}0.98$ (Dweck et al., 1995).

The Grit scale measures the extent to which individuals are able to maintain focus and interest, and persevere in obtaining long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit scales have

been utilized in studies regarding academic achievement in college. Undergraduate students at an elite university that scored high on the Grit scales had higher grade point average than their peers despite having lower SAT results (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit has positively influenced grades for African American males at predominately White college institutions (Strayhorn, 2014). The Grit scales have a reliability $\alpha = 0.85$ (Duckworth et al, 2007).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics provide meaningful summaries about data in search of potential patterns (Trochim et al., 2016). For Part A, the demographic survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The first 8 questions gather demographic information regarding the participants. These questions were designed to gain information of the academic pursuits of the participants, such as grade point average and degree attainment. The central measures of tendency of mean, median and mode were applied to the demographic data. Questions 10 through 20 utilized a 5-point Likert Scale. The Likert Scale consists of 5= strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 2 = disagree, and 1 strongly disagree.

The Growth Mindset scale was scored according to the scale protocol (Dweck, 2016). The Growth Mindset scale utilized a 6-point Likert Scale with 1 = strongly agree to 6 = strongly disagree. To score, the participants' results were averaged by adding the results together and dividing by 3. Participants' average scored in a range from 1 to 6. The participants with a higher score had a greater growth mindset.

The Grit scale was scored according to the scale protocol (Duckworth et al., 2007). The Grit scale utilized a 5-point Likert Scale. Questions 1, 4, 6, 9, 10 and 12 are assigned points for 5 = Very much like me to 1 = Not like me at all. Questions 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 11 are assigned points from 1 = Very much like me to 5 = Not like me at all. To score, the participants' total points

were added together and divided by 12. The maximum score on this scale is 5, which scores as extremely gritty. The lowest score on this scale is 1, which scores as not at all gritty.

The interviews, demographic survey, Growth Mindset survey and Grit scales will be utilized for the data triangulation of the study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), triangulation is using multiple sources of data to confirm emerging findings. The use of data triangulation is a strategy for promoting validity and reliability of the study. After the data collection, a member check was utilized to confirm the participants responses. Member checks, also called respondent validation, is a way to ensure internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The member checks were conducted through email communication with the participants.

After the data was collected and confirmed, I conducted open and axial code and categorization to identify recurring themes in the surveys and interviews. Open coding is designed to identify any data that may be relevant to the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Following the open coding, axial coding is utilized to relate the categories to each other (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After the themes were identified, the qualitative data was analyzed to determine what the participants attributed to their high levels of achievement during their K-12 school experience. I utilized the results of the self-assessment Growth Mindset and Grit scales to explore the themes from the participants' interview responses.

Evidence of Validity

Evidence of Construct Validity

Validity deals with the accuracy of the measurement, in other words, how well does the tool measure what it is intending to measure (Sullivan, 2011). Utilizing multiple sources of data, helps improve construct validity in a qualitative research study. In this research study, I utilized a survey of the participants with embedded Growth Mindset survey and Grit scales and a semi-

structured interview protocol. To enhance external validity or transferability, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest utilizing thick, rich descriptions in regards to setting, participants, and with direct quotes from the interviews as adequate evidence. Another strategy for transferability is to provide maximum variation in the cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although I utilized a small random sample of ten participants for the interviews, the range of the participants varied in terms of their K-12 school experience.

Evidence of Internal Validity

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), internal validity is a strength of qualitative research, since qualitative research provides for in depth, rich descriptions of data collection and data analysis. By creating a demographic survey and interview questions that were reviewed by a panel of educators, the questions were clarified and specific to the research questions. In addition, utilizing the Dweck (2016) Growth Mindset scale and Duckworth (2007) Grit scale, highly vetted instruments, enhanced the internal validity of the data. Through qualitative research, holistic interpretations are generated from the thorough evidence collection and analysis process. There are various ways to increase the internal validity of a qualitative research study, including triangulation, member checking, and providing a trail of evidence.

Triangulation

Triangulation is the process when utilizing multiple methods of data collection to compare and cross-check data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this research study, the demographic survey, the interviews, the Growth Mindset scale and the Grit scales are the four pieces of data that were utilized for triangulation. Each of the ten participants in part B completed all of the steps of the data collection process, which included the survey with the Growth Mindset scale and Grit scale, and the semi-structured interview.

Member Checking

Member checking is another strategy to improve the internal validity of a research study. Member checking or respondent validation occurs when the researcher sends the preliminary findings to the participants for confirmation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, after the survey completion, I sent a copy of the results of the surveys back to the participants to confirm their accuracy. In addition, after each interview, I transcribed the interview and sent a copy of the results back to the participants to review for accuracy. This process of member checking allows for the participants to validate their responses and clear up any miscommunication.

Trail of Evidence

An audit trail is a detailed accounting of the methods, procedures, and decisions in the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The audit trail provides a clear, detailed record of the research study. I kept a detailed running record of the date, times of the interviews, and surveys as part of the audit trail. In addition, the coding and categorization of the interviews and surveys for the data analysis were clearly outlined.

Evidence of Reliability

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), reliability is the extent where the findings can be repeated or replicated. Reliability can be assessed through multiple data sources that are used in the triangulation of the study. The demographic survey, the interview, the Growth Mindset scale, and Grit scale were part of the triangulation of data for this study. The Growth Mindset scale has a high internal reliability $\alpha = 0.94\text{-}0.98$ (Dweck et al., 1995). The Grit scale has an internal reliability $\alpha = 0.85$ (Duckworth et al, 2007). In addition to triangulation, peer examination, investigator's position, and the audit trail are other strategies to increase reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I had a panel of educators review the demographic survey and

interview questions to attempt to increase the reliability of the questions. The racial make-up of the panel of seven school administrators was four African American administrators and three White administrators.

Evidence of Applicability

This mixed methods study with AB format examined the experiences of high performing African American through a survey and interviews. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that the rich, thick descriptions is a strategy to enable transferability. The ability to provide direct quotations from the interviews and the surveys leads to the transferability of the study. In addition, the Growth Mindset and Grit scales are well known, highly developed measures. These measures can be utilized in the replication of this study.

Limitations

Limitations of this mixed method study were the sampling methods and relatively small sample size. Convenience and snowball sampling are not representative of the general population (Trochim et al., 2016). However, the convenience and snowball sampling are appropriate when trying to reach a unique population (Trochim et al., 2016) Due to the sampling methods and the small number of interviewed participants, this study may not be generalizable. For this mixed method study, high performing African American graduates is a specific targeted group of students. The data collected from the study could also be utilized to provide school administrators with information regarding what high performing African Americans need from their school communities.

As a White female school administrator, my bias and White privilege could impact the results of this study. As a lifetime school administrator, I had a personal interest in the success of the African American students. Being fully aware of bias and privilege, I utilized member

checking with the participants' interviews to ensure accuracy and credibility for the study. It is the lived experiences of the high performing African American graduates that can impact the future of other African American students in our schools today.

Summary

This mixed methods study attempted to examine high performing African American graduates of suburban high schools to determine themes that contributed to high levels of student achievement. Participants of this study were African American graduates from a suburban high school. Demographic surveys and interview questions were developed in consultation with a panel of school administrators. Growth Mindset scales and Grit scales were self-administered to provide preliminary information for the data analysis. The interview data, surveys, and scales were coded to identify themes of relationships, Growth Mindset, Grit, and racial identity. These themes were found in the review of the literature. Threats to validity were minimized with the use of member checking, triangulation of data, and audit trail. Survey and interview questions were reviewed by a multiracial panel of educators. The use of thick, rich personal descriptions enhanced the transferability of this study.

This study helped to fill in the gap of research on high performing African American students and their lived experiences in suburban schools. It is important to understand the experiences of our most successful African American students. With this understanding, schools can look to apply this knowledge to close the gaps for all students.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This mixed methods study sought to explore the lived experiences of high performing African American students as well as their self-assessment of racial identity, growth mindset, and grit within the school context. This was a two-part study: Part A consists of a quantitative survey and Part B consists of qualitative interviews. Data was gathered through a convenience sample of recent African American graduates from a suburban high school. For Part A, the survey instrument was developed with questions of racial identity, the Growth Mindset Scale (See Appendix C) and the Grit Scale (see Appendix D). The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Open-ended questions were coded, organized, and analyzed by theme. For Part B, ten participants participated in semi-structured interviews. The interview responses were coded, organized, and analyzed by theme. Part A provided me with an overall understanding of the lived experiences for high performing African American students, while Part B provided me with rich, thick descriptions of high performing African American students lived experiences in their own words.

In this chapter, the sections are titled: descriptions of study participants, demographic data, analysis of data by research question, and summary. For Part A, the description of the participants and demographic data were analyzed using quantitative research methods. The analysis of survey data was a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. For Part B, the data was analyzed using qualitative methods. An overview of the data collected in both parts of this study are provided in the summary of the chapter.

Part A Survey

Description of Study Participants

The results of Part A of the study showed that of 18 survey participants, the median age group was 23-24 and they were five years post high school graduation with a mean GPA of 3.6. 76.5% of survey participants were female. While the participants had varying degrees, 38.9% participants indicated they were currently pursuing doctoral degrees. The current careers of the participants also varied. However, 22.2% were aspiring doctors and 16.7% teachers. While in high school, 55.6% of participants identified as in the pre-encounter or encounter, the beginning stages of racial identity development.

The survey was sent via SurveyMonkey to 50 African American graduates of a suburban high school. The graduates were one to ten years post high school graduation. There were 25 participants who signed the informed consent to participate in Question 1 of the survey. However, seven participants discontinued the survey and did not answer any additional questions. Therefore, 18 participants completed the survey. Not all participants answered every question, and any skipped questions were not included in the data analysis portion of the results.

Table 5 shows the number of survey participants by question. The second section of the survey, Demographic Information, was addressed with questions 2-10. Responses ranged from 16 to 18 participants answering these questions. Questions 3, 4, and 7 were not answered by all participants. One participant did not answer Question 3, which pertained to gender. Question 4 asked for the participants' current pursuit of education, with one participant not answering this question. Question 7 asked for the participants' employment status, with two participants not answering this question. All other questions were answered by all 18 participants.

The third section of the survey, Questions 11-20, contained Likert Scale questions. The possible responses were strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. 18 participants completed this section; however, Question 13 , which was "School staff support was an important factor in my academic success in school" was only answered by 16 participants. The two participants may not have wanted to share their impressions of school support staff with me. Questions 21-22 were open-ended questions with 16 participants with two participants not answering the open-ended questions. These participants may not have wanted to share specific examples of their experiences in high school.

The Growth Mindset Scale were Questions 23-25 on the survey. There were 17 participants who participated in the Growth Mindset questions. These 17 participants answered all the questions in this section. One participant did not participate in this section of the survey.

The GRIT Scale were Questions 26-37. 17 participants completed this section of the survey. One participant did not answer any of the GRIT questions. It is important to note that this participant also did not participate in the Growth Mindset section of the survey. For Question 32, which was "I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one," three participants did not answer the question. The participants may have chosen to skip these questions because it did not apply to them. As research suggests, high performing African American students tend to accomplish their goals. The questions that were skipped were counted as a zero for the GRIT calculation for these participants.

Finally, question 39 asked for volunteers to participate in Part B semi-structured interview. There were ten participants that agreed to participate in Part B.

Table 5

Number of Survey Participants by Question

Question	Responses	Skipped
1. Informed Consent	25	0
Demographic Information		
2. Age	18	0
3. Gender	17	1
4. High school grade point average	17	1
5. Current pursuit for continued education	18	0
6. Highest degree attainment	18	0
7. Awards and recognitions	18	0
8. Employment status	18	0
9. Future employment aspirations	18	0
10. Racial identity development	18	0
Likert Scale Questions		
11. Family support	18	0
12. Peer support	18	0
13. School staff support	16	2
14. Teachers with strong relationships	18	0
15. Active engagement in school	18	0
16. Few African Americans in advanced courses	18	0
17. Encouraged to take advanced courses	18	0
18. Code-switching	18	0
19. Negative stereotypes	18	0
20. Stereotype threat	18	0
Open-Ended Questions		
21. What are some challenged that occurred in high school?	16	2
22. How did you overcome these challenges?	16	2
Growth Mindset Scale		
23. You have a certain amount of intelligence, and you can't really do much to change it.	17	1
24. Your intelligence is something about you that you can't change very much.	17	1
25. You can learn new things, but you can't really change your basic intelligence.	17	1

Grit Scale		
26. I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.	17	1
27. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.*	17	1
28. My interests change from year to year.*	17	1
29. Setbacks don't discourage me.	17	1
30. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.*	17	1
31. I am a hard worker.	17	1
32. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.*	15	3
33. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.*	17	1
34. I finish whatever I begin.	17	1
35. I have achieved a goal that took years of work.	17	1
36. I become interested in new pursuits every few months.*	17	1
37. I am diligent.	17	1
Interview Participation		
38. Interview Participation	10	8

Demographic Data

In order to provide an understanding of who participated in the survey, eight demographic data questions were asked of the participants. These questions provided insight on the participant's age, gender, grade point average, degree attainment, and employment status.

The participants in the survey varied by age. The age group with the most participants was greater than 27 years of age at 27.8%. The age group with the least participants was 25-26 years of age at 5.6%. The median age group was in the 23-24 group, which is five years past high school graduation. Therefore, half of the sample was under five years since high school graduation, which may imply that their high school experiences were still fresh in their minds. The other half of the sample is greater than 5 years from high school graduation. Table 6 shows the age of the participants in this study.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics and Age of Participants
N=18

Age Group	N	% Of 17
18-20	2	16.7%
21-22	4	22.2%
23-24	4	22.2%
25-26	1	5.6%
27+	7	27.8%

The gender of the participants of the survey was predominately female with 76.5% participants identified as female, while only 23.5% of participants identified as male. Females respond to surveys in greater proportions than males (Kwak & Radler, 2002; Saxon et al., 2003; Underwood et. al., 2000). 17 participants answered this question with one participant skipping this question. Table 7 illustrates the gender of participants of the survey. One participant did not answer this question.

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics and Gender of Participants
N=17

Age Group	N	% Of 17
Male	4	23.5%
Female	13	76.5%
Nonbinary	0	0%
Prefer not to answer	0	0%

High achieving African American students in suburban schools can be defined as students with a grade point average of 3.2 or higher (Andrews, 2009). 16 participants provided an actual GPA. It is important to note that the two participants that did not answer this question are in the 27+ age category. It is likely that these two participants did not recall their high school

grade point average. In this study, participants reported grade point averages ranging from 2.1 to 4.1. There were 81% of participants that reported a grade point average of greater than 3.2, the benchmark grade point average of high performing students. The mean grade point average was 3.6. The mode grade point average was 3.9, while the median grade point average of 3.8. Table 8 lists the central measures of tendency for the grade point average of the participants.

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics and Grade Point Average
N=16

	GPA
Mean	3.6
Mode	3.9
Median	3.8

The current population of the Greenland Schools is 20% African American students. The participants held varying degrees ranging from high school diploma to a juris doctorate. The participants were currently pursuing bachelor's degrees, master's degrees and doctoral degrees. It was striking that 38.9% participants indicated they were currently pursuing doctoral degrees. Table 9 shows the highest degree attainment as well as the current pursuit of degrees for the participants.

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics and Degree
N=18

	Highest Degree Attained	%	Current Degree Pursuit	%
HS diploma	1	5.6		
Bachelor's	11	61.1	4	22.2
Master's	5	27.8	3	16.7
Juris Doctorate	1	5.6		
Doctoral			7	38.9

	Highest Degree Attained	%	Current Degree Pursuit	%
No Advanced Degree			4	22.2

The employment status for the participants varied with 28% full-time student to 72% employed. The 72% that stated that they were employed listed their occupations as medical resident, attorney, teacher, community health worker, accountant, and production assistant. The participants have a variety of aspirations for future careers. Doctor (22.2%) and teacher (16.7%) were the most common answers for future career aspirations. Table 10 lists the careers that the participants would like to attain.

Table 10

Descriptive Statistics Future Career Aspirations
N=18

Career	N	%
Doctor	4	22.2
Teacher	3	16.7
Nonprofit Leader	2	11.1
Psychologist	2	25.0
CEO	1	6.0
CPA	1	6.0
Engineer	1	6.0
Entrepreneur	1	6.0
Judge	1	6.0
Reporter	1	6.0
Writer	1	6.0

For question 10, the participants were asked to self-identify their stage of racial identity development while in high school: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, or internalization-commitment (Tatum, 1992). Participants were given a description of each stage of racial identity. A majority of participants, 55.6%, selected pre-encounter or encounter, the beginning stages of racial identity development. Only 17% of

participants identified the internalization-commitment as their stage of racial identity development while in high school. Table 11 displays the racial identity development while in high school for the participants.

Table 11

Descriptive Statistics and Racial Identity Development Stage
N=18

Stage	N	%
Pre-encounter	5	27.8
Encounter	5	27.8
Immersion/Emersion	1	5.6
Internalization	3	16.7
Internalization-Commitment	4	17.0

Analysis of Data by Research Question

Using the data from the survey, I applied descriptive statistics to analyze the data, and I organized the data by research question. The participants were asked to rate their answers on a five-point Likert scale: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree or disagree, agree, and strongly agree. The Likert scale results were coded so that 1=strongly disagree while 5=strongly agree.

Research Question 1

How do high performing African American students describe lived experiences in a suburban high school?

This research question was addressed in the survey with two open-ended questions. Question 21 asked "As a high performing African American student, what are some challenges that occurred in high school?" Question 22 asked "How did you overcome these challenges?" There were 16 participants that answered these questions. Tables 12 and 13 outline several emerging themes that were identified in the responses.

Table 12

As a high performing African American student, what are some challenges that occurred in high school?

Theme	Quotes
Isolation	"being the only black student in classes"
	"not black enough"
	"not feeling like I belonged"
	"talking white"
	"underestimated" academic abilities
	"far-fetched' career aspirations"
Microaggressions	"You know you were only accepted because you're black and you're filling a quota."
	"My achievements meant nothing because my white peers disliked and bullied me."
	"token black girl"
Representation	"The only staff that looked like me were teachers that did not teach common core subjects, janitors, or cafeteria workers."
	"representation is crucial and serves as an inspiration for students"
Curriculum	"I had no sense of pride in my identity because everything was based on slavery, racism and struggle."
	portrayed minorities in "barbaric ways"
	"the majority of the literature did not pertain to my identity"

The first theme for high performing black students was isolation in school and classes. Many participants referenced "being the only black student in classes" and "not feeling like I belonged." The isolation also branched out with the African American peers. Participants report that they were challenged from the African American peers that they were "not black enough" or "talking white."

The second theme for high performing African American students that emerged was microaggressions from staff and students. Participants reported that staff "underestimated" their academic abilities and their career aspirations were seen as "far-fetched." One participant reported that after receiving the first college acceptance, a peer said in front a group of students,

"You know you were only accepted because you're black and you're filling a quota." Another participant wrote "my achievements meant nothing because my white peers disliked and bullied me." A third participant wrote that she was "token black girl" in many of her advanced classes.

The third theme that emerged from this question is the lack of African American staff representation. One participant wrote that "the only staff that looked like me were teachers that did not teach common core subjects, janitors, or cafeteria works." Another participant wrote "representation is crucial and serves as an inspiration for students."

The fourth theme that emerged from this question was the curriculum issues. Many participants referenced that the curriculum highlighted only the negative aspects of being an African American, such as slavery, racism, oppression, and struggle. A participant commented that "I had no sense of pride in my identity because everything was based on slavery, racism and struggle." A participant reported that the stories read in English classes portrayed minorities in "barbaric ways." Another participant stated, "the majority of the literature did not pertain to my identity."

Table 13

How did you overcome these challenges?

Theme	Quotes
Strong racial identity	"forced myself to become confident in my own ability." "…aware of the complexities that come with being a black person in society, but also proud of my identity." "I become more aware of the racial dynamic and learned how to cope with other students' words and actions."
Supportive family and friends	"parents who prioritized academics and encourage us to participate in extracurriculars." "helped communicate my abilities with teachers and placement into proper courses."

Theme	Quotes
	"when you're welcomed by your peers and community, it becomes significantly easier to be your authentic self." "having honest and open conversations with my black friends played a large role."
Supportive spaces	"extracurricular program for African American students" "ally for a teacher" "seen and understood."
Historically Black College/University (HBCU)	"My identity and history were affirmed, and I saw examples of excellence all around me." "gave me confidence in myself and my accomplishments but taught me to find my own identity outside of academics."

The second open-ended question was question 22, "How did you overcome these challenges?" There were 16 participants that also answered this question. There were three themes in the responses to this question: strong racial identity, supportive family and friends, and supportive spaces. The theme of strong racial identity was evident in the participants answers. One participant wrote "forced myself to become confident in my own ability." Another participant stated "…aware of the complexities that come with being a black person in society, but also proud of my identity." A third student reported "I become more aware of the racial dynamic and learned how to cope with other students' words and actions."

The second theme that emerged from this question is the supportive network of family and friends. For example, one participant wrote "parents who prioritized academics and encouraged us to participate in extracurriculars." Parents were also referenced as advocates that "helped communicate my abilities with teachers and placement into proper courses." A third participant wrote "when you're welcomed by your peers and community, it becomes significantly easier to

be your authentic self." Lastly, a participant wrote "having honest and open conversations with my black friends played a large role."

The final themes that emerged from this question were the focus on supportive spaces within the school and Historically Black College/University (HBCU). One participant referenced the extracurricular program for African American students. Another participant referenced having an "ally for a teacher" that made her feel "seen and understood." HBCUs were supportive spaces post-graduation for students. Two participants out of the 18 in the survey referenced HBCUs. One participant stated, "My identity and history were affirmed, and I saw examples of excellence all around me." Another participant wrote that HBCU "gave me confidence in myself and my accomplishments but taught me to find my own identity outside of academics."

Research Question 2

What school factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success?

There were four survey questions which asked questions regarding school factors that attribute to success of high performing African American students. Participants felt the most contributing school factor to their academic success was having a strong relationship with a teacher (M 4.6, SD 0.7). Participants reported that school factors that slightly contributed to their academic success were school staff support (M 4.4, SD 0.6) and active engagement in school community and extracurriculars (M 4.4, SD 1.0). Participants felt that the school factors that least contributed to their academic success was encouragement from school staff to take advanced courses (M 3.7, SD 1.0). Table 14 reports the results of the school factors with the mean and standard deviation scores.

Table 14

Descriptive Statistics for Survey Statements of School Factors
N=18

Statement	M	SD
I learned best from teachers that developed a strong relationship with me	4.6	0.7
School staff support was an important factor in my academic success in school.	4.4	0.6
I was actively engaged in my school community with extra and co-curricular activities.	4.4	1.0
I was encouraged to take rigorous and advanced courses by my teachers and counselors.	3.7	1.0

Research Question 3

What personal factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success?

The survey asked three questions regarding personal factors that attribute to success of high performing African American students. Participants felt the most contributing personal factor that attributed to their academic success was the family support (M 4.4, SD 0.8). Participants also felt that ability to code-switch (M 3.9, SD 1.0) was a contributing factor to their academic success. Participants rated African American peer support (M 3.3, SD 0.7) as the least contributing factor in their academic success. Table 15 reports the personal factors for academic success with the mean and standard deviation for each statement.

Table 15

Descriptive Statistics for Survey Statements of Personal Factors
N=18

Statement	M	SD
Family support was an important factor in my academic success in school.	4.4	0.8

Statement	M	SD
I utilized code-switching to navigate between my school, home, and peer environments. Code-switching is defined as the alternating use of more than one linguistic code.	3.9	1.0
Peer support from fellow African American students was an important factor in my academic success in school.	3.3	1.4

Research Question #4

How do high performing African American students score themselves on the Growth Mindset and Grit scales?

There were 17 participants that completed both the Growth Mindset (Appendix C) and GRIT (Appendix D) scales. For each scale, the participants were required to answer a series of questions. I then calculated the results according to the scale protocols. Table 16 illustrates the participants' scores on the Growth Mindset and GRIT scales.

The highest possible score on the Growth Mindset scale is 6 and the lowest possible score is 1. The mean score for the Growth Mindset scale was 4.5 with a standard deviation of 1.2. The mean score was 75% of the maximum score possible on the Growth Mindset scale. In fact, 24% of participants rated themselves with a 6, the highest score on the Growth Mindset scale. The lowest reported score on the Growth Mindset scale was 2. 41% of participants earned a high score of a 5 or 6 on the Growth Mindset scale. 53% of participants earned a medium score of 3 or 4 on the Growth Mindset scale. 6% of participants earned a low score of 1 or 2 on the Growth Mindset scale.

The GRIT scale ranges from lowest score of 1 (not at all gritty) to the maximum score of 5 (extremely gritty) (Duckworth et al., 2007). The mean score for the GRIT scale was 3.8 with a standard deviation of 0.5. The mean score of GRIT scale was 76% of the maximum score

possible on the GRIT scale. The highest score on the GRIT scale was 4.5 and the lowest score was 2.8. 41% of participants earned a high score of a 4 or 5 on the GRIT Scale. 53% of participants earned a medium score of a 3 on the GRIT scale. 6% of participants earned a low score of a 2 on the GRIT scale.

Table 16

Descriptive Statistics for Growth Mindset and GRIT Scales
N=17

Participant	Growth Mindset 1-6	GRIT 1-5
Participant 1	3.3	4.2
Participant 2	3.7	4.2
Participant 3	5.0	4.0
Participant 4	4.7	3.6
Participant 5	4.7	3.9
Participant 6	5.0	4.0
Participant 7	3.0	2.8
Participant 8	4.3	3.2
Participant 9	5.0	3.6
Participant 10	6.0	3.9
Participant 11	4.7	3.1
Participant 12	2.0	3.2
Participant 13	4.7	3.8
Participant 14	6.0	4.4
Participant 15	3.0	3.9
Participant 16	6.0	4.3
Participant 17	6.0	4.5
Mean	4.5	3.8
Standard Deviation	1.2	0.5

A correlation exists between the Growth Mindset and GRIT scale scores. There is a significant positive relationship between the Growth Mindset and GRIT scale scores for the participants, $r(15) = .532$, $p < .03$. This correlation should be interpreted with caution due to the

limited sample size of 17 participants. Table 17 displays the correlation for the Growth Mindset and GRIT scale score.

Table 17

Correlation of Growth Mindset and GRIT
N = 17

	Growth Mindset	GRIT
Growth Mindset	1	0.532
GRIT	0.532	1

$p < 0.03$

Part A Summary

The results of Part A of the study showed that of 18 survey participants, the median age group was 23-24, and they were five years post high school graduation with a mean GPA of 3.6. 76.5% of survey participants were female. While the participants had varying degrees, 38.9% of participants indicated they were currently pursuing doctoral degrees. The current careers of the participants also varied. However, 22.2% were aspiring doctors and 16.7% teachers. While in high school, 55.6% of participants identified as in the pre-encounter or encounter, the beginning stages of racial identity development.

The research found that strongest themes emerged when participants were asked about the challenges they faced in school. The themes were sense of belonging, microaggressions, representation, and curriculum. When asked how they overcame these challenges, themes of strong racial identity, supportive family and friends, and supportive spaces were evident.

The research data suggested that participants reported that having a strong relationship with their teacher (M 4.6, SD 0.07) was the most contributing factor for their academic success. Staff support (M 4.4, SD 0.6) and active engagement in school and extracurriculars (M 4.4, SD 1.0) were also contributing factors in their academic success. The school factor that contributed

the least to academic success was the encouragement from school to take advanced courses (M 3.7, SD 1.0).

The research found that 41% of participants rated themselves high on the Growth Mindset scale, while only 6% of participants rated themselves low on the Growth Mindset scale. 41% of participants rated themselves high on the GRIT scale, while only 6% of participants rated themselves as low on the GRIT scale. A correlation existed between the Growth Mindset and GRIT scale scores. There was a significant positive relationship between the Growth Mindset scale and GRIT scale scores for the participants, $r(15) = .532$, $p < .03$. However, this correlation should be interpreted with caution due to the limited sample size.

The Part A survey results were used as a means to validate the data collected from the Part B semi-structured interviews, employing a triangulation approach. The identified themes originating from the survey responses and open-ended inquiries will be utilized to reinforce the findings derived from Part B.

Part B: Semi-Structured Interviews

Description of Study Participants

Ten participants agreed to participate in the semi-structured interviews after completing the survey. The gender make-up of the participants was four males and six females. The age range of the participants was from 18-27+, with 40% of the participants in the 27+ age category. Doctoral degrees were being currently pursued by 40% of the participants, while 20% of the participants were not currently in pursuit of advanced degrees. Table 18 lists the demographic data including gender, age range, high degree attained, and current degree pursuit for the participants in the semi-structured interviews.

Table 18

Descriptive Statistics for Interview Participants

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Highest Degree Attained	Current Degree Pursuit
Participant A	Male	27+	Master's	Doctoral
Participant B	Female	21-22	Bachelor's	Doctoral
Participant C	Female	25-26	Bachelor's	Doctoral
Participant D	Female	23-24	Bachelor's	None
Participant E	Female	27+	Master's	Doctoral
Participant F	Male	27+	Master's	None
Participant G	Female	27+	Master's	Master's
Participant H	Male	21-22	Bachelor's	Master's
Participant I	Female	18-20	High School Diploma	Bachelor's
Participant J	Male	23-24	Bachelor's	None

Participant Profiles and Lived Experiences

In this section, the ten participants who agreed to participate in the semi-structured interviews are described. I summarized the participant's story as a high performing African American student as follows: their lived experiences, personal factors, and school factors that attributed to their success.

Participant A

Lived Experience

Participant A is a current medical student who would like to become a general internist or primary care physician. He was a pre-med major in college, however, after college, he worked in the business side of healthcare for six years. During this time, he learned that he would like to be a healthcare provider, so he applied to medical school.

Personal factors

Parental support was paramount for Participant A. His parents instilled the strong work ethic with the idea of "school was his job" and he needed to "do well" in school. He appreciated his strong family home environment, so that he just had to focus on his studies. Participant A recognized that he had incredibly resourceful parents that could assist him with his academics. Participant A also recognized that his parents made sure that he was surrounded by African American role models of doctors, lawyers, and engineers. He was inspired by these African American role models.

He described himself as a fairly typical student in high school. Participant A reported being highly organized and responsible for assignments. This provided him the opportunity to seek extra help when needed. Participant A stated "you have to kind of dig deep to push through…" when faced with challenging classes. He often sought extra help from teachers during office hours or his peer group. Another strategy he would employ was to look for outside resources to assist with difficult courses.

Participant A had a core group of three to four friends in similar classes and extracurricular activities. The peer group in advanced courses had similar academic goals which led to a sense of community. He and his peers were very "goal-orientated" and "looking toward the future." They were trying to "do the best that we could in classes to get in the best college possible."

School factors

Participant A described his overall school experience as really positive. Participant A reported attending a supportive school environment as a factor to his academic success.

Participant A recognized at his school there was an abundance of resources available for students. He was very active in the school with extracurricular activities. He participated in the Science Olympiad club, swim team, and orchestra.

Many teachers were supportive according to Participant A. He felt his teachers were easily accessible for extra help. For example, although advanced math was a difficult course, Participant A reports his math teacher supported his learning by being non-judgmental, supportive, and approachable. He would seek extra help outside of class for extra practice. Another example of a supportive teacher was his orchestra teacher. She provided him with extra music opportunities, such as contests and solos in the concerts. Participant A reflected that this teacher support helped him to achieve in school and beyond.

Participant B

Lived Experience

Participant B is currently a senior in college studying psychology. She is planning to take a gap year after college, then pursue a doctoral degree in clinical psychology.

Participant B shared that attending a school with primarily white teachers was challenging. She reported "having a familiar face would have made my school experience a little easier." Participant B reports in high school she had contact with African American teachers in non-core subject areas. These African American teachers were supportive in helping her navigate the school environment. Participant B shared that her locker was by an African American teacher's classroom. This teacher could tell if she was having a bad day. This teacher was available when she needed to talk or wanted to have lunch in his room.

Participant B reported feeling a little isolated in elementary school, since she was one of the only African American students in her homeroom. During middle school and high school,

students changed classes, so she had an opportunity to be in classes with other African American students.

Personal factors

Participant B reported that school was "relatively easy for her." Participant B described herself as an auditory and visual learner. She learned best from step-by-step examples in math and science classes. Time management was essential to her success in school since she participated in many clubs and activities including swimming, track, volleyball, MAC scholars, and spirit club. Participant B attributes involvement in these activities as helping her "push to keep your grades good."

Participant B reported that family support was an important factor in her academic success. She said that her family provided help with assignments and designated time for schoolwork from an early age. Participant B fondly remembers "sitting down at the table together doing homework" with her family. In high school, Participant B stated that her family support was available, however, she had gained independence in doing her schoolwork.

Participant B said that she had the same friend group throughout her school experience. She formed study groups with her peers, which contributed to her academic success in school. For example, she reported that her friends would assist in sharing notes from classes. With her peers, she would attend teacher academy periods together for reteaching of concepts.

School factors

Attending a small school lead to a supportive environment for Participant B. She reported administrators and teachers "did a good job of making sure that everyone was included." As for students, she stated "everyone's always so friendly." Participant B also said that the school had a

culture of high expectations for students. She was motivated to perform well academically because "other people around you are motivated to do well."

Teacher relationships were an important part of her academic success. "Teachers cared about how their students did." For example, her Spanish teacher could always tell if she was struggling with a concept. Participant B would often seek out the Spanish teacher after class "just to chat."

Participant B identified other key personnel that were helpful to her academic success in school. Counselors helped with the college process and to navigate choosing academic classes. Coaches also impacted her success in school. Participant B said that coaches "cared so much about all of their students." Coaches provided an indirect impact on academic success because coaches "push you in your sport…also pushes you to do good in school."

Participant C

Lived Experience

Participant C is currently a medical resident in emergency medicine. While in high school, Participant C reported not having a sense of belonging in the school since she was not the same religion as most of the school community. Participant C reflected that high school was difficult since there were many top performing students. She referenced that her class had many students with perfect ACT scores. This academic competitive environment was challenging for her. Participant C also stated that the financial burdens of her family were challenging. She did not attend the capstone field trips, such as sixth grade camp and eighth grade Washington DC trip due to family financial barriers and parental concerns with overnight trips. Another financial challenge was the lack of the Internet at home, so Participant C had to complete her online assignments at school or at the library.

In medical school, Participant C explained the difficulty of being a first-generation medical student. Her parents are not doctors, so she felt like "I am going head first, hoping that I get out." Participant C shared that applying to medical school was difficult due to financial barriers. She could not afford to take an MCAT review course, so she had to prepare for this competitive assessment on her own. She stated, "I pulled myself up from my bootstraps."

Personal factors

Participant C described herself as an independent learner. Her preferred learning method was to study independently and then attend a study group to discuss a concept and check her own understanding of the concept. She liked to come to the study group setting with a solid understanding of the material. Participant C also attributed time management as an important skill to her success. She prioritized homework after a long day of school and extracurricular activities.

Parental and extended family support was an important factor in Participant's C success in school. Her parents emphasized the importance of going to college and being successful. She credited her parents as a "driving factor to finish" her education. Her family support was also extended to her grandparents, godparents, and parental friends. Being surrounded by "educated Black adults" was very motivating for Participant C.

School factors

Participant C was appreciative of her school experience in terms of the diversity of abilities. She was able to attend school with students with autism, down syndrome, deafness, and other disabilities. Participant C was motivated to achieve by watching these peers overcome their disabilities. Participant C also commented on the level of academically exceptional students in

her classes. "I had no choice but to be exceptional too." There was a pride in attending her high school. Participant C felt that the school did not allow students to "slip through the cracks."

Participant C utilized outside of class time to study with her teachers. As a "shy and reserved" student, working with teachers in a private setting was critical to her academic success. Participant C recalled a math teacher that encouraged her to look at the big picture of her school trajectory. He reinforced that she had "solid foundational skills in math." She also referenced there were teachers that she did not even have in class, but she felt comfortable hanging out with friends during study hall with these approachable teachers. In contrast, Participant C did not connect with "strict teachers." It was difficult to approach teachers that she did not have a good relationship.

Participant C was active in extracurricular activities including tennis, cross country, and indoor track. Her teammates in these activities provided her a social break from the pressures of the academic rigors of school.

Participant D

Lived Experience

Participant D is currently an accountant. She did not identify any academic barriers in school. Participant D stated "I don't think I had any real major barriers academically." Overall, her high school experience "prepared me for the rest of my academic career." As a high performing student, Participant D was in many advanced classes. As a result, Participant D did feel like she was bullied by other African American students for "being white." In addition, Participant D felt isolated by the students in her advanced classes. She stated, "There was only a few of us." Participant D noted that during 2016 presidential election, her high school "did not feel as welcoming and safe" due to a lot of students feeling "bold."

Personal factors

Along with high expectations, her parents also instilled goal setting for success. Participant D stated, "having a high standard for yourself, having goals to achieve" was instrumental in her academic success. Participant D credited her family with setting high expectations for academic achievement. Having parental expectation of earning A's and B's in school, Participant D stated, "I did not get anything below that." In addition to setting a high expectation for academic success, her parents supported her academics with help when needed. Her mother would read over writing assignments and her father would help with math homework.

Participant D had good relationships with a group of friends in her classes. This group made her feel "…loved, welcomed and included." Participant D relied on this group to help her study for her classes. Participant D would meet up with her friends at the library to help each other with homework. According to Participant D, "They were gonna support me no matter what."

Participant D challenged herself in school by taking advanced and difficult classes. For example, Participant D challenged herself in school by learning Chinese. She recalled having to "dig deep and really study hard" for that class. To meet the challenge of these difficult classes, she described her optimal learning mode as "seeing and doing." Participant D learned best from multiple examples in class. Participant D advocated for her learning, by going to teachers for extra help after school when needed. As a result of the rigorous classes, Participant D identified the workload demands of advanced classes helped her with time management. She stated, "I learned how to prioritize things." Participant D also credited the advanced class to helping her "learn how to deal with stress."

School factors

The school staff was an important factor for Participant D's academic success. For example, Participant D was encouraged by her math teacher to continue to take honors courses in high school. She recalls "he pulled me and a couple of students of color aside…just keep the path of taking honors courses."

Participant D shared that hands-on teachers with open office hours were important to her academic success. These teachers were available to her for help with schoolwork or to just talk. Having teachers that pay that extra attention was an important factor in her success. For example, Participant D recalled a social studies teacher that provided extra support in a subject that was difficult for her.

Participant D appreciated that one of these teachers started an African American Literature course. As a senior in high school, she was exposed to her own African American culture through literature. According to Participant D, the teacher "pushed us to think a little bit harder about other people we might not interact with."

In addition, having African American school staff was important for Participant D. An African American counselor in middle school brought "a certain level of subconscious comfort." She also recalled some of the interpreters for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing program were African American. Although she did not work directly with the interpreters, these staff members were "super helpful, super encouraging."

Participant E

Lived Experience

Participant E is currently a college librarian who is pursuing a doctoral degree. Her parents were first-generation college-educated teachers in public school. She attended a small

private parochial urban school for grades K-1, then moved to the suburban public school for second grade. She was immediately placed in special education for speech and a learning disability. As a special education student, Participant E felt that she and the other African American students were the "misfits" of the school. Participant E was eventually removed from special education in 9th grade and transitioned to mainstream classes, which was a difficult transition. Participant E also recalled many teachers that berated students. For example, a math teacher berated a classmate, which led Participant E to shut down and not participate in class. She failed the math class and retook the class in summer school and earned an A. Another example of the discouragement from staff was an African American guidance counselor that told her, "You are probably not going to college." Negative experiences with staff members influenced Participant E to become a schoolteacher and librarian.

Participant E identified several barriers during her education. Cultural barriers occurred in the curriculum. She stated that "my culture was never highlighted outside of being a slave, that was a barrier." Another barrier for Participant E was that she did not "have a sense of belonging." Participant E faced academic barriers being labeled as a special education student then being mainstreamed without any support. She stated she was "trying to keep her head above water, trying to just maintain."

Personal factors

Participant E credited her parental support as a factor in her success in school. Her parents, first-generation college-educated teachers, set the expectation for college attendance. After the school counselor discouraged Participant E from going to college, her mother countered with the statement, "You are going to college, I don't care what they say." Although, Participant E's parents set the expectation to succeed, "they really did not know how to model

it." Her parents put her in "the best situation" and provided support. For example, her father got her a math tutor because she was having difficulty in math class.

Participant E characterized herself as an "abstract and curious learner." She constantly transferred topics in her brain and looked to 'make connections." Participant E said that "It wasn't until I got into college that I blossomed" as a learner. Participant E was one of the ten participants who was interviewed who attended an HBCU. By attending an HBCU, she felt "My identity was acknowledged and I learn about the contributions that being Black made." Participant E credited the combination of her natural curiosity and a positive learning environment in college as her keys as life-long learner today.

School factors

Participant E recognized that special teacher relationships in her academic career positively influenced her as a student, and having African American teachers was important for Participant E. These teachers were "engaging, encouraging, and set high expectations" for learning. For example, an elementary teacher engaged her reading with the "best books." Another example of positive teacher influence was a social studies teacher that allowed her to take her test orally, because "He was able to understand how kids learn differently." Participant E remembers another challenging teacher with high expectations, "She was challenging, but caring." One African American teacher was "a touchpoint for a lot of black kids in the school." Another African American teacher was "a reflection of you."

Participant E felt that experiential learning was an important factor in her academic success. For example, she took an Asian Studies class that took several field trips to the art museum as part of the course. She stated that it was "amazing to experience these different

things." Participant E was actively involved in the school through extracurricular activities, such as sports and the dance team.

Participant F

Lived Experience

Participant F is currently a middle school math teacher. His greatest challenge in school was obtaining self-confidence as a learner. In seventh grade, he said that "I did not know the true value in education until later on." In regards to self-confidence, high school was hard for Participant F. In high school, there was a highly competitive environment. He indicated that as a college sophomore he really gained the self-confidence to "accomplish the goal of graduating from college." He knew "I'm supposed to be here."

Personal factors

Participant F's mother was critical in his academic success. She was responsible for making sure "I stayed on a good path." His mother modeled a strong work ethic by having multiple jobs. Participant F stated, "I always admired her and wanted to be like her." Participant F felt a responsibility to his mother. He said, "I did not want to let her down."

The welcoming school community led to Participant F having a core group of friends. He attributes this friend group with a sense of belonging at school. Participant F would do homework and study with his friends. His friends helped motivate Participant F to have college aspirations. "My friends wanted to go to big schools like Michigan, Ohio State, Penn State. I did not want to be left out." Participant F has maintained these high school friendships today .

Participant F credited discipline and goal setting for his academic success. After high school, he enrolled in the local community college and earned an associate's degree, then he went to a college and earned his bachelor's degree and master's degree.

Participant F learned best from a directed guided note approach. He stated, "You tell me it. I'll write it down on a piece of paper and then I'll just study it until it's stuck in my brain." He also benefited as a visual learner with pictures, charts, and diagrams. One strategy that helped him with his academic success was to go to the library to study.

School factors

Participant F stated that his high school had "high expectations for students." He credited these high expectations for his college preparation. He indicated that the mission of the school was "student success." Attending a very diverse school provided Participant F with an appreciation of the different cultures.

Participant F credited good teachers having an impact on his academic success. For example, a math teacher was so engaging, funny and witty. "He's a one of a major, major factor of me being a teacher today." Overall, Participant F appreciated the dedication of the faculty and staff at his high school. "As I got older, I was able to appreciate how hard they worked." Participant F recognized that his teachers set high expectations for him as a learner.

Participant F was active in sports participating on the football, basketball, and track teams. The teams provided him with a social outlet for school. The coaches were important to Participant F's success in academics and life. He attributed life lessons, such as goal setting to his track coach. In track, he learned to set small goals to improve his race time. For participant F, his journey to become a teacher was achieved by setting small goals: associate's degree, bachelor's degree, and master's degree.

Participant G

Lived Experience

Participant G obtained a bachelor's degree in urban studies and a master's degree in public administration. Currently, she is employed at the College of Social Work at a major university working to transform high needs schools.

As a high-performing suburban African American student, Participant G also recognized that she was not "urban enough" for some groups of African American students. As Participant G reflected on her school experience, she recalled "not having a whole bunch of teachers that looked like me." When she did have an African American teacher, Participant G stated, "it made my learning experience at school more enriching."

Participant G recognized that being one of a few minority students in some classes led to uncomfortable conversations. For example, she was one of two African American students in a Human Rights class. There were many people in the class with differing opinions. Participant G felt "uncomfortable voicing my opinion." Later in high school, Participant G found her voice in uncomfortable conversations. For example, when meeting with her school counselor to discuss college options, her counselor was discouraging her from applying to certain colleges. Participant G found the courage to disagree with her counselor and apply to the colleges.

Personal factors

Participant G lived with her mother and grandparents. Her mother worked multiple jobs "out of necessity to help support us" and Participant G "appreciated the sacrifices." Participant G credits her family for "pushing her" to be engaged and involved in school. Her family, including her father, were always "present" in her school career. Her family provided her the constant reminder that "You got to be twice as good. You got to work even harder." She felt this

statement was a reminder of the high expectations for herself as an African American student. Participant G's family reinforced the expectation that "I am going to graduate from high school, and I am going to go to college and make something of my life and myself." Her extended family also provided a support network for her. Participant G surrounded herself with a group of friends with similar values. "School was a priority" for her peers. There was an expectation with her friends that "we wanted to do well" in school.

Participant G described herself as a person that "loved school and enjoyed learning" and she was "self-motivated and determined." As a young elementary student, she described herself as the "teacher's helper." She was highly motivated to assist the teachers with school tasks. When faced with a difficult class, such as chemistry, Participant G would spend a lot of time getting extra help.

School factors

The small school environment led to a sense of belonging in the school community for Participant G. Another positive aspect of the small school environment was the small class sizes. Participant G stated, "I tend to do better in those smaller classes."

Participant G was highly active and engaged in her school community. She participated in orchestra, choir, cheerleading and many other clubs. Her coaches and advisors positively influenced her as a high performing student. One club that had a positive impact on Participant G was the Scholars, a club focused on closing the achievement gap. The club "helped me feel that I was seen as a Black student." The club assured her that "there were folks in the building that cared about me in that part of my identity." Extracurricular activities also provided Participant G with experiential learning through travel with the choir and orchestra.

Participant G learned best from engaging and supportive teachers who developed relationships with their students. With these teachers, Participant G was comfortable seeking out extra help and support. For example, the Spanish teacher was identified as one of "my go to people." Participant G would seek the Spanish teacher for extra help with classwork and for "stuff outside of class." Participant G remembered her freshman advisor that assisted with her "life drama." Another example of a teacher relationship was her fourth-grade teacher. Participant G stated, "She showed an interest in me as an individual, not just a student." Participant G appreciated the opportunity to be engaged in the curriculum with relevant topics, such as race. For example, Participant G fondly recalled the Human Rights class was the first class that discussed race in a formal setting.

The support staff of the school had a positive impact on Participant G's school experience. Bus drivers, lunch ladies, custodians, and the latchkey staff were critical members of the staff. Participant G said, "They were supportive in making me feel just seen and valued as an individual."

Participant H

Lived Experience

Participant H is currently a mechanical engineering master's degree student. Participant H felt that high school was relatively conflict free. Participant H was challenged to be recommended for certain AP level courses. He was not recommended for AP American History as an incoming 9th grade student. As a result, Participant H did not pursue any AP social studies courses. Participant H also remembered being recommended for AP Calculus AB instead of AP Calculus BC even though he had received A's in the prior course. With his parents' support, he had to "stand my ground to get into the classes." Once in the advanced classes, Participant H

recalled that there was just one other African American in his classes. He stated, "It was a bit of an alienating experience, but I got used to it." According to Participant H, "I was not black enough for the other black kids and I was not white enough for the white people." When Participant H was accepted in a prestigious university, others had commented to him that "you only got in because you are black."

Personal factors

Participant H's parents were an influential role in his academic success. His parents supported his efforts to take advanced classes and be involved in extracurricular activities. Participant H's parents had the high expectations for his academic success in school and with extracurricular activities. Participant H felt his parents supported his interests and passions for both inside and outside of school.

Participant H felt that he was in the "smart nerdy" click at school. His friends were those students that shared the same classes and activities. Participant H and his friends did homework together and studied for tests together. The study groups allowed Participant H to "verbalize my understanding for topics and uncover any holes in my understanding." Participant H also attributed his friend group to spark his internal "competitive person."

Participant H gravitated to the math and science classes during high school. His preferred learning style was to practice different problems through repetition. Participant H also utilized multiple online resources to help with understanding difficult concepts. Participant H saw homework as an opportunity for a "good foundation" for learning. Participant H also utilized the teacher office hours for help and extra opportunities for learning.

School factors

Participant H described the high school as having "a culture of learning." He recalled the majority of students focused on learning and this positive culture impacted his academic success. The school offered a wide variety of AP and Honors classes for a relatively small school. He credited this exposure to advanced classes as an influencing factor to his academic success.

Participant H connected with his math and science teachers and club advisors. For example, the robotics teacher attributed to his interest in pursuing engineering. According to Participant H, the robotics teacher did a good job with "allowing us to fail when we needed to fail and succeed when we needed to succeed." Another example of a teacher making a connection with Participant H was his physics teacher. In this standards-based physics classroom, Participant H was allowed to test his skills whenever he was ready to assess. Participant H recognized this mastery-based classroom as "a really good model of instruction."

Participant H was highly involved in the extracurricular activities in school including golf, robotics, talent show, orchestra, and Science Olympiad. These clubs provided Participant H with hands-on learning experiences that engaged him. He was "highly focused" on taking math and science classes and doing activities like robotics and Science Olympiad which supported his interest in engineering. Extracurricular activities also provided leadership experiences for Participant H. As a student director of the talent show, Participant H learned to delegate tasks, work with a team, and develop the program.

Participant I

Lived Experience

Participant I is currently an undergraduate student studying journalism. As a middle school student, she did not participate in the gifted program. However, in high school, she was

able to take Honors and AP classes. This transition to advanced courses in high school was challenging for Participant I. For example, she made the jump to Honors English her sophomore year. She found the transition with writing difficult since she did not have the previous exposure in the general education classes. Participant I felt that certain teachers were barriers for her learning. She stated some teachers "took pride in the fact that students struggled." Participant I also felt that the literature in the curriculum was "not only outdated, but extremely racist texts." She referenced texts that portrayed African American, Asian, and Indian characters in a negative light.

Personal factors

Participant I's parents were very supportive in her academic success. Her parents grew up in an urban setting and did not have the same opportunities as she did. Participant I recognized that her parents were influential in her desire to "continue the cycle of upward mobility." She described her parents as "always invested" and "extremely supportive to a fault" in her education. Participant I felt her parents "helicoptered" in regards to her education. For example, they would utilize the online gradebook to check on her grades regularly. Participant I felt that she has thrived with the independence of college as demonstrated by her perfect GPA. In addition to her parents, Participant I received support from her older sister and grandparents.

Participant I had a supportive friend group that helped her with academic success at school. Many of her friends were in the same classes and extracurricular activities. They supported each other with assignments and how to navigate different teachers' classes. Participant I developed "strong bonds" with her peers and is still in contact with many of her peers today.

Participant I stated that she "made a space for herself that I could be comfortable" in her high school environment. This self-reliance led to her having a strong sense of belonging in her school community. Participant I was actively involved in the school environment with "race relations." She felt comfortable advocating for students with administrators and teachers.

Participant I described herself as a visual, hands-on learner. She taught herself by searching videos on topics. She stated, "I have learned to just take initiative in my learning." She also attributed her "carefree and easy going" attitude as part of her academic success. She prioritized assignments and homework completion in order to free up time to work on personal interests. As an independent learner, Participant I wanted to do things for herself first before asking for help or assistance. Participant I had an overall positive school experience because she "took the initiative to make my experience."

School factors

The small school welcoming environment was a positive factor for Participant I's academic success. Participant I excelled socially in this school environment. Her high school environment was challenging for her academically. She credits this challenge in helping her prepare for a relatively easy transition to college academic rigor. The small school environment also allowed Participant I to have better connections with teachers. Some teachers made a positive difference for Participant I. For example, she recalls the English teacher that encouraged her to take honors English. She felt that this teacher made "a genuine connection with students of color." This teacher was "intentional about listening to students and provided a safe space for students." Participant I sought out this teacher even when she did not have the teacher for class.

Extracurricular activities were critical to Participant I's success at school. She was involved in journalism, Scholars, equity team, climate action team, and drill team. As a

journalism student, she was comfortable interviewing the administrators of the school and district on important topics, such as the achievement gap with ACT scores. As a member of the Scholars group, Participant I felt there was a safe space for African American students in the school. This support group provided several college tours for African American students. As a member of the Equity team, Participant I participated in an inclusive diversity summit for the entire student body. Participant I's involvement in extracurricular activities were rooted in her personal interests and passions.

Participant J

Lived Experience

Participant J is currently a production assistant for a major production network in California. He has aspirations to be a member of a writer's room for television network series. Excelling in school was relatively easy for Participant J. He describes his "love and hate" relationship with English class in high school. His freshman English classes was the first time that he was challenged to succeed academically. In his AP Literature class, Participant J recalled being one of two African American students in the class. It was challenging because classmates made jokes about Toni Morrison's book *Beloved.* According to Participant J, "the jokes surrounding this really dark book about slavery made us uncomfortable."

As a member of the queer community, Participant J said "I could not quite be who I was openly" during his time in high school. As a junior and senior in high school, participation in the Gay Straight Alliance allowed participant J to begin to open up about his true self.

Personal factors

Participant J's mother had high academic standards for him. She was a schoolteacher in a neighboring school district. His mother also provided him with balance from the rigor of

academics and stress, “She was my rock all through high school.” Participant’s J father and stepfather also supported his academic success in school. Another supportive group for Participant J was his church. The members of his church helped sponsor him to attend an expensive film camp in the summer.

Participant J had a small supportive friend group of “nerdy black friends” that attributed to his academic success. This small group of peers provided social support in the navigation of the Honors and AP classes as well as academic support. Participant J felt a connection to school through his friends. “I had a sense of belonging. I was good at finding my people.” Participant J’s friends were one of the first group of people that he came out to as a member of the queer community.

Participant J described himself as a visual learner that did well with practical examples. He would pay attention in class and do his homework regularly. Participant J attributed his persistence for his academic success. “I did not want to give up just because something was difficult.” He sought assistance from his teachers during the academy period times. He appreciated the teachers that exhibited patience with him as a learner. He was less likely to seek out help from teachers when they were “condescending.”

School factors

Participant J felt a connection to school through his administrators and counselors. He worked as a technology intern in the summers for the school district. This working relationship with the school district was extended through his time in college.

Participant J developed good relationships with school personnel. He indicated that there was a “mutual respect” for his teachers. Participant J developed relationships with teachers that cared about him as a person. For example, his rigorous high school freshman English teacher

challenged Participant J to become a better writer. Participant J connected with the TV production teacher throughout middle school and high school. This teacher invested in his interest in a career in TV productions. Participant J also appreciated teachers that had a sense of humor. Participant J did not want to disappoint his teachers because of these close relationships. He excelled academically as a way to show his admiration to his teachers. Participant J sought assistance from his teachers during the academy period times.

Research Questions

In this section, the findings from all ten participants to each research question based on the data collected is reported. Through the interviews, common themes emerged for the research questions, which are reported below.

Research Question 1

How do high performing African American students describe lived experiences in a suburban high school?

There were five themes that emerged for the lived experiences of the high performing African Americans. Isolation, competition, curriculum, dichotomy of recommendations, and representation were evident in multiple responses from the participants. The themes and specific examples from the interviews and analysis are reported below. Table 19 illustrates which participants reference each theme.

Table 19

Summary of Themes for Research Question 1

Participant	Isolation	Competition	Curriculum	Dichotomy of Recommendations	Representation
Participant A		X			
Participant B	X			X	X
Participant C		X		X	

Participant	Isolation	Competition	Curriculum	Dichotomy of Recommendations	Representation
Participant D	X		X	X	X
Participant E	X		X	X	X
Participant F		X			
Participant G	X		X	X	X
Participant H	X			X	
Participant I			X	X	
Participant J	X	X	X		

Isolation

One common theme of the lived experiences of African American students is that of isolation. Most of the participants reported that they were one of the few African American students in their advanced courses. This led to students feeling isolated in their classes as well as with their African American peers in the school. For example, Participant B remembers being the only African American student in her elementary years. Participant D reported that she was accused of "being white" by other African American students. She also recognized that "there was only a few of us" in her advanced classes. Participant E felt that she was labeled as "misfit" for being in special education classes. Participant G was not "urban enough" for some group of African American students. Participant H stated, "I was not black enough for the other black kids and I was not white enough for the white people." The sense of isolation was identified as a challenge for the participants. Participant J identifies as openly queer and stated, "I could not be who I was openly in high school." The theme of isolation can be triangulated with the Part A survey. Isolation was a common theme in both the survey and interviews.

Competition

Another theme that emerged from the lived experiences of African American students was competition. Several referenced the highly competitive environment in the high school and with friends. Participant C described the school and fellow students as highly competitive. For

example, she referenced several students with perfect ACT scores and college acceptances. Participant C said, "it was a lot of pressure to be around them consistently." Participant A referenced that he and his friends would "do the best that we could in classes to get in the best college possible." Participant F felt that highly competitive environment affected his self-confidence in his abilities to achieve. Participant F stated, "everybody seemed like they were doing so well." He also stated that "they always seem so competitive…you don't think you have that when you actually get your education." Participant J stated, "I needed to keep my grades up so that I could get into a good college."

Curriculum

Having culturally relevant curriculum was a theme that emerged for the high performing African American students. Participant I was challenged by "not only outdated, but extremely racist texts" in her English classes. She referenced texts "where black people are called racial slurs" and "Asian and Indian people being shown as barbaric." In her opinion, the texts portray African American, Asian, and Indian characters in a negative light. She was happy that the Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain was removed from the curriculum. Participant E stated that "my culture was never highlighted outside of being a slave, that was a barrier." In contrast, Participant D was appreciative of the opportunity to have an African American literature course. Participant D stated, "The course broadened our horizons and made us look outside of the United States." Participant G spoke positively of a Human Rights course. She stated, "We talked about race and privilege in all sorts of things." She also said that "it just made my learning experience more enriching." Both of these courses provided these students with opportunities to learn with a culturally relevant curriculum. Participant J said, " We read really dark books about slavery

which made us uncomfortable as the only Black students in the class." A culturally relevant curriculum was evidenced by the data collected from the surveys and interviews.

Dichotomy of Recommendations

There was a dichotomy of recommendations from staff regarding advanced coursework and colleges. Staff recommendations both positively and negatively influenced participants. Recommendations to rigorous courses, programs, or colleges emerged as a theme for several of the participants. Participant H recalls not being able to take AP U.S. History as freshman in high school. This lack of access led him to not pursuing other advanced social studies courses. He stated, "It was difficult to get into the class that I thought I should have been in." He also was recommended to take AP Calculus AB instead of the more rigorous AP Calculus BC. In this case, the student did not follow the teacher's recommendation. He said, "I would have to stand my ground a little bit to get into classes." Participant G was discouraged to apply to certain colleges by her counselor. Participant G remembered, "I was discouraged to apply to some colleges and was told to think of smaller and local colleges." She did not follow her counselor's recommendation and applied to the colleges of her choice. Participant E was discouraged from going to college by a school counselor. Participant E remembered that her counselor said, "The chances are you are not going to college with your grades." However, Participant E's mother reinforced the fact that she was going to go to college. Her mother told her "I don't care what they say, you are going to go to college."

In contrast, several students were recommended or encouraged by their teachers to take advanced coursework. Participant B was positively influenced by the school counselors in selecting courses and through the college application process. According to Participant B, her counselor was "very helpful and answered pretty much every question" regarding the college

admission process. Participant C and Participant D were recommended by their math teacher to continue their pursuit of advanced mathematics. Participant C's math teacher said that "she had a strong foundation for Calculus." Participant D's math teacher "encouraged students of color" and was "looking out for us." Participant F believed that his math teacher was "one of a major, major factor of me being a teacher today." Participant I was encouraged to take Honors English as a sophomore after being encouraged by her freshman English teacher. Her English teacher told her, "You do not need to be in regular English classes, you should be in the Honors English class."

Recommendations can be inferred from the responses to question 15 in the Part A survey. It is evident that recommendations had a substantial impact on academic success with a mean of 3.7 out of 5 and a standard deviation of 1.0.

Representation

Representation with teachers of color was another emerging theme for the participants. Participant B stated that her biggest barrier was "not having anyone that looked like me until high school." She suggested that "having a familiar face would have made my school experience a little easier." She felt that African American teachers would have "helped cultural stuff click for me in my head." Participant D stated that having an African American counselor in middle school brought a "certain level of subconscious comfort." Participant D recalled the lunch time groups with the counselors as help "to talk about any of our stressors." According to Participant D, "It was really helpful just to have somebody to talk to you." Participant E recalled that one African American teacher was "a touchpoint for a lot of black kids in the school" and was "amazing." Another African American teacher reminded Participant E of her mother. "She was like a momma; she was like home" and she was "a reflection of you." Participant E recalled she

would act appropriately in the presence of this teacher since "it was just like being at home." Participant G said that having an African American teacher "made my learning experience at school more enriching." She recalled, "I now realize how important that was in those years. And how when I had those folks (African American teachers) and how I latched on to them."

The Part A survey can be used to triangulate the representation theme. According to the survey results, participants expressed that they only saw individuals who looked like them working in positions such as janitors, cafeteria workers, and teachers who did not teach common core subjects. Moreover, the survey established that having representation is essential for inspiring students.

Research Question 2

What school factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success?

There were three themes that emerged from the participants' responses regarding school factors that attributed to their academic success. The three themes were environment, supportive staff, and extracurricular activities. Below is a detailed explanation of each theme with direct support from the participants' interview responses. Table 20 outlines the participants responses in relationship to the three themes.

Table 20

Summary of Themes for Research Question 2

Participant	Environment	Supportive Staff	Extracurriculars
Participant A	X	X	X
Participant B	X	X	X
Participant C	X	X	X
Participant D		X	X
Participant E		X	X
Participant F	X	X	X

Participant	Environment	Supportive Staff	Extracurriculars
Participant G	X	X	X
Participant H	X	X	X
Participant I	X	X	X
Participant J		X	X

Environment

One common theme that emerged for high performing African American students was the school environment. Participant A recognized that the abundance of resources within the school environment contributed to his academic success. He stated, "going to a school with resources to pursue what you want to pursue" was a critical factor in his academic success. Participant B reported that the small school environment led to a supportive environment with high expectations for all. The school personnel "did a good job of making sure that everyone was included" and students at the school were "motivated to do well." This environment led to motivation for Participant B to be successful in school. "I think just knowing that I could perform high and perform well was my motivation." Participant C also recognized the level of academically exceptional students in her classes. "They were exceptional students, and I had no choice but to be exceptional too." She felt a sense of ownership in the schools' high expectations. "We can't let the school's name go down and I think that motivated us" to achieve. "Participant F stated that the school had "high expectations for students" and the mission was "student success." Participant G felt the small school environment led to a sense of belonging in the school community. The smaller class sizes led to better student achievement outcomes for Participant G. "You knew all your teachers and I never felt like just a number." The small school environment allowed her to be "involved and to do lots of things." Participant H described the school environment as having a "culture of learning" and "a relatively focused school" with a majority of the students at the school focused on learning. The small school environment

provided a welcoming environment for Participant I. She stated, "I could be friends with people that I wanted to be friends with" and I could "build up rapport with people."

Supportive Staff

Another theme that emerged from the interviews with high performing African American students was having supportive teachers and staff. Most participants reported that supportive teachers and staff helped them achieve academic success in school. Participant A reported that his teachers were easily accessible for extra help. For example, he described his math teacher as non-judgmental, supportive, and approachable. Participant B emphasized the importance of teacher relationships on learning. For example, "teachers cared about how their students did." As a shy student, Participant C appreciated teachers that encouraged her academic ability. Participant D recalls that hands-on teachers with open office hours were critical in her success as a student. Participant E found teachers who were "engaging, encouraging, and set high expectations" for learning as an important factor in her success as a student. Participant F recognized that his teachers set high expectations for him as a learner. Participant G learned best from engaging and supportive teachers who developed relationships with their students. With these teachers, Participant G was comfortable seeking out extra help and support. Participant H connected with teachers that supported his interests in math, science, and engineering. Participant I connected with teachers that "provide a safe space for students." Participant J also connected with teachers that cared about him as a person.

Besides teachers, there were other school staff that high performing African American students reported as having a positive influence on their academic achievement. Participant B identified her school counselor for having a positive effect on her academic success through the college selection process. Many participants reported that their club advisors and coaches

impacted their success in school. For example, Participant B recognized that coaches had a direct impact on student success. Participant F recognized that his track coach taught him the life lesson of goal setting. Participant G commented that the support staff, such as bus drivers, lunch ladies and latchkey staff, made her feel "seen and valued as an individual."

Positive school staff relationships can be inferred from the responses to questions 13 and 14 in the Part A survey. It is evident that school staff support had a substantial impact on academic success with a mean of 4.4 out of 5 and a standard deviation of 0.6. Additionally, teachers who built strong connections with students were perceived as being the most effective with a mean of 4.6 out of 5 and a standard deviation of 0.7 in facilitating learning.

Extracurricular Activities

The third theme that emerged from high performing African American students as school factors in their academic success was involvement in extracurricular activities. Most of the participants were highly involved in multiple extracurricular clubs and athletic opportunities. Participant A participated in Science Olympiad, swim team, and orchestra. Participant B was involved in swimming, track, volleyball, scholars, and spirit club. Participant C was active in extracurricular activities including tennis, cross country, and indoor track. Participant E was actively involved in the school through extracurricular activities, such as sports and the dance team. Participant F was active in sports participating on the football, basketball, and track teams. Participant G participated in orchestra, choir, cheerleading, and many other clubs. Participant H was highly involved in the extracurricular activities in school including golf, robotics, talent show, orchestra, and Science Olympiad. Participant H felt that extracurriculars "supported my education." Participant I participated in journalism, scholars, equity team, climate action team, and drill team. Participant J participated in video broadcasting and as a technology intern.

The participants indicated that their participation in extracurriculars facilitated a sense of belonging and engagement in the school community. Participant G stated that "extracurriculars pushed me to be engaged at school." Participation in the extracurricular activities also provided time management. Participant C recognized that because of sports "I got back home at six or seven, then I would do my homework so I could be asleep by eleven." Extracurriculars also provided leadership opportunities. Participant H reported that extracurriculars provided "a good experience of working on team, delegated task, letting do things by ourselves."

The positive effects of extracurricular activities can be inferred from the response to question 15 in the Part A survey. It is evident that extracurricular activates had a substantial impact on academic success with a mean of 4.4 out of 5 and a standard deviation of 0.6.

Research Question 3

What personal factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success?

There were three themes that were identified for personal factors that attributed to academic success. The themes were parents, friends and determined learners. The themes and details supporting these themes are listed below. Table 21 illustrates the themes for research question 3 by participants.

Table 21

Summary of Themes for Research Question 3

Participant	Parents	Friends	Determined Learners
Participant A	X	X	X
Participant B	X	X	X
Participant C	X	X	X
Participant D	X	X	X
Participant E	X		X
Participant F	X	X	X

Participant	Parents	Friends	Determined Learners
Participant G	X	X	X
Participant H	X	X	X
Participant I	X	X	X
Participant J	X	X	X

Parents

A common theme for personal factors attributing to high performing African American academic success was family support. Many of the participants cited their parents and extended family members as influential in their academic success. Participant A's parents instilled the strong work ethic with the idea of "school was his job" and he needed to "do well" in school. Participant A recognized that "both of my parents were educated; they have a strong emphasis on education." Participant B fondly remembered "sitting down at the table together doing homework" with her family at an early age. She gained independence with homework in high school, but recognized her parents "were always there if I needed help." Participant C's parents emphasized the importance of going to college and being successful. She recalled "my parents would say you are going to study because you need to get into college." Her parents were "the most important driving factor to finish college." Participant D credited her parents for high expectations and goal setting for her academic success. Her parents "set the high standard for getting "A's and B's in school." Participant E's parents were first-generation college students, so they set the expectation for college attendance. Her parents realized "you only have one chance to educate your kid." They moved the family from the city to the suburban school in search of a better education for Participant E. Participant F's mother was a positive role model with a strong work ethic. She held multiple jobs to support her family. Participant F said, "I always admired my mom and wanted to be like her." Participant G's mother "worked two jobs…she did it out necessity to help support us. I was aware of her sacrifices." Participant G's mother also reminded

her often that "You got to be twice as good. You got to work even harder." Participant H's parents supported his interests and passions both inside and outside of school. "My parents would bring me to different extracurriculars. They were pushing me to do all these things and encouraging to continue these extracurriculars." Participant I attributed her parents influence in her desire to "continue the cycle of upward mobility." Her parents grew up in the city and had limited opportunities. Participant I described her parents as "not enjoying what they do" for jobs. This awareness has caused Participant I to continue her education so that "I enjoy my work." Participant J reported that his mother "pushed me to pursue academic rigor and to challenge myself" and "she was my rock all throughout high school."

The positive effects of family support can be inferred from the response to question 11 in the Part A survey. It is evident that family had a substantial impact on academic success with a mean of 4.4 out of 5 and a standard deviation of 0.8.

Friends

Another theme that emerged as personal factors for high achieving African American students was establishing a supportive friend group. Many participants reported that they had a supportive friend group with similar academic interests. Participant A stated that his friends were very "goal-orientated" and "looking toward the future." Participant B formed study groups with her friends and shared notes. "We definitely leaned on each a lot with classes, doing study groups, and sharing notes." Participant C's friends participated in the same extracurricular activities which provided a social break from the academic pressures of school. "It was nice to hang out with the jocks and talk about sports and things that weren't academic, it was a nice break." Participant D reports that her friends made her feel "…loved, welcomed and included." Her friends "were really there for me and I knew they would come through for anything."

Participant F's friends provided a sense of belonging. "I felt that I fit it and belonged." Participant F's friends also motivated him to dream big with college aspirations. "I wanted to be like them, so I worked hard." Participant G's friends had similar values, "school was a priority" and "my friends were like-minded." Participant H identified his friends as the "smart nerdy" click at school. Participant I reported that her friend helped her navigate through different teachers' classes. Participant J stated that "my nerdy black friends" were available for venting about the challenges of high school. His friends also provided a "sense of belonging" in the school. For high performing students a strong, positive peer group was influential in their academic success in school.

Triangulating with Part A question 12 on peer support, it becomes apparent that having supportive friends can greatly impact academic success. Students benefited greatly from the peer support of their fellow African American classmates, as evidenced by a mean of 3.3 out of 5 with a standard deviation of 1.4 in the realm of academic achievement.

Determined Learners

The third theme that emerged as a personal factor for high performing African American students was being determined learners in school. Most participants reported actively seeking assistance from teachers and other resources especially for rigorous classes. Participant A stated "you have to kind of dig deep to push through…" when faced with challenging classes. This statement can be associated with GRIT; however, Participant A did not define the statement as GRIT. Participant B learned best by practicing multiple examples for classes. She also sought assistance from teachers during the academy period. The academy period was an independent time at the end of the school day where students could seek extra assistance from teachers. Participant C would study independently prior to attending a study group with peers. Participant

D would have to "dig deep and really study hard" for her difficult classes. Participant E was constantly transferring topics in her brain and looking to 'make connections" as an engaged learner. Participant F engaged with learning by writing notes and studying at the library. Participant G would get extra help from teachers for difficult subjects, such as chemistry. Participant H would engage with multiple online resources to assist in his learning. Participant I would also engage in online learning through videos. Participant J credited his persistence for his academic success as "I did not want to give up just because something was difficult."

Summary

For Part B, ten participants were interviewed by me. There were four males and six females ranging in age from 18-27+. Doctoral degrees were currently being pursued by 40% of the participants, while 20% of participants were not seeking advanced degrees. Each of the participant's interviews were analyzed for lived experiences, personal factors, and school factors that attributed to their academic success.

Although each participant had a unique lived experience, there were several themes that emerged from the interviews. The five themes that emerged from the lived experiences of the participants were isolation, competition, curriculum, recommendation, and representation. Four of these themes are supported by research in the literature review. The only theme that was not researched is the theme of competition. Many of the participants reported feeling isolated as high performing African American student. The isolation occurred from being one of the few African American students in the advanced classes. A secondary form of isolation existed for the participants from African American peers. The participants reported that they were "not Black enough" for their African American peers. Many participants also referenced the competitive nature of school. The high performing African American students felt pressure to achieve from

their classmates. Often this competitive pressure was viewed as a positive pressure of the school environment. A third theme was the curriculum. Many participants felt that the curriculum portrayed African Americans and other minorities in a negative light. However, some participants referenced courses such as Human Rights and African American literature as a positive curricular addition to the school course offerings. The fourth theme that emerged was a dichotomy of recommendations. The participants experienced both positive and negative recommendations. The positive recommendations were in the form of a supportive teacher encouraging students to take the next challenging course. The negative recommendations occurred when students were discouraged from take an AP course or applying to certain colleges. The final theme that emerged was representation. The participants reported a lack of African American teacher representation in their school. The participants also reported that having African American teachers allowed them to be seen, heard, and validated. The support from African American staff members was an important factor in their academic success.

There were three themes that were evident for the school factors of academic success for high performing African American students: environment, supportive staff, and extracurricular activities. All of these themes are supported with the research in the literature review. The small welcoming school environment was prominent in the responses of the participants. The school environment boasted a culture of high expectations for all students. The second theme that emerged was the supportive staff. Participants reported that teachers with high expectations and encouragement supported their learning. The participants had positive teacher relationships that extended outside of the classroom. Other staff members positively influenced their academic success including counselors, coaches, and advisors. The third theme for school factors was extracurricular activities. All the participants were actively engaged in the school with several

extracurricular activities. Participation in extracurriculars provided a sense of belonging and engagement in the school.

There were three themes that were evident for the personal factors of academic success for high performing African American students. Parents, friends, and determined learners were the personal factors. Again, these themes are supported by the research in the literature review. Most of the participants reported on the positive influence from parents. Parents provided high expectations for learning as well as resources and support for the participants. The second theme that emerged was a close, supportive friend network. The participants reported that their friends provided support through study groups, similar goals, and high expectations. Finally, most of the participants were determined learners. They sought help from teachers when they needed support in difficult courses. As determined learners, the participants also were determined to succeed. In the next chapter, the themes and the related research of these themes will be discussed.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSION

This mixed methods study examined the lived experiences of high performing African American student in suburban high school. The study provided insights into their lived experiences, school factors and personal factors that contributed to their academic success. The study also provided the participants an opportunity to self-assess their racial identity, Growth Mindset, and Grit. There were 18 participants for the Part A survey and 10 participants for the Part B interviews.

The study sought to answer four research questions. How do high performing African American students describe lived experiences in a suburban high school? What school factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success? What personal factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success? How do high performing African American students score themselves on the Growth Mindset and Grit scales? This study supported the existing literature on high performing African American students. High performing African American students are those students who graduate at the top of their class, consistently enroll in advanced placement, honors or gifted classes, and participate in leadership roles (Chambers et al., 2014).

The findings of this chapter are organized into the following sections: summary of findings, discussion, significance of the study, and recommendations for future research, and the conclusion. The analysis of each research question is connected to the previous research in the literature. This analysis provides the framework for the significance of the study for education and school leaders. The recommendations for future research are suggested. Finally, a summary of synthesizes the important aspects of this research.

Summary of Findings

Analysis of Each Research Question

Several findings emerged from the analysis of survey responses and interview responses. In this section, the findings of the study will be examined by research question and connected to the literature.

Research Question 1

How do high performing African American students describe lived experiences in a suburban high school?

The lived experiences of high performing African American students led to nine findings. The findings can be categorized into student factors and school factors. The student factor findings include isolation microaggressions, strong racial identity, and supportive family and friends. The school factors findings include representation, curriculum, competition, dichotomy of recommendations, and supportive spaces and HBCUs. Eight of the findings are directly connected to the literature. These findings are isolation, microaggressions, strong racial identity, supportive family and friends, representation, curriculum, supportive spaces, and dichotomy of recommendations. The finding of competition was not connected to the literature.

Student Factor Findings

Finding Number 1: Isolation

In this study, high performing African American students reported feeling isolated in their advanced classes. Participants in the survey and interviews reported that they were one of the few African American students in their advanced course. For example, participants stated "being the only black student in classes," "there were only a few of us," and "not feeling like I belonged." Isolation of high performing African American students is well documented in the

literature. Participants also reported that "not black enough" or accused of "talking white" by peers. One participant stated, "I was not black enough for the other black kids and I was not white enough for the white people."

African American students are underrepresented in gifted education services (Ford, 2011) and in advanced placement classes (Education Trust, 2020). The lack of representation leads to feelings of isolation for African American students in schools (Chambers et al., 2014; O'Connor et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2018). Feelings of isolation and racial identity struggles are psychological costs for high performing African American students in predominantly white schools (Chambers et al., 2014; McGee 2013). Finally, due to the isolation in school, high performing African American students may also suffer from loss of connection to the larger African American community (McGee, 2013; Tabron & Venzant Chambers, 2019).

Finding Number 2: Microaggressions

In this study, high performing African American students were subjected to microaggressions from students and staff. In the survey and interviews, participants provided examples of these microaggressions: "You know you were only accepted because you're black and you're filling a quota" and "token black girl." These microaggressions led the participants to feel that their academic abilities were "underestimated" by students and staff.

Microaggressions are subtle, offensive remarks against racial minority groups (Pierce et al., 1977). Microaggressions are negatively related to psychological well-being and physical health (Costa et al., 2023). More specifically, microaggressions for minority college students have been linked to mental anguish, poor self-esteem, and costs to academic success (McCabe, 2009; Nadal et al., 2014). Microaggressions are rooted in the racial toxicity within academic environments at predominately white institutions (Rolon-Dow, 2022).

Finding Number 3: Strong Racial Identity

In this study, the high performing African American students identified their racial identity as part of their academic success. A majority of participants, 55.6%, identified pre-encounter or encounter, the beginning stages of racial identity development while in high school. Only 17% of participants identified the internalization-commitment as their stage of racial identity development while in high school. In the interviews and survey questions, participants identified being "aware of the complexities that come with being a black person in society, but also proud of my identity" and "confident in my own ability."

This finding is prevalent in the research on high performing African American students. High performing African American students demonstrate a strong sense of racial identity (Leath et al., 2019). Racial identity is at the core of the adolescent experience where students desire a sense of belonging and affirmation (Tatum, 2017). African American students move through five stages of racial identity development: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment (Cross, 1991).

Finding Number 4: Supportive Family & Friends

In this study, high performing African American students reported the supportive family and friends as a critical factor in their academic success. In the survey, participants felt the most contributing personal factor for their academic success was the family support (M 4.4, SD 0.8). Participants rated African American peer support (M 3.3, SD 0.7). In the interviews, all ten participants identified parental and family support as critical factors in their academic success. The interviews revealed a strong home environment where "parents prioritize academics," "setting the high standard for getting A's and B's in school," and "do well" in school. Most of the participants identified a supportive friend group as an important factor to their academic

success. The high performing African American students identified friends with similar academic interests such as "goal orientated" and "nerdy black friends."

This finding is well supported in the research. For high performing African American students, a comprehensive system network including community, parents, and peers is essential for student achievement (Jones et al., 2019; Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Positive family and home dynamics has an effect size of .53 on student achievement (Hattie, 2008). Positive peer influence has an .53 effect size on student achievement (Hattie, 2008). High performing African American students frequently described their positive relationships with similar friends critical to academic success (Corley et al., 2020; Jones, 2012).

School Factor Findings

Finding Number 1: Representation

A common finding for the lived experiences of high performing African American students is the lack of representation from teachers of color. Many of the participants identified the lack of representation from teachers of color. "The only staff that looked like me were teachers that did not teach common core subjects, janitors, or cafeteria workers." The importance of teacher representation was highlighted as "representation is crucial and serves as an inspiration for students" and "certain level of subconscious comfort." African American teacher representation allows for high performing students to be seen, heard and validated.

The finding of representation is well documented in the literature. An unintended consequence from *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) is the reduction of African American teachers. The number of African American teachers was drastically reduced by half within a decade (Gladwell, 2017). In schools, African American students rarely walk into a classroom and have a teacher of the same race. Only 18 percent of educators are teachers of color, furthermore

black male teachers represent 2 percent of all teachers (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). The availability of one African American teacher of an advanced level course was associated with a two-percentage point increase in the uptake of advanced courses for African American students (Hart, 2020). Having a teacher of the same race as African American students has a positive impact on reading and a significant impact on math achievement (Egalite et al., 2015).

Finding Number 2: Curriculum

High performing African American students shared their experiences with a lack of representation in the curriculum. Many participants referenced that the curriculum highlighted only the negative aspects of being an African American, such as slavery, racism, oppression and struggle. Specifically, participants identified that "I had no sense of pride in my identity because everything was based on slavery, racism and struggle" and "my culture was never highlighted outside of being a slave, that was a barrier."

A culturally relevant curriculum is well documented in the literature. Students need to see themselves in the curriculum so that it is culturally relevant to them (Flennaugh, 2016). For African American students, a nurturing learning environment and access to high quality education can lead to student success (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). In addition, culturally responsive teaching is the practice in which teachers embed their student's culture into the curriculum and teaching styles. Providing students with high quality curriculum and culturally responsive instruction is linked with high achievement (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). A multicultural curriculum increases student engagement and motivation (Ford, 2011). The Bank's Multicultural Infusion model (2009) outlines levels of multicultural education: contributions, additive, transformation, and social action. This transformative model of multicultural education moves from contributions to social action. For high performing African American students,

providing a curriculum in quadrant four allowed for a pairing of their academic, social, and racial needs.

Finding Number 3: Dichotomy of Recommendations

Teacher and counselor recommendations were a pertinent finding in this study for high performing African American students. Recommendations to take advanced classes was a barrier for some students. Participants felt that the school factor that least contributed to their academic success was encouragement from school staff to take advanced courses (M 3.7, SD 1.0). Participants described not being recommended for AP classes and being discouraged from applying to certain colleges.

Teacher recommendations for gifted or advanced courses is often a barrier for African American students (Ford et al., 2011). Teachers can be viewed as gatekeepers (St. Mary et al., 2018). To combat this barrier, some schools are removing the teacher recommendation requirement for advanced courses. For example, Freehold Regional High School District in New Jersey eliminated teacher recommendations for AP course requirements. A de-tracked system for advanced classes places the responsibility on the parents and students to take the advanced courses (O'Connor et al., 2011).

For many participants in the study, teachers' recommendations were encouraging factors to pursue rigorous coursework. Several participants were encouraged by their Math or English teachers to take rigorous honors and AP courses. Teachers' attitude toward students and high teacher expectation led to student engagement for African American students (Miller, 2015). The warm demander theory suggests that African American students benefit from warm and demanding teachers (Sandilos et al., 2017). These warm demander teachers nurture African

American students with caring, yet high expectations for academic achievement and emphasize their brilliance (Delpit, 2012).

Finding Number 4: Supportive Spaces & HBCUs

In this study, high performing African American students identified supportive spaces as a factor in their academic success. The participants sought out opportunities for supportive spaces in the school, such as a specific teacher or club for African American students. For high performing African American students, a nurturing learning environment and access to high quality education can lead to student success (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). In the study, many students shared that the extracurricular club for African American students provided a supportive and safe environment in school. An example of such programming is the Shaker Schools' Minority Achievement Committee, a student support organization for African American students that provide mentoring and academic support (Yu et al., 2017). The student-led Minority Achievement Committee focuses on normalizing the counternarrative of high performing African American students through peer training and educational experiences (Yu et al., 2017).

A specific example of supportive spaces for some of the participants occurred later in life with their college choice. Participants in the study referenced attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as an important factor in their academic and social success. HBCUs were identified as supportive spaces for post-secondary students. For example, one participant stated, "My identity and history were affirmed, and I saw examples of excellence all around me." Another participant stated, HBCUs "gave me confidence in myself and my accomplishments but taught me to find my own identity outside of academics." Students attend HBCUs for a variety of reasons including a desire to be with other African American students and the opportunity for active racial self-development. (Van Camp et al., 2009). The HBCU

environment fosters a community of African American learners for high performing African American students. High schools need to create a similar welcoming environment for their high performing students.

Finding Number 5: Competition

In this study, the high performing African American students reported on the competitive environment in the school. Participants referenced "it was a lot of pressure to be around them consistently," "they always seem so competitive…you don't think you have that when you actually get your education," and "do the best that we could in classes to get in the best college possible." The highly competitive environment is a byproduct of the college preparatory high school environment. The high school offers 26 advanced placement course and 21 honors courses. 80% of students pursued a post-secondary education. A competitive learning environment was not a focus of the literature review for this study.

Research Question 2

What school factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success?

The school factors of high performing African American students led to three findings that are connected to the literature. These findings are school environment, supportive staff and relationships, extracurricular activities.

Finding Number 1: School Environment

In this study, the school environment was a school factor for high performing African American students. Participants reported that the small and welcoming school environment contributed positively to their academic success. The small environment led to small classes sizes where students felt supported. The participants also reported that the school had high

expectations for all students. The school also provided a lot of resources and activities that supported student learning.

For African American students, a nurturing learning environment and access to high quality education can lead to student success (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Providing students with high quality curriculum and instruction is linked with high achievement for African American students (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Schools that foster a campus culture, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, holistic and integrated support systems, and a sense of belonging are schools where African American students thrive (Museus & Liverman, 2010). The effective school movement highlighted five characteristics of effective schools: strong leadership, clear emphasis on learning, positive school climate, regular and appropriate monitoring of student progress, and high expectations for students and staff (Edmonds, 1979).

Finding Number 2: Supportive Staff and Relationships

Supportive staff and relationships were a school factor for high performing African American student academic success in schools. Most participants reported that supportive teachers and staff helped them achieve academic success in school. Teachers were reported to be "engaging, encouraging, and set high expectations." The study also revealed that high performing African American students were positively influenced by other staff including counselors, club advisors, bus drivers, lunch staff, and latchkey staff.

This finding is well supported in the literature. Teacher–student relationship has a .52 effect size on student achievement (Hattie, 2008). Students who perceived teachers as demanding with high expectations demonstrate positive student growth (Sandilos et al., 2017; Walker 2011). In addition to high expectations for students, teachers need to demonstrate a profound belief in student capabilities (Pitre, 2014). Supportive staff include teachers with the underlying beliefs

that African American students are brilliant and fully capable of learning (Delpit, 2012). Finally, teachers need to be intentional about making connections between information that is being presented and students existing knowledge and cultural frameworks (Pitre, 2014). Being able to draw connections and relationships between the students' lives and the material being taught is essential for African American student achievement (Pitre, 2014).

Finding Number 3: Extracurricular Activities

In this study, extracurricular activities were found to be an important school factor in the success of high performing African American students. Most of the participants were highly involved in multiple extracurricular clubs and athletic opportunities. The participants indicated that participation in extracurriculars facilitated a sense of belonging and engagement in the school community. Participation in extracurricular activities also provided time management and leadership opportunities.

The finding of participation in extracurricular activities is supported in the literature. For high performing African American students, participation in extracurricular activities is essential to successful navigation of schools (Corley et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2017). Participation in extracurricular activities provides opportunities to travel, exposure to new experiences, provides mentors and prepares students for college, and fosters the development of leadership skills (Corley et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2017). Furthermore, extracurricular activities, such as the Shaker Schools Minority Achievement Committee focuses on normalizing the counternarrative of high performing African American students through peer training and educational experiences (Yu et al., 2017). Supportive clubs like the Minority Achievement Committee, provide safe spaces for high performing African American within schools.

Research Question 3

What personal factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success?

The personal factors of high performing African American students led to four findings that are connected to the literature. These findings are parents, friends, determined learners, and code switching,

Finding Number 1: Parents

In this study, parents were an important finding which high performing African American students attributed their academic success. Many of the participants cited their parents and extended family members as influential in their academic success. Parents provided high expectations for academic achievement, support for academics, and positive role models for high performing African American students. The participants of the study reported admiration for their parents.

The finding of positive family support is well documented in the literature. A positive family and home dynamics has an effect size of .53 on student achievement (Hattie, 2008). Parents are vital to promoting or inhibiting academic success (St. Mary et al., 2018). African American students demonstrate a positive sense of self, strong belief in their abilities, and motivation for academic success with the support of their parents (Corley et al., 2020). Schools need to focus on engaging families instead of parent involvement (Leithwood et al., 2010). The higher levels of engagement correlate to Type 5 and Type 6 of Epstein's framework of involvement: decision making and collaborating with the community. Parental involvement is a key to academic success for students.

Finding Number 2: Friends

High performing African American students identified that their friends were an important factor in their academic success. High performing African American students reported that their friends had similar academic interests such as being "goal-orientated" and "looking toward the future." The peers of high performing African American students assisted with study groups as well as providing a social break from the rigorous academic pressures. Most importantly, the peer group provided a sense of belonging for high performing African American students.

The finding of supportive friends can be found in the literature. Positive peer influence has a .53 effect size on student achievement (Hattie, 2008). High performing African American students frequently described their positive relationships with similar friends critical to academic success (Corley et al., 2020; Jones, 2012). Peer support through school organizations provided mentorship and guidance for African American students (Yu et al., 2017).

Finding Number 3: Determined Learners

In this study, high performing African American students were determined learners which positively contributed to their academic success. In this study, student determination was evident through the self-advocacy skills of the high performing African American students. Many students reported seeking additional help and clarification from teachers during the academy time. Participants also reported finding resources to support their learning, such as online videos. Finally, participants' determination was evident by the resilience and persistence with difficult courses.

High levels of student determination for high performing African American students is supported by the literature. African American high school students' determination in school is

attributed to lesson engagement, teachers' attitude towards students, and teacher expectations (Miller, 2015). Determination in learning is a critical part of the warm demander theory (Sandilos et al., 2017). Museus and Liverman (2010) suggested that engagement in educational purposeful activities require academic challenge, active and collaborative learning environment. As a result of high levels of determination, Fantuzzo et al. (2012) suggested that African American students performed significantly better on both reading and mathematics tests.

Finding Number 4: Code Switching

In this study, high performing African American students identified the ability to code switching to navigate between their school, home, and peer environments. In the survey, participants also felt that the ability to code-switch (M 3.9, SD 1.0) was a contributing factor to their academic success. Participants in the survey reported that they were challenged from African American peers that they were "not black enough" or "talking white."

The finding of code switching is prevalent in the literature. Code switching is the double consciousness that African American students must navigate in schools (Chambers et al., 2014). Yu et al. (2017) reported the ability to code switch as a primary reason for African American student success at a suburban high school. Harpalani (2017) suggested that high performing African American students have a strong racial identity to cope with the racial stereotypes in academic settings in predominately white institutions. In addition, high performing African American students described themselves as confident, focused, competitive, determined, and leaders (Corley et al., 2020).

In summary, there were numerous findings of this study related to the three research questions. For research question one, the lived experience of African American students, there were nine total findings that were categorized into student and school factors. The four student

factors findings were isolation, microaggression, strong racial identity, supportive family and friends. The five school factors were representation, curriculum, supportive spaces, dichotomy of recommendations, and competition. All of the findings were supported in the literature except the finding of competitions. For research question two, there were three findings related to school factors for high performing African American students. The school factors were school environment, supportive staff and relationships, and extracurriculars. For research question three, there were four findings related to the personal factors for high performing African American students. The personal factors were parents, friends, determined learners, and code switching. All of the findings for research questions two and three were supported in the literature.

Discussion

This mixed methods research study examined high performing African American graduates of suburban high schools. The study provided insights into the lived experiences, school factors and personal factors, and the self-assessment of Growth Mindset and Grit. High performing African American students are those students who graduate at the top of their class, consistently enroll in advanced placement, honors, or gifted classes, and participate in leadership roles (Chambers et al., 2014). Despite known barriers and challenges, the high performing African American students still found success in school and beyond. The findings of the study were supported by the research from the literature review.

Psychological Costs

High performing African American face the psychological costs of isolation, racial identity, and microaggressions (Chambers et al., 2014; McGee 2013). As a result, high performing African American students may also suffer from loss of connection to the larger African American community (Tabron & Venzant Chambers, 2019; McGee, 2013). In this study,

many of the participants reported feeling isolated in their advanced classes by the small number of African American students. In addition, high performing African American reported feeling isolated by African American peers. According to participant H, "I was not black enough for the other black kids and I was not white enough for the white people."

It is important to note the costs to high performing African American students. Knowing the psychological costs for these students will allow schools to create a more supportive environment for high performing African American students. Examples of a supportive environment can include a support group for African American students. For example, the Shaker Schools Minority Achievement Committee, provide a safe space for high performing African American students within the school (Yu et al., 2017). The participants in the study reported that belonging to the Scholars club provided them with a safe space as African American students. The Scholars club "helped me feel that I was seen as a Black student. There were folks in the building that cared about me in that part of my identity."

The research is profound on the psychological costs associated with high performing African American students (Chambers et al., 2014; O'Connor et al., 2011; Walls & Hall, 2018). There are predictable challenges such as isolation, racial identity, and microaggressions for African American students (Chambers et al., 2014; McGee 2013). Extracurricular programs that are designed to meet the needs of African American students are essential for academic achievement (Yue et al., 2017). Schools need to expand programming designed to support African American students.

Dichotomy of Recommendations

The research on teacher recommendations in regards to African American students for gifted and advanced classes is abundant. Lack of teacher recommendations negatively affects

African American students access to gifted classes (Ford et al., 2011). Teachers are more likely to refer white students for gifted education (Fish, 2017). Student ethnicities impact teacher referrals for gifted education which has led to an underrepresentation of African American students in gifted programs (Elhoweris et. al, 2005). This study illuminated the challenges and barriers for teacher and counselor recommendations. Teachers can be viewed as gatekeepers (St. Mary et al., 2018). To combat teacher bias in the referral process, Manning (2018) suggested professional development and support for classroom teachers in the identification of gifted African American students. Another strategy is the removal of teacher recommendations requirement for advanced courses. For example, Freehold Regional High School District in New Jersey eliminated teacher recommendations for AP course requirements. A de-tracked system for advanced classes places the responsibility on the parents and students to take the advanced courses (O'Connor et al., 2011).

Representation

There is a lack of representation of teachers of color in the American education workforce. According to the Department of Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), only 18 percent of educators are teachers of color. Furthermore, black male teachers represent only 2 percent of all teachers. Research shows that representation has a positive impact on reading and a significant impact on math achievement (Egalite et al., 2015). This study showed that the lack of representation of African American teacher was challenging for high performing students. Having an African American teacher provided high performing students with inspiration. African American teachers provided participants with the opportunity to be seen, heard, and valued in the school community. African American teachers provided the participants with an internal support system within the school.

Schools need to focus on hiring staff that mirrors their student population. By increasing the number of African American teachers in a school, all students will have the opportunity to connect with more teachers of color. A diverse school staff will not only benefit African American students, but it will benefit all students.

Besides teachers, the concept of representation is also extended to the curriculum. Students need to see themselves in the curriculum so that it is culturally relevant to them (Flennaugh, 2016). This study emphasized that high performing African American students did not see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Providing students with high quality curriculum and culturally responsive instruction is linked with high achievement (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). A culturally responsive framework for instruction makes all students feel a sense of ownership and empowerment (Ford et al., 2011).

It is important to note the diversification of curriculum is a journey and not a destination. The needs of our students are constantly evolving. It is important to review curriculum on a regular basis to meet the needs of all students. For African American students, it is important that they see positive portrayals of African Americans in the curriculum. Often times, our curriculum only represents African Americans in a negative and oppressed light.

Supportive Spaces

The study confirmed the need for supportive spaces for high performing African American students within a school. A nurturing learning environment and access to high quality education can lead to student success (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). In the study, the supportive spaces in schools were identified as individual teacher's classrooms as well as an extracurricular club designed for African American students. High performing African American students felt validated and supported in these spaces.

High performing African American students thrive in a welcoming school environment with supportive teachers that build positive relationships. High performing African American students with a sense of belonging in schools is critical for student success (Museus & Liverman, 2010). This study identified that a welcoming school environment with high expectations for learning was a major factor in the success of high performing African American students. This study also confirmed that high performing African American students learned best from teachers in which they had developed a strong relationship. Finally, the school environment was filled with extracurricular opportunities for high performing African American students to excel. Participation in extracurricular activities is essential to successful navigation of schools for high performing African American students (Corley et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2017).

Supportive spaces within teacher classrooms can be nurtured through teacher professional development. Individual teachers have the power to develop strong relationships for students. For high performing African American students, providing teacher professional development in culturally responsive teaching and the warm demander theory will enhance the teachers' abilities to provide support spaces for students. Again, the professional development of teachers needs to be on-going. Improving culturally responsive teaching for students through professional development should become a cultural norm for the school.

Supportive Parents and Friends

This study showed that high performing African American students attributed their success in schools to strong support from parents and friends. African American students demonstrated a positive sense of self, strong belief in their abilities, and motivation for academic success with the support of their parents (Corley et al., 2020). In addition, high performing African American students frequently described their positive relationships with similar friends

critical to academic success (Corley et al., 2020; Jones, 2012). Interestingly, the study also revealed the necessary skill of code switching between peers for high performing African American students. Code switching is the double consciousness that African American students must navigate in schools (Chambers et al., 2014).

This finding can be troublesome for school staff since parental and peer support are outside of the realm of their control. However, it is important to recognize the importance of parental and peer support. School leaders need to find new and exciting ways to engage parents in the educational process. Schools need to focus on engaging families instead of parent involvement (Leithwood et al., 2010). The Epstein Framework level five and six focus on decision making and collaborating with community. School leaders need to facilitate high levels of parental engagement. With high levels of parental engagement ingrained in the school culture, students will succeed academically in schools.

Significance of Study

This mixed method study added to the research on the lived experiences of high performing African American students in suburban schools. The study offered insights into the lived experiences of high performing African American students and their perceptions of the school and personal factors that contributed to their academic success. Despite the known barriers and challenges, the high performing African American students successfully navigated the school environment. The findings of this study provide a much-needed positive approach to the study of African American student achievement in schools. By studying high performing African American student achievement, this study opens the door to improving student achievement for all African American students.

The study of high performing African American students can impact teacher professional development. It is important for teachers to know the challenges and barriers that high performing African American students face in school today. Awareness of the psychological costs of isolation and microaggressions can help teachers become great advocates for high performing African American students. But more importantly, teachers need to be aware of the factors that high performing African American students have identified as critical to their academic success. The development of strong relationships with African American students and high expectations for student achievement is critical for the success of African American students. Providing teachers with increased professional development in the areas of warm demander theory and culturally responsive teaching will help improve the academic success for all African American students.

This study of high performing African American students can also impact school leaders. School leaders are responsible for creating a warm and welcome environment for student success. The study outlines the importance of representation with staff and in the curriculum for high performing African American students. School leaders should prioritize hiring staff that mirrors their student population. African American students positively benefit from having teachers of the same race (Egalite et al., 2015). In addition, school leaders need to provide opportunities for representation in the curriculum. This study supported the need for a multicultural curriculum that meets the needs of all students.

Finally, this study provided a counternarrative to the common achievement gap narrative for society at large. The common narrative of African American students not being successful in school compared to the White and Asian peers is rooted in stereotypes and bias. This study directly addressed that false narrative by examining high performing African American students.

Despite the known barriers for students of color, high performing African American students are highly successful in the school environment. This study provided concrete evidence of what impacts student performance for high performing African Americans. With this knowledge, the study can debunk the stereotypes of African American students for future generations.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research primarily focused on the high school experience of high performing African American students. This research can be a catalyst for future research on high performing African students at the elementary school level and middle school level. It would be interesting to see the findings about high performing African American at younger ages. Would the findings be similar to those findings about the high school students? The research could also be extended for examine high performing African American students post college graduation. There is current research about the impact of predominately white institutions and historically black colleges and universities on African American student achievement. However, future research studies could examine the experiences of high performing students at both institutions. More specifically, research could examine how high performing African American students from predominately white suburban educational environments adjust to HBCUs.

In this study, parental support was identified as an important factor in academic success for high performing African American students. Parental involvement can significantly impact academic outcomes for students (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). With parental involvement, students demonstrate improved academic performance which leads to gains in self-esteem and future success (Furstenberg, 2010; Hill et al., 2004).

However, parental support is outside the influence of control for schools. For some students, parental support is missing from the school environment. Students with single parents,

low-income households, or parents with limited education may have less involvement compared to their peers (Hill & Tyson, 2009). In situations with limited parental support, schools have implemented a variety of programs to provide support to students. Research suggests that programs, such as academic coaching and mentorship can mitigate the impact of low parental support and improve academic outcomes for students (Sawyer, 2006). Future consideration for additional research in the area of parental involvement would be what schools can do in the absence of parental support for African American students.

Finally, this study was limited in size and scope. New research can be expanded to include a much larger sample size with students from different schools. By expanding the sample size, the study results will become generalizable.

Conclusions

High performing African American students navigate the significant challenges of school and still excel at the highest levels. This study illuminated the lived experiences, and school and personal factors that high performing students attribute to their success in schools. The findings of this study confirmed the research on a variety of aspects of high performing African American students. From their lived experiences, there were several challenges or barriers identified, including isolation, microaggressions, competition, lack of recommendations for advanced coursework, lack of teacher representation, and lack of culturally responsive curriculum. Even with these challenges, the students were still academically successful in school. In order to combat these challenges and barriers, the high performing African American students relied on a strong racial identity, supportive family and friend, and supportive spaces within the school. The school factors that positively contributed to their academic success were the school environment, support staff, teacher relationships and involvement in extracurricular programs. The personal

factors that high performing African American students attributed to their success were parents, friends, and determined learning. All of these factors were confirmed by the research in the field.

By studying the most successful African American students in schools, there is an opportunity to learn what factors can influence student achievement for all African American students. Administrators need to provide a school environment with high expectations for all students, focus on increasing the representation of teachers of color in our schools, authentically engage parents, and expand extracurricular programming for students. Teachers must develop strong relationships with students, provide a culturally responsive curriculum in a supportive classroom space. By focusing on African American student achievement through a positive lens, schools will help raise the level of achievement for all African American students.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Methods

1. Select participants using a random numbers chart after generating a pool of candidates utilizing convenience and snowball sampling method.
2. Email participants requesting the interview to assist in the research study. In addition, after consent of the interview is obtained, arrange for meeting, date and time for the interview.
3. Provide the interviewee informed consent through email and Docusign for electronic signature.
4. Greet the participant in the virtual meeting.
5. Review the informed consent with the interviewee by reading them aloud the form.
6. Assure participant that they can decide to not respond to questions that are uncomfortable or quit the interview at any time without repercussions.
7. Reiterate that the interview will be recorded. Begin recording the interview questions.
8. Read the first interview question. Take notes in short hand on the interview questions with pen and legal pad of paper.
9. Follow up with clarifying questions if appropriate such as "Can you elaborate on that?" "What do you mean?" "Can you give me an example?"
10. Repeat the question process for all the questions.
11. Ask the participant if he/she has any questions for me.
12. Thank the participant for his/her participation in the interview. Stop the recording.
13. End the virtual meeting by closing the virtual meeting window.

APPENDIX B

Survey Questions

1. What is your age?
    a. 18 – 20
    b. 21 – 22
    c. 23 - 24
    d. 25 – 26
    e. 27 +
2. What do you identify as your gender?
    a. Male
    b. Female
    c. Nonbinary
    d. Prefer not to answer
3. What was your grade point average in high school?
4. What is your current pursuit for continued education?
    a. Associate Degree
    b. Bachelor's Degree
    c. Master's Degree
    d. Doctoral Degree
    e. Other
5. What is your highest degree attainment?
    a. Associate Degree
    b. Bachelor's Degree

c. Master's Degree

d. Doctoral Degree

e. Other

6. List any awards or recognitions that you have received in your post-secondary endeavors?

7. What is your current employment status?

8. What are your future employment aspirations?

9. When you were in high school, what stage of racial identity development (Tatum, 1992) best describes you.
    a. Pre-encounter – The individual seeks to assimilate and be accepted by Whites, and actively or passively distances him/herself from other persons of own race. This de-emphasis on one's racial group membership may allow the individual to think that race has not been or will not be a relevant factor in one's own achievement.
    b. Encounter – Movement into this phase is typically precipitated by an event or series of life events that forces the individual to acknowledge the impact of racism in one's life. Faced with the reality that he or she cannot truly be White, the individual is forced to focus on his or identity as a member of a group targeted by racism.
    c. Immersion/Emersion – This stage is characterized by the simultaneous desire to surround oneself with visible symbols of one's racial identity and active avoidance of symbols of Whiteness. Individuals in this stage actively seek out opportunities to explore aspects of their own history and culture with the supports of peers from their own racial background.
    d. Internalization – In this stage, secure in one's own sense of racial identity, there is a need to assert the "Blacker than thou' or similar attitudes often characteristic of the prior stage. Pro-one's race attitudes become more expansive, open and less defensive. The internalized individual is willing to establish meaningful relations with Whites who acknowledge and are respectful of his or her self-definitions. The individual is also ready to build coalitions with members of other oppressed groups.
    e. Internalization-Commitment – Those in this last stage have found ways to translate their personal sense of race into a plan of action or general sense of commitment to the concerns of their own race as a group. This is sustained over time. Their race becomes the point of departure for discovering the universe of ideas, culture and experiences beyond their own race, in place of mistaking their race as the universe itself.

10. Family support was an important factor in my academic success in school.
    a. Strongly Disagree
    b. Disagree

c. Nether Agree or Disagree
d. Agree
e. Strongly Agree

11. Peer support from fellow African American students was an important factor in my academic success in school.
    a. Strongly Disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Nether Agree or Disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly Agree

12. School staff support was an important factor in my academic success in school.
    a. Strongly Disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Nether Agree or Disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly Agree

13. I learned best from teachers that developed a strong relationship with me.
    a. Strongly Disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Nether Agree or Disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly Agree

14. I learned best from teachers with high expectations for student achievement.
    a. Strongly Disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Nether Agree or Disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly Agree

15. I was actively engaged in my school community with extra and co-curricular activities.
    a. Strongly Disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Nether Agree or Disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly Agree

16. I was often one of the few African Americans in my advanced courses.
    a. Strongly Disagree
    b. Disagree

c. Nether Agree or Disagree
d. Agree
e. Strongly Agree

17. I was encouraged to take rigorous and advanced courses by my teachers and counselors.
    a. Strongly Disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Nether Agree or Disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly Agree

18. I utilized code-switching to navigate between my school, home, and peer environments. Code-switching is defined as the alternating use of more than one linguistic code
    a. Strongly Disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Nether Agree or Disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly Agree

19. I encountered negative stereotypes on a regular bias in school.
    a. Strongly Disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Nether Agree or Disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly Agree

20. I experienced stereotype threat in my advanced courses.
    a. Strongly Disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Nether Agree or Disagree
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly Agree

21. As a high performing African American student, what are some challenges that occurred in high school?

22. How did you overcome these challenges?

23. Would you like to be considered as an interview participant in the Part B of the study. Interviews will be approximately one hour in length and will be conducted virtually through Google Meet.
    a. Yes
    b. No

24. If you would like to participate in the Part B interview, please provide your name and email address.

APPENDIX C

Growth Mindset Scale

This survey accompanies a measure in the SPARQTools.org Measuring Mobility toolkit, which provides practitioners curated instruments for assessing mobility from poverty and tools for selecting the most appropriate measures for their programs..

Age: Child, Teen, Adult
Duration: < 3 minutes
Reading Level: 6th to 8th grade
Number of items: 3
Answer Format: 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = mostly agree; 4 = mostly disagree; 5 = disagree; 6 = strongly disagree.

Scoring:
To calculate the total score for each participant, take the average rating of the items by adding respondents' answers to each item and dividing this sum by the total number of items (3).

Sources:
Dweck, C. S. (2016). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development.* Psychology Press.

Dweck, C. S., Chiu, C. Y., & Hong, Y. Y. (1995). Implicit theories and their role in judgments and reactions: A world from two perspectives. *Psychological Inquiry, 6*(4), 267-285.

Instructions: Read each sentence below and then circle the *one* number that shows how much you agree with it. There are no right or wrong answers.

1. You have a certain amount of intelligence, and you can't really do much to change it.

Strongly agree Agree Mostly agree Mostly disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

2. Your intelligence is something about you that you can't change very much.

Strongly agree Agree Mostly agree Mostly disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

3. You can learn new things, but you can't really change your basic intelligence.

Strongly agree Agree Mostly agree Mostly disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

Contact: Stanford_SPARQ@stanford.edu

Link: http://sparqtools.org/mobility-measure/growth-mindset-scale/
Open Access: Yes

APPENDIX D

12- Item Grit Scale

Directions for taking the Grit Scale: Here are a number of statements that may or may not apply to you. For the most accurate score, when responding, think of how you compare to most people -- not just the people you know well, but most people in the world. There are no right or wrong answers, so just answer honestly!

1. I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.
   Very much like me
   Mostly like me
   Somewhat like me
   Not much like me
   Not like me at all

2. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.*
   Very much like me
   Mostly like me
   Somewhat like me
   Not much like me
   Not like me at all

3. My interests change from year to year.*
   Very much like me
   Mostly like me
   Somewhat like me
   Not much like me
   Not like me at all

4. Setbacks don't discourage me.
   Very much like me
   Mostly like me
   Somewhat like me
   Not much like me
   Not like me at all

5. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.*
   Very much like me
   Mostly like me
   Somewhat like me
   Not much like me
   Not like me at all

6. I am a hard worker.
   Very much like me
   Mostly like me
   Somewhat like me
   Not much like me
   Not like me at all

7. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.*
   Very much like me
   Mostly like me
   Somewhat like me
   Not much like me
   Not like me at all

8. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.*
   Very much like me
   Mostly like me
   Somewhat like me
   Not much like me
   Not like me at all

9. I finish whatever I begin.
   Very much like me
   Mostly like me
   Somewhat like me
   Not much like me
   Not like me at all

10. I have achieved a goal that took years of work.
    Very much like me
    Mostly like me
    Somewhat like me
    Not much like me
    Not like me at all

11. I become interested in new pursuits every few months.*
    Very much like me
    Mostly like me
    Somewhat like me
    Not much like me
    Not like me at all

12. I am diligent.
    Very much like me
    Mostly like me

Somewhat like me
Not much like me
Not like me at all

Scoring:

1. For questions 1, 4, 6, 9, 10 and 12 assign the following points:
   5 = Very much like me
   4 = Mostly like me
   3 = Somewhat like me
   2 = Not much like me
   1 = Not like me at all

2. For questions 2, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 11 assign the following points:
   1 = Very much like me
   2 = Mostly like me
   3 = Somewhat like me
   4 = Not much like me
   5 = Not like me at all

Add up all the points and divide by 12. The maximum score on this scale is 5 (extremely gritty), and the lowest score on this scale is 1 (not at all gritty).

Researchers and educators are welcome to use the scales I have developed for non-commercial purposes. https://angeladuckworth.com/research/

Duckworth, A.L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M.D., & Kelly, D.R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 9, 1087-110

APPENDIX E

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
How do high performing African American students describe their lived experiences in a suburban high school?	1. Describe yourself as a learner in schools? How did you learn best?
	2. Describe any challenging experiences that you face in school?
	3. Describe any barriers that you faced while in school.
	4. Describe a class or teacher that highly engaged you?
	5. Did you feel a sense of connection and belonging in your school? Why or why not?
	6. Describe how you experienced your relationships with school personnel?
What school factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success?	1. Please describe your overall experience in K-12 school.
	2. What school factors were important to your success in school?
	3. This study defines high achievement as a grade point average of greater than 3.2, what skills or strategies did you utilize to maintain your high level of student achievement in school?
	4. How, if at all, did teachers support your success?
	5. How, if at all, did administrators support your success?
	6. How, if at all, did counselors support your success?
	7. Were there other school personnel that supported your success?
What personal factors do high performing African American students attribute to academic success?	1. How, if at all, did your friends support your success in schools?
	2. How, if at all, did your family support your success in schools?
	3. Was there anybody else other than family and friends that supported your success in school? If so, how did they support?
	4. What motivated you to attain a high level of student achievement in school?

APPENDIX F

Informed Consent: Part A

Dear Participant:

I am Linda LoGalbo, a doctoral candidate, from Youngstown State University. I am conducting a study to investigate high performing African American graduates and the roles that Growth Mindset, GRIT, and racial identity play in their achievement. In this study, you will be asked to complete a survey questionnaire with three sections: demographic information and school experience questions, Growth Mindset survey, and GRIT scale. The online survey will be emailed through Survey Monkey and will take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

You may be at risk of emotional/psychological harm because of this research. The survey you will complete asks about your experiences in schools and you may have negative emotional feelings when completing the survey. The likelihood that you will be harmed is minimized because you are not required to complete all answers to the survey. Participation is voluntary.

The benefit to you from being in this study is your participation will provide meaningful information to schools regarding high performing African American student achievement.

Your privacy is important and I will handle all information collected about you in a confidential manner. I will report the results of the project in a way that will not identify you. I do plan to present the results of the study to my doctoral committee at my dissertation defense.

You do not have to be in this study. If you don't want to, you can say no without losing any benefits that you are entitled to. If you do agree, you can stop participating at any time. If you wish to withdraw just tell me or the contact person listed below.

If you have questions about this research project please contact Dr. Jane Beese at 330.941.2236 If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact the Office of Research Services at YSU (330-941-2377) or at YSUIRB@ysu.edu

By checking the box below, I agree to participate.

☐ I understand the study described above and have been given a copy of this consent document. I am 18 years of age or older and I agree to participate.

APPENDIX G

Informed Consent: Part B Semi-Structured Interview

Dear Participant:

I am Linda LoGalbo, a doctoral candidate, from Youngstown State University. I am conducting a study to investigate high performing African American graduates and the roles that Growth Mindset, GRIT, and racial identity play in their achievement. In this study, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interview questions were created with the theories of racial identity, Growth mindset, and GRIT. The interview questions have been reviewed by a panel of educators. The virtual interview will take 60 minutes to complete. The interview will be recorded.

You may be at risk of emotional/psychological harm because of this research. The interview questions will ask about your experiences in schools and you may have negative emotional feelings when participating in the interview. The likelihood that you will be harmed is minimized because you do have the right to refuse to answer any interview questions. Participation is voluntary.

The benefit to you from being in this study is your participation will provide meaningful information to schools regarding high performing African American student achievement.

Your privacy is important and I will handle all information collected about you in a confidential manner. I will report the results of the project in a way that will not identify you. You will be given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym. I do plan to present the results of the study to my doctoral committee at my dissertation defense.

You do not have to be in this study. If you don't want to, you can say no without losing any benefits that you are entitled to. If you do agree, you can stop participating at any time. If you wish to withdraw just tell me or the contact person listed below.

If you have questions about this research project please contact Dr. Jane Beese at 330.941.2236 If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact the Office of Research Services at YSU (330-941-2377) or at YSUIRB@ysu.edu

I understand the study described above and have been given a copy of this consent document. I am 18 years of age or older and I agree to participate.

Signature of Participant:_____

Date:_____

I understand that the interview will be recorded and give my permission to be recorded.

Signature of Participant:_____

Date:_____

APPENDIX H

IRB Approval

2022-99 - Initial: Initial - Exempt
do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>
Thu 4/7/2022 9:08 AM
To:

- Jane Beese <jbeese@ysu.edu>;
- Linda H LoGalbo lhlogalbo@student.ysu.edu
Apr 7, 2022 9:08:40 AM EDT

Jane Beese
Teacher Ed and Leadership St

Re: Exempt - Initial - 2022-99 High Performing African American Students: Defying the Achievement Gap

Dear Dr. Jane Beese:

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board has rendered the decision below for High Performing African American Students: Defying the Achievement Gap

Decision: Exempt

Selected Category: Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly
reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,
Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board