Understanding the Academic Achievement of African American Scholars: An Intrinsic Case Study of an Urban High School

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Understanding the Academic Achievement of African American Scholars:

An Intrinsic Case Study of an Urban High School

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in
Instructional Leadership

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Abstract

This qualitative intrinsic case study focused on the academic achievement and success of African American alumni students in an urban school district in New York City. The researcher sought to answer the following research questions: (a) How do urban, African American high school alumni perceive and describe the quality of education they received as impacting their studies and their success?; (b) How do alumni describe the social and cultural factors that contributed to and influenced the quality of education they received?; and (c) How do social and cultural factors influence their trajectory towards high academic achievement and/or success? Data were gathered utilizing three sources: semistructured interviews with eight alumni students from 2007 to 2016, high school transcripts, and personal artifacts that were impacted by the students’ experience at Woodbine Academy High School (WAHS), a pseudonym approved to maintain the confidentiality of the alumni and the institution used in the study. Information was gathered to determine the social and cultural factors that contributed to the high success rates of African Americans as lived and experienced by the alumni. Data analysis captured and documented the alumni participants’ voices, which presented the counter-narrative to the deficit model. This descriptive case study of eight alumni participants revealed four themes that resonated throughout the data analysis. Alumni participants perceived the social and cultural factors that impacted their success were passion as reflected by the teachers’ content knowledge and interaction, belonging, access and opportunity, and expectations.

Keywords: academic achievement, African American, racial congruency, culturally responsive/relevant, achievement/opportunity gap
Dedication

To my parents, Marie Claude Blass and the late Ulrick Lavache, who, as immigrants from Haiti, taught me what it meant to be resilient in the face of adversity, and sacrificed so their children could have educational opportunities for a better life.

To my wife, Selina S. Lavache, I am forever indebted to you, for without you and your unwavering love and support, this would not have been possible.

To my siblings, Luckner Salvador, Sabine Sanon, Mency Theodore, and Caminer Lavache, for all the do’s and don’ts I learned along the way as the “Baby” of the family. From each of you I learned something different: from Nene (Luckner), I learned the concept of not taking life too seriously; from Bibi (Sabine), I learned perseverance and diligence; from Ichou (Mency), I learned love and forgiveness; and from Cary (Caminer), I learned to follow my dreams.

To my many nieces, nephews, godchildren (Dylan, Riley), and grandson (Omari), may you stand on my shoulders and be GIANTS. Through hard work, perseverance, and fortitude to follow your dreams, the world is yours to have.

This is for those who understand their purpose as educators and believe in the capacity of our children of the African diaspora in America (African Americans) to unleash their brilliance.
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Dr. Brianna Parsons, your guidance and patience throughout this journey have allowed me to remain grounded. Your expertise, encouragement, enthusiasm, and counseling gave me permission to direct my pathway. You were understanding of all that I had going on with work and family obligations, and for this I am eternally grateful. You were present for the early-morning and late-night responses, along with your unwavering faith in my ability to remain steadfast in achieving this goal. The truth is, you exemplified fundamental attributes of a truly phenomenal educator. Ultimately, you made me believe that it was all possible through your dedicated support. For this I say, you are simply the BEST!

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To the alumni student participants and the students of WAHS, you have made all the trials and tribulations of the last 15 years of my 22-year career as an educator all worthwhile. You have brought me great joy in being a part of your success, no matter how big or small, professional or personal. For that, I thank you and I am grateful.

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remain persistent and patient, recognizing the greatness and brilliance in our students even when they don’t see it for themselves.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Race and racism are the bedrock on which America has built its educational disparities, and thus failed to provide all students with access to equal quality education. Despite the 1954 ruling of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, which required schools to integrate with the intent of addressing the assumption of “separate but equal” as a valid means to educate all children, the law was not enforced. The greater disparities of the educational systems in the Southern states significantly contributed to the ruling; however, Northern states faced similar challenges and resistance to desegregation, causing the same disparities. New York State has a long-standing history of segregated schools. In New York City (NYC), Kucsera and Orfield (2014) argued that similar to the period before the Civil Rights Era, school age children are isolated and experiencing more segregated spaces, more than any of the Southern states at that time (Frankenberg, 2011; Kucsera & Orfield, 2014).

The failure to educate African American students by not providing access and opportunity is a result of choice (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014). These decisions and choices made by various individuals in positions of power often create policies, though well intended, that continue to perpetuate the disparities and inequalities that have a detrimental impact on the education of African American students. In turn, this creates an intentional gap in achievement for African American students and their White peers (Milner, 2014; Toldson & Ebanks, 2014). Historically, the decision to resist school desegregation, despite federal and state laws, or to offer limited resources in the form of financial capital or human capital, whether overtly or covertly, has stagnated the prosperity of the United States. The decisions of the past currently contribute to stratifying and regulating African Americans as second-class citizens in order to preserve the power of the dominant culture (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The divisions that are caused by race
and racism have obscured the citizens of the United States from recognizing that “Improving achievement [for all students] leads to a better prepared workforce and to a greater growth which translates into higher level of national income” (Hanushek, 2011, p. 43). Nobel Laureate A. Michael Spence (2001) indicated that education and access to information through education impact individual productivity. Thus, it is through the acquisition of information by way of education that qualified candidates, regardless of race, will meet the demands of the workforce.

During the Civil Rights era and at the height of the efforts to desegregate public facilities and schools, African American students were bussed into White schools to meet the mandate of desegregation. After the landmark ruling of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, a subsequent ruling was made in Brown II (1955), which mandated for school desegregation to occur “with all deliberate speed” (p. 301). Many White school districts around the country were vehemently against desegregation. In fact, in 1957, the governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, used the National Guard to prevent African American students from attending Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas (Frontline, 2014). The defiance of the governor led then-President Eisenhower to send a federal escort for nine African American students who would later be referred to as the “Little Rock Nine” as the first students to integrate Central High School.

Terrence Roberts and Melba Pattillo Beals, who were part of the Little Rock Nine, recalled the disdain and animosity from Whites who opposed desegregation. Moreover, during this period, African American students were subjected to “substandard materials, such as ‘Black only facilities’ and resources, used textbooks and dilapidated education facilities” (Milner, 2014, p. 14). For many African American parents and desegregation advocates, desegregation meant access to new educational opportunities that would improve conditions afforded to African
American children. While the mandate of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka did offer some opportunities, the government’s efforts to enforce the law was not done with fidelity. For some advocates of desegregation, it is the assumption that African American students within diverse schools would aspire to behaviors leading to increased social mobility (Frontline, 2014). Yet, prior to desegregation, African American students graduated at higher rates than they do today.

According to Kucsera and Orfield (2014), the Supreme Court began to turn back on desegregation, “causing the dismantling of desegregation plans across the country” (Frontline, 2014, 5:34) as early as 1991. The dismantling of desegregation plans created an influx of charter schools in many urban cities. These charter schools are largely located in highly segregated neighborhoods where the student population reflects mostly African American and Latino students. The purpose of creating new charter schools was twofold. During desegregation, charter schools were a means to offer White parents who sought to resist desegregation a choice or an alternative to avoid desegregation (Rothstein, 2015). By 1998, charter schools became an alternative to traditional public schools in which teachers were allowed the autonomy to take risks in their pedagogical approach to reaching their students. Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) from 1974 to 1997, indicated that charters could improve the “social mobility of working class children and social cohesion among America’s increasingly diverse population” (Kahlenburg & Potter, 2014, p. 1). Despite the intentions, charter schools are more racially and economically segregated than public schools. In addition to the racial isolation of students in charter schools, approximately 70% of the teachers in charter schools are White (Frankenberg, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013).

Today, the majority of the teaching workforce is made up of White females at a rate of approximately 83% (Toldson & Ebanks, 2014; Vilson, 2015) while African American students are
overrepresented in special education or as disciplinary concerns (Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Toldson & Ebanks, 2014). Nevertheless, the racial incongruence between White teachers and African American students may directly influence teachers’ attitude and behavior (Dee, 2004; Frankenberg, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Moule & Higgins, 2007; Toldson & Ebanks, 2014). When African American students are taught by teachers of similar racial or ethnic backgrounds, their performance is often improved by “two to three percentile points” (Dee, 2004, p. 5). Not only do African American students remain on grade level, but are also less likely to drop out of school at a rate of 29% if they have at least one African American teacher in elementary school (Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay, & Papageorge, 2017; Rosen, 2017).

Teachers of color pursue teaching as a profession with the intention of breaking the cycle of racism as a result of their own experience (Kohli, 2009). The personal experiences of teachers of color within the educational system, whether as a student or as an educator, influence their role and impact the academic achievement of the students they service. In many cases, educators of color who have been oppressed as a result of their racial make-up have often internalized the racism they have experienced, using it as a catalyst that impacts their practice and how they influence their students. To this extent, when students experience racism in school, they develop and have an understanding of the world outside of school, which differs from what they experience in their communities. This knowledge impacts their success in school and in life (Emdin, 2016; Kohli, 2013). With this understanding, teacher-student racial and ethnic congruency may have a significant impact on the performance of African American students and their performance in and out of the classroom.

In the United States, one in three high school students fail to graduate on time with a high school diploma, and for African American students, nearly 50% will not graduate on time
(Swanson, 2009). In 2009, Swanson reported that in large cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Baltimore, only 52% of the students earned a high school diploma. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015) reported that from 1990 to 2013, the national dropout rate declined, with a “decrease from 12% in 1990 to 7% in 2013, with most of the decline occurring since 2000” (p. 1).

In 2012, New York State Education Department (NYSED) reported the graduation rate for African American students was 68%. By 2016, NYSED reported an overall high graduation rate of 79.4% (Taylor, 2017), while the graduation rate of African American students remained level at just under 70% (Atwell et al., 2017). Additionally, the NCES (2016) reported that the high school completion rate for African American students between the ages of 18 to 24 was 92%. Despite the national and New York State (NYS) gains in graduation rates, certain subgroups such as “special education, low income and minority students” (Pannoni, 2014, p. 1) lagged behind and the graduation rates of African American students remained below other ethnic groups (Hill, 2013; Long, 2015; Pannoni, 2014). Across the nation, the 2015 cohort was made up of 38.5% of African American and Latino students; however, 46% graduated on time (Atwell et al., 2017). Moreover, the gap in graduation rates for African American and Latino students was 20 percentage points less when compared to their White peers (NYSED, 2017).

To some, graduation rates represent a single measure of the progress that is achieved; however, one must consider some of the policy changes that have impacted these results. Students who live in NYS must pass a minimum of five core NYS examinations known as the Regents Examinations with a grade of 65 or better. According to Taylor (2017), NYS students with disabilities are able to graduate with two Regents exams instead of the expected five. Similarly, students in general education are able to appeal to the superintendent or the district if
they fall short on one or two Regents exams. In other words, if students do not meet the passing 
score within the range of 60 to 64, they may appeal for concessions to be made (Pannoni, 2014). 
Here, it is important to understand that high school “status completion rates include all 
individuals in a specified age range who hold a high school diploma or alternative credential, 
regardless of when it was attained” (NCES, 2016, p. 82). Despite the gains in high school 
completion rates, it is imperative for policymakers and other institutions to identify practices that 
could potentially be used at other institutions to improve the graduation rates of African 
American students. These practices should work towards preparing African American students 
for college or the workforce, thus closing the achievement gap that exists as a result of lack of 
access and opportunity afforded to African American students.

Statement of the Problem

High schools located in urban settings are often largely populated by African American 
and Latino students (Long, 2015). Disparities in educational opportunities often subject these 
students to a mediocre quality of education as a result of lack of resources, quality, and 
congruent teacher compositions (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Vilson, 2015). Moreover, the 
curriculum often overlooks and disenfranchises students by emphasizing and promoting the 
rhetoric of the dominant culture. To this extent, the students’ own wealth of pre-existing 
knowledge and culture is made to seem inferior and invalid. Consequently, this results in many 
students who are left disengaged from school and ill prepared for college and the workforce.

Countless research has indicated and stressed the importance of the self-reflection and 
commitment of educators to learn and understand the experiences and backgrounds of the 
students they service (Emdin, 2016; Gay 2013; Kohli, 2012, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009; 
Milner, 2014). Educators must consider the abilities of their students as well as the
characteristics and cultural background of their families as assets to the instruction that will be provided. Using the cultural background of students as an asset impacts how teachers decide on the relevance and purpose of what they will teach as well as how they intend to teach. As Emdin (2016) argued, “unless teachers broaden their scope beyond the traditional classroom” (p. 10), the academic achievement of African American students will be hindered. Therefore, it becomes essential for educational institutions to consider culturally responsive pedagogical practices as a means to engage and empower African American students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically so that their values, experiences, and cultural knowledge are validated (Emdin, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1999, 2009; Milner, 2014).

**Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was an intrinsic, qualitative case study focusing on the academic success and achievement of African American alumni students of Woodbine Academy High School (WAHS). The academic achievement of African American students is often discussed using the deficit framework (Kohli, 2009; Lynn, 2014; Milner, 2012). In contrast, this study investigated the positive and successful achievements of African American alumni students from a small urban high school. A pseudonym was used with regard to the institution to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the alumni students who participated in the study. A semistructured interview process was the primary means of data collection used to identify and understand the social and cultural factors that impacted the academic achievement and success of these African American students. The alumni participants’ narratives were obtained and documented; their lived experiences produced rich and thick (Geertz, 1973) data that gave credence to the practices that impacted the academic achievement of African American students who attended Woodbine Academy High School.
Research Questions

This study investigated how African American alumni from WAHS, an urban high school, described the quality of education they received as impactful to their success. Additionally, it evaluated how these alumni students recounted their educational experiences and related teaching, social, and cultural practices to their academic achievement and success. The researcher captured the narratives of alumni students who graduated from WAHS to determine what factors contributed to and impacted the academic achievement of African American students. The research questions that guided this study: (1) How do urban, African American high school alumni perceive and describe the quality of education they received as impacting their studies and their success?; (2) How do alumni describe the social and cultural factors that contributed to and influenced the quality of education they received?; and (3) How do social and cultural factors influence their trajectory towards high academic achievement and/or success?

Research Objectives

This intrinsic, qualitative case study sought to document and give voice to the alumni students of WAHS as a means of providing a counter-narrative to the vast majority of past and current research and discussions, which often present the African American students’ academic achievement as near the bottom of the performance scale or from a deficit framework. Therefore, in considering the factors that impacted the success rate of the alumni students from WAHS, the researcher’s hope was to develop an understanding of best practices that could provide a blueprint or serve as a model to other institutions with similar demographics to help understand the needed support and constructs that can close the achievement gap. This would demonstrate that when given access to various opportunities, African American students can succeed and the achievement gap can be reduced.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to study WAHS as a potential model from which one can gain insight from its alumni students into what aspects of their high school experiences contributed to their academic achievement and/or success. The intention of the study was to determine the factors that contributed to and influenced the quality of education that consistently produced a high rate of academic achievement as a means to improve and help close the achievement gap. Additionally, the objective of the study was to offer insight into how varying social and cultural factors impacted the success of African American students by capturing the experiences through the voice of the alumni students whose academic achievement and/or career trajectory were influenced by such factors.

Conceptual Framework

The academic achievement of African American students is often hindered by policies, attitudes, and behaviors that have caused inequities and disparities, both locally and nationally. Prior to Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954), Jim Crow laws divided the United States along “color lines” (Du Bois, 1935), whereby access and opportunity to acquiring an education were limited. African American communities became more self-sustaining and reliant by establishing educational institutions that often thrived, even though resources regarding facilities and textbooks were lacking. African American students who attended the institutions described above were successful as a result of people in the community who supported their education. In addition, students were nurtured by the community and they experienced high-quality African American teachers who related to them, despite the inadequacies of the facilities. Therefore, the argument against “separate but equal” was a result of a lack of resources. The conditions that African American students were subjected to within these facilities were not necessarily
conducive for learning. The need for better conditions and facilities prompted the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s to push issues related to education to the forefront. The ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) appeared as a positive gain to African Americans as its intentions were to offer equal access to public facilities and resources, and not the lack of success of African American students who attended community schools that reflected or resembled the student population and demographics.

In the case of education, African American students endured these burdens in the name of school desegregation. African American students were subjected to being bussed to White schools where they were unwanted (*Frontline*, 2014; Grellety, Peck, & Pech, 2017). Policies were established to give school choice to White families in order to avoid desegregation; neighborhoods and housing were made exclusive to Whites by the federal government in order to keep African American families out (Cook, 2015; Eaton & Rivkin, 2010; Hanushek, 2010; Rothstein, 2015). Therefore, educational disparities for African American students continued to exist while policies were reinvented and disguised to make the larger population believe schools were improving.

Kucsera and Orfield (2014) noted that NYC was one of the most segregated districts in the country. In 2010, NYC had 32 community school districts, of which 19 had less than or equal to 10% of White students. Segregated schools in NYC were largely due to segregated neighborhoods. Even with the establishment of new charter schools, 73% were defined as “apartheid schools” by Kucsera and Orfield (2014) as a result of less than 1% of the students attending being White. African American students continued to be disenfranchised by the changing policies that were implemented for the sake of improving the quality of education they were afforded.
The conceptual framework used to examine this disparity of opportunity, resources, and access to quality education impacting the academic achievement of African American students was critical race theory (CRT), cultural relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billing, 2009), and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2013). While there are nuances to cultural relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching, their fundamental premise lies in the intentional practices of educators to value student knowledge and background as an asset to engage, empower, and educate African American students. This practice was not exclusive to African American students; however, as a marginalized group, it was important to consider the focus of the research with regard to the academic achievement and success of African American students.

Furthermore, CRT maintained that racism perpetuated the exclusion and “disregard of racial minorities” (Martinez, 2014, p. 13) as a means to maintain the interest and status quo of the dominant culture, or what Tripp and King-Jupiter (2008) referred to as the ideologies of White supremacy. To this extent, this study was not only relevant but also essential to the discourse of the education of African American students. WAHS, an urban high school composed of over 85% African American students, has demonstrated that it is possible for African American students to meet national academic standards and obtain high levels of academic achievement, despite the lack of racial diversity. Moreover, the study offered the counter-narrative of WAHS alumni participants’ lived experiences to illustrate that the academic achievement of African American students does not exist due to the lack of ability to achieve, but rather as a result of the lack of access to opportunities.

**Definition of Terms**

*Academic Achievement:* Academic achievement is defined as a multifaceted construct that is made up of various aspects of learning, representing performance measures and outcomes.
Academic achievement indicates that specific goals were met within an instructional environment, to which an individual has demonstrated educational growth based on the levels of success and as a result of the students’ acquired knowledge and skills over time (Arora, 2016; Steinmayr, Meibner, Leidinger, & Wirthwein, 2015).

Achievement Gap: Achievement gap is the unequal or inequitable distribution of educational results and benefits that is consistent in its occurrences in which the gap reflects a trend of the disparities of achievement within a particular group (Great School Partnership, 2013a).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Culturally responsive pedagogy is an “approach to teaching that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural referents to impact knowledge, skills and attitudes. It is a way of teaching that validates the values, prior experiences and cultural knowledge of students” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 20).

Opportunity Gap: The opportunity gap is the unequal or inequitable distribution of educational resources and opportunities as a result of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and community demographics that perpetuates low expectations of certain groups of students’ educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment (Great School Partnership, 2013b).

Racial Congruency: Racial congruency occurs when the student and teacher share the same race and/or ethnicity whereby the teacher is a reflection of the student to whom he/she is able to relate to, motivate, advocate, and serve as role model (Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015).

Limitations

Qualitative research has a number of inherent limitations despite its ability to result in profound research. In qualitative research, some limitations include the inability to replicate the study because of the personal nature it has for the researcher, the perception that qualitative
research is not rigorous, and the inability to generalize the study in which it can be applicable to larger situations (Simon & Goes, 2013). The limitations in this study included the scope and the method used to collect the data for analysis, and the following limitations were considered when interpreting the results of this study.

The study was limited to a single urban high school with an average population of 365 students. Therefore, generalizability of the outcomes was not applicable to institutions of similar demographics or those serving larger populations of African American students. In addition, the study focused only on the academic achievements and successes of African American students who graduated from one high school. The narrowness of the study did not offer a comparison of outcomes to other ethnic groups within the school, nor of other groups of a similar population in other schools. Moreover, studying the academic achievement of students as a result of race failed to consider other factors that impacted African American students and their academic performance. As a result, causal conjectures or inferences could not be considered since other explanations to the success of WAHS alumni students could not be excluded. Lastly, collecting data from interviews, in which the alumni participants were asked to self-report the accounts of their experiences, was subjective. As a result, capturing myriad experiences was a challenge since the experience of each alumnus was distinct and individualized.

**Scope, Assumptions, and Delimitations**

It was important to note the scope, limitations, and delimitations in this study as they allowed an opportunity for the researcher to provide the parameters within which the study occurred. In addition, the researcher was able to offer limitations of the study, while also providing the objectives, timeframe, locale, and issues on which the research focused its attention (Simon & Goes, 2013). The scope of this study focused on the African American
alumni students of WAHS. The alumni participants were restricted to a small urban high school located in NYS. This study focused on eight participants who graduated from WAHS between 2007 and 2016. To that extent, any alumni within that timeframe were eligible to participate. As a means of diversifying the alumni participants in the study, the researcher sent emails to all potential participants about the value of their contribution and lived experience to this study. The selection of the alumni participants reflected purposeful sampling; however, participants were selected based on the order in which they responded to the invitation, which implied that alumni students had to respond within the timeframe upon receiving the invitations in order to be considered as part of the study. Alumni students who responded in a timely manner were deemed as motivated, creating a limitation for alumni students whose responses were delayed. This excluded alumni students who struggled academically while attending WAHS and skewed the data. Furthermore, as alumni participants were selected, the researcher also reflected on the variation of participants based on the year they graduated as a means to avoid any one cohort year impacting the study. Additionally, semistructured interviews lasting between 1½ to 2 hours were conducted, tape-recorded, and transcribed as a means of capturing the lived experience of the alumni student participants.

Assumptions

The researcher was an integral contributor to the teaching and learning process that occurred at WAHS. As a result, there were several assumptions that guided the researcher during the study. The researcher contemplated the impact the study would have as a result of documenting the educational experiences conveyed and shared by the alumni participants who attended WAHS. To this extent, the researcher assumed and anticipated alumni participants would discuss the commitment of the teachers who offered their time and academic support. This
conversation was a necessary tool to guide them to meet academic goals and high expectations the school community envisioned would become a reality. Additionally, alumni participants would reference that despite the relentless, and what might have been perceived as the overbearingness of adults to want what seemed impossible, it was the diligence, wisdom and foresight of teachers, administrators and parents that led to their success. The attitudes and behaviors of staff members instilled and encouraged the students to develop a mindset of resiliency and perseverance when confronted with challenges and adversity. The researcher assumed that alumni participants would present the evidence through their narrative that despite the challenges they faced, there was a sense of family where teachers genuinely cared. The alumni participants felt they belonged to a community to which they could be themselves as African-American students in an urban school and still excel academically. The researcher was hopeful that fundamental to the validity of the study, there would be the counter-narrative of the possibilities for African-American students to achieve academic and personal success as they reflected on their personal educational experiences while attending WAHS and the impact it had on their success.

**Delimitations**

The delimitation of this study was as a result of the researcher’s personal choice and decision for the study’s design. The researcher conducted an intrinsic qualitative study and chose to use CRT as the conceptual framework to explore the academic achievement of African American students who acquired a quality education, despite the lack of resources and access to opportunity that often stifles this marginalized population. Additionally, the researcher employed the racial congruency of teacher-student composition in the classroom, along with cultural relevant pedagogy, as the underlying premise to consider the factors that did or did not contribute
to the success of the alumni participants. Subsequently, the researcher examined and offered the narratives of African American alumni students of WAHS as a means of providing insight into social and cultural factors that influenced the trajectory toward high academic achievement and/or success as defined by the alumni participants; this, then, offered a more comprehensive perspective from those who experienced the educational process.

Teachers at WAHS are often discredited for the work they do as pedagogues. Many colleagues often question the capabilities of the teachers for consistently having high rate of students success and what their students are able to accomplish academically on high stake examinations. For that reason, WAHS have been referred to as a “test prep school” as a result of the students ability to meet graduation exam requirements for the New York State Board of Regents. Assumptions about the academic success of the students are often questioned. These assumptions often suggest that the student who attend WAHS are academically prepared from middle school to withstand the academic rigor they experience and therefore would succeed regardless of the school they attended; or that the students are academically astute. While students who attend WAHS come with varying degrees of academic preparation, only a small group of about 25% of the students exceeds the standards in middle school to deem them academically prepared for high school. Nevertheless, after students attend four years of high school and meet the state requirements for graduation, the assumption should be that students are prepared to attend college/university or enter into the workforce. Yet, despite the academic success of the African-American students of WAHS another assumption that is implied is that their success is attributed to educators who lack professional integrity, implying that the academic success of African-American students is dependent on grade inflation and/or assistance from the teachers.
Significance of the Study

The significance of this study documented and presented the counter-narrative experiences of African American alumni students of WAHS who demonstrated academic achievement and success, while also examining the impact of the quality of education they received. This study was relevant because, despite the gains made in rising graduation rates, African American students still represented the minority subgroup with the smallest gains in relation to their White peers. It is often the norm that while gains are continually made, the percentage of African American students in urban cities graduating on time or at all is 15% less than Whites (Long, 2015). When African American and Latino students are compared to their white peers, there remains a large achievement gap as the graduation rate is lower than 20 percentage points (NYS, 2017). To this extent, WAHS appeared to defy the odds, educating and preparing African American students to succeed. As inner-city schools remain heavily populated by African American students where resources are lacking and teacher quality and congruence are disproportionately in contrast to the school population, it was important to consider what factors impacted the students who attended WAHS. Furthermore, what were the supporting systems that propelled alumni students to succeed academically? What opportunities were available outside of the classroom, and how did teacher expectations affect their academic studies? Moreover, this study gave the alumni students an opportunity to express the factors, practices, and interactions that led to their success, which could provide insight to other institutions into how to guide African American students toward success and high academic achievement.

Summary

The academic achievement of African American students must be assessed from multiple
perspectives; otherwise, the academic performance of African American students will continue to be explained from the deficit model framework, or perhaps worse, the lack of ability to meet the standards of academic achievement will be considered the result of their mental or intellectual capacity (Lynn, 2014; Milner, 2012). This is often the overwhelming narrative used to discuss the achievement gap of African American students and is often perpetuated by some in the dominant culture and established power structures. The failure of African American students to receive a quality education is no fault of their own. Rather, it is in the failure of policymakers, politicians, and other stakeholders to recognize how race impacts systems and policies; though maybe well intended, they do not consider the whole child.

Educational policymakers often seek to prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach in educating students, including African American students (Brooks & Brooks, 1999), while others seek to ameliorate the disparities by offering a single solution, such as charter schools or school choice as remedy (Burke, 2013). In doing so, many African American students are marginalized and disenfranchised, not only by the social circumstances and conditions in which they may live, but by the educational systems and institutions that have created greater disparities (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Malcom-Piqueux, 2011; Rothstein, 2015). The discourse of an achievement gap “is antithetical to diversity because it suggests that all students live and operate in homogeneous environments with equality and equity of opportunity afforded to them” (Milner, 2012, p. 694). The disparities that African American students in urban settings endure are due, in part, to the racial incongruence of their teachers as well as to a curriculum that fails to speak to their history and culture. This disconnection between students and both the instructors and curriculum renders students disengaged from school, resulting in the lack of success and
academic achievement for African American students (Emdin, 2016). Baldwin (1979) stated that:

The brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in America never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child’s language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiates his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter into a limbo which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never be white. Black people have lost too many children that way. (p. 3)

Therefore, using culturally responsive pedagogy along with racially congruent staffing proved to be beneficial in improving the academic achievement of African American students.

Fundamentally, it is the moral obligation of teachers and school administrators to ensure that students, regardless of their race and socioeconomic status, are given a quality education. For African American students, doing so often appears more challenging due to lack of resources, community support, and other impeding factors.

The research design for this study was an intrinsic case study. The study identified, documented, and explored the social and cultural factors that impacted the success and academic achievement of African American students through the lived experiences of alumni students from WAHS. To ensure that the study upheld the criteria and expectations for approval, the researcher examined literature that included historical overviews of varying causes that have led to the achievement gap and contributions to the disparity of education for African American students. The researcher also conducted an examination of components that supported the
academic achievement of African American students in becoming college- and career-ready. Additionally, CRT was used as the foundation for the counter-narrative that supported the success of African American students by African American alumni students of WAHS. The literature focused on culturally relevant pedagogy and the racial congruence of educational staff as a means of improving access, opportunities, and academic achievement for African American students.

In the following chapters the researcher will guide the reader through an extensive literature review in Chapter 2, followed by the research methodology in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, the results of the study were analyzed and presented. In Chapter 5, the researcher offers a discussion and interpretation of the study’s results; additionally offering suggestions and recommendations for future research and a final conclusion to the study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Darling-Hammond (2010) has suggested that if the United States is to survive and remain prosperous in the 21st century, it must change or make a shift towards offering all students access to a quality education. Despite the landmark ruling of Brown v. Board of Education (1954), historically in the United States, policymakers and educational stakeholders has subjectively failed to provide all students the opportunity for equal access to a quality education. Brown was the federal government’s mandate to desegregate schools as a means of resolving the issue of “separate but equal” in public facilities under Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). Until 1955, almost all public spaces including classrooms were segregated (Campbell-Jones & Campbell-Jones, 2002; Horsford, 2011; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Kohli, 2009; Malcom-Piqueux, 2011; Morris, 1999). Darling-Hammond (2010) asserted that the lack of investment in educational systems has diminished or stagnated the prosperity of the United States, and further suggested the United States must be proactive in improving “the quality of teachers and teaching, the development of curriculum and assessments that encourage ambitious learning by both students and teachers, and the design of schools as learning organizations that support continuous reflection and improvement” (p. 1). Therefore, if the United States is to compete in this global arena, improvements in the quality of its education systems must occur nationally. The United States must also recognize the benefits of closing the achievement gap by educating all children and the economic impact this can have on its attempt to remain competitive.

Horsford (2014) noted that given the prevalent role of race and racism in our schools, educators must be able to acknowledge and attempt to understand its impact on the education of African American students because “to avoid issues of race is both pragmatic and problematic” (p. 124). The United States must act with urgency and great commitment, and take collective
responsibility to educate all students. While race is a social construct, it appears to be one of the leading causes of the inequality and disparity that exist in the education system today, even though African American students attend diverse schools (Butler, 2003; Campbell-Jones & Campbell-Jones, 2002; Casteel, 1998; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998). With this understanding, regardless of the type of school setting African American students attend, they often face adversities rooted in direct or indirect discriminatory practices that are perhaps caused by and perpetuated as a result of the racial inequities that exist impacting their academic performance. For this reason, this study focused on Woodbine Academy High School (WAHS) located in an urban setting, where the researcher wanted to capture the lived experiences of the alumni students that would offer insight into their academic achievement as African American students.

The following literature review produced a foundation for this study by providing an overview for which the academic achievement of African American students could improve and help close the achievement gap. The review begins with the researcher’s personal account of how teacher expectations and family support both impacted her academic performance and perception of college readiness. The review then follows a discussion of critical race theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework for understanding the moral responsibility of various stakeholders to provide African American students with the resources that give them access to learning opportunities. The lack of equitable distribution of resources has contributed to the disparities that exist in many urban districts with a large population of African American students, thus resulting in limited access to learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kantor & Lowe, 2004; Moule & Higgins, 2007). Moreover, one can understand the magnitude and implications of referring to the disparities as an achievement gap, suggesting there is a
difference in intellectual capacity between African Americans and their White counterparts (Davis, 2005; St. C. Oates, 2003).

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to understand and document the impact of the quality of education that African American alumni students received from an urban public school, WAHS. In addition, this study also determined what opportunities influenced the success rate of the alumni students and examined the hindrances that both historically and presently exist regarding the academic achievement of African American students. The study also focused closely on the social and cultural factors that contributed to the students’ success throughout high school and subsequently once they graduated high school. Despite school funding and the socioeconomic status of the students, they identified some of the practices that impacted and led to the success of African American students within a public, urban high school in New York City (NYC). Lastly, the study investigated the success of alumni participants based on their definition of success and their various pursuits and endeavors such as going on to college or entering the military or workforce.

The literature review outlines the historical impact of critical policies and factors that were created with the intent to improve educational access for African American students, but has instead, oppressed, stifled, and disenfranchised African American students, impacting their academic achievements (Davis, 2005; Kohli 2012). Factors such as teacher perceptions, expectations, engagement, and relationships play a role in the opportunities afforded to African American students. Critical race theory in conjunction with culturally responsive education were used as the theoretical frameworks to understand and foster agency in order to change the paradigm for improving the academic achievement of African American students. Lastly, this case study of an urban public school in NYC investigated how African American students
overcame, succeeded, and demonstrated academic prowess in an educational system that often subjected African American students to institutional racism and was perpetuated by what many refer to as a de facto or de jure segregation. By definition, de facto segregation is racial separatism that occurs as a result of individual choice, and de jure segregation occurs as a result of government policies which often affect and limit African American students’ access to resources and opportunities (Erickson, 2011; Glass, 2015; Rothstein, 2015). Tripp and King-Jupiter (2008) indicated that the challenges experienced by African American students in U.S. schools are “attributed to the dynamics of race” (p. 33) and an unequal distribution of resources as a means of maintaining power. White students are often assigned and referred to as intellectually superior while African American students are deemed inferior.

**Conceptual Framework**

African American communities are no longer defined by the local establishments of the past, such as schools, houses of worship, local stores, public parks, and community centers, but by the ability of individuals within the community to become self-sufficient and authentic (Emdin, 2016; Moule, 2009; Nelson, 1987; Yeakey & Bennett, 1990). Educators are not only obligated to ascertain whether the educational institution where they are employed reflects high standards and rigor; they are also accountable for making sure that all students have enriching experiences that assist them in becoming global citizens. Furthermore, effective instruction requires teachers to empower and nurture their students to think independently as well as process and decipher information quickly, while simultaneously remaining their authentic selves with each experience they encounter.

According to Mezirow (1997), the educator serves as a facilitator rather than the authority responsible for assisting students to engage in objective and subjective reframing through
rational discourse. Similar to the role of the authentic leader as defined by Palmer (2004), the educator serves to encourage students and/or colleagues in critical thinking. Teachers, in essence, operate as facilitators to students becoming independent thinkers, by allowing them to challenge and not merely follow another “expert” opinion, but rather to establish their own views and opinions. Mezirow (2000) noted that critical thinking and open-mindedness represent “a willingness to construe knowledge and values from multiple perspectives without loss of commitment to one’s own values” (p. 13).

One of the critical aspects of culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogical framework is the ability for the educator to remain open-minded, respecting the students and the outcomes that results. Culturally relevant pedagogy prepares students to question the status quo as it relates to institutional racism, structural inequalities and injustice racial or otherwise (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Lack of open-mindedness can typically lead to bias, prejudice, and stereotypical thinking—all of which inhibit critical thinking and relationship development between the teacher and the student. These biases are often referred to as implicit biases.

Implicit bias is defined as the attitudes or stereotypes that unconsciously impact one’s actions, decisions, and understanding of others primarily as related to race (Staats, 2016). Implicit bias is the “hidden prejudices against members of other racial groups” (Yudkin & Van Bavel, 2016, p. 1). Yudkin and Van Bavel (2016) argued that biases occur in many facets; they are not necessarily as a result of race. These behaviors can be thought of as a result of the “human tendency to divide into groups” (p. 1). However, because the country’s power structures were created on the basis of race (Harris, 1993), the disparities are often associated to race. According to Holroyd (2015), implicit biases are derived from “associations stored in memory. These associations can influence behaviors and judgments” (p. 512). While individuals are
susceptible to making decisions based on their personal biases, whether consciously or unconsciously, for educators such biases can have detrimental consequences to African American students and their academic performance and achievement (Toldson & Ebanks, 2014). According to Adams (2008), implicit bias impacts more than the overrepresentation and frequent inequities for African American students as a result of discipline concerns. Instead, implicit biases affect African American students in multiple instances.

In schools with a large population of African American students, the students often have “inexperienced teachers, score lower on standardized test, [are] referred for special education, and [fail] to graduate” (Adams, 2008, p. 1). Additionally, the expectations for academic achievement for African American students is often lower than for their White peers. Moreover, implicit bias marginalizes the experiences of African American students when teachers fail to acknowledge the contributions of African Americans and other people of color, whereby only the contributions or accomplishments of Whites are recognized through the curriculum (Tripp & King-Jupiter, 2008). Racial attitudes towards African American students often lead to what is highlights as a lack of cultural and racial congruency in which “teachers misinterpret, denigrate and dismiss” the cultural assets that African American students bring into the classroom (Emdin, 2016; Tripp & King-Jupiter, 2008).

In an age of technology, educators should teach students the art of communication to develop critical thinking and social skills, which includes their oratory and writing skills. Not only must the students be well versed and able to articulate themselves within the language of academia, but they also must be able to fit into their local communities (Emdin, 2016). They must be able to understand the relation of self to family, self to community, and self to the world. Palmer (2004) suggested there is a seamless back-and-forth between the individual and the
world; a reciprocity and exchange between what flows from the world into one’s being and, in turn, what one gives back to the world. As such, individuals are “continually engaged in the evolution of self and world” (Palmer, 2004, p. 48). According to Engerman and Bailey (2006), “The quality of education is a major determinant of the adolescents’ acquisition of the skills needed to compete equally and effectively in the technology-driven global community” (p. 455). As a result, students must simultaneously find their balance within this ever-changing paradigm of living within the dominant culture and the multifaceted cultures in which they experience the world.

**Self-perception of Belonging and Being African American**

The world is very different since I attended college as an undergraduate student; access to information, opportunities, and experiences were not as prevalent as they are today. In fact, applying to and graduating from college was an arduous process compared to the higher education of today—students can visit any university of their choice virtually, attend school online, and never step onto a college campus. Did I feel ready for college? Indeed, I did. I entered college on my merit, not because of affirmative action—at least that is what I believed, as my grades spoke for themselves. My lived experiences led me to believe that I was prepared to be in the college environment. However, when I entered college, I felt insecure about my ability to compete with my peers, who were mainly White and appeared to be cultivated and groomed for college, and whose parents were college graduates. Similar to the students who attended “predominantly white elite independent schools” in which African American students struggled to fit in, I found higher education challenging in part due to “fewer family economic resources relative to the schools’ population” (Datnow & Cooper, 1997, p. 57). Nevertheless,
despite my immigrant mother’s limited education, she impressed upon me the value of education and, despite my insecurities, nothing would stop me from achieving educational success.

I could not articulate or categorize my insecurities as a deficit since the educators in my high school prepared me for college, and my grades demonstrated readiness. However, perhaps while I was confident, there was a fear that loomed over my head, questioning whether I belonged in college. How would I make it when it all seemed foreign and difficult? I realized that much of what it meant to be college-ready was about academic preparation and resiliency. The notion of resiliency and my own perception may be a personal bias, which may be interpreted as blaming African American students for not meeting or achieving greatness. To this end, the idea that one can improve circumstances based on one’s own intrinsic motivation and fortitude is an assumption that must be avoided, as there are other policies and obstacles that can hinder the progress of African American students and their academic achievement but are often not addressed.

Lack of resiliency implies that individuals who are not successful are so as a result of their own doing; but perhaps what I understood as resiliency was the ability to bring with me my identity—unlike many African American students who may “live within socioeconomic disadvantaged spaces while maintaining their dignity and identity. They are blamed for achievement gaps…learning quickly that they have to divorce themselves from their culture in order to be academically successful” (Emdin, 2016, p. 13). Yet, I quickly identified that my strengths resided first and foremost in my Haitian heritage and my faith. I not only represented my family but also my community. However, I often wondered: Was my motivation extrinsic, intrinsic, or both to withstand being among those who appeared to be more fortunate and/or privileged than I was?
According to Datnow and Cooper (1997), my ambivalence and apprehension resulted from the lack of acknowledgment from White peers in recognizing and affirming my intellectual ability. Similar to my experience, racism is almost always present for the African American student. Therefore, despite the superficial constructs of racism, the reality of racism inevitably becomes internalized. Its existence becomes memorialized in every aspect of life for many African Americans. Despite the lack of acknowledgment, I knew they were not smarter than I was; they simply had more resources and more opportunities available to them than I did, like parents who attended college. However, whether or not my parents attended college was no longer of significance. Instead, as an African American student, the journey I was embarking on and its implications were profound. Here, it is important to understand that my perception of myself was the result of what I was taught, my educational experiences, and thus a bias toward how I viewed myself in relation to my White peers.

Self-doubt, apprehension, and insecurities are commonly experienced by African American students entering college; such biases exist as a result of their “minority” status and labels imposed by the dominant culture. According to Oates (2004), for African American students, their self-perception is twofold. First, it involves one’s self-esteem, in which there is generally positive self-evaluation to the extent that self-acceptance and respect are standard. However, there is self-efficacy which is necessary for one to meet the challenges of life and, in this case, university study as a belief in one’s ability and efforts towards potential accomplishments relative or in comparison to their White counterparts. Oates indicated the efficacy that African American students endured was not of their own doing, but as a result of the undermining of African American progress resulting from the patterns of racism. While some
African American students doubted their efficacy, their self-esteem remained intact, enabling them to overcome and achieve academically.

**Resources versus. Will and Support**

Despite the lack of resources, I had the drive and support necessary to succeed, which is something all young scholars need. For African American students, the need is for their spirits to be uplifted and their destiny not to be defined by their circumstances (Du Bois, 1935; Glass, 2015). African American students need reassurance that there are others who believe in them, and know they can and will succeed. This includes the adults who are placed in their lives as educators and are expected to guide them, even when they do not necessarily feel they are capable (Delpit, 2003). Prior to integration in the South, it was the African American teachers who educated African American students. Regardless of the parents’ socioeconomic status that was at or below the poverty line, the teachers encouraged and provided the students the opportunity through education to go to college and university.

Delpit (2003) argued that students of color, African Americans, can be successful not by fixing their diction or language or by dumbing down the curriculum, but, instead, by employing instructional strategies “designed specifically for their cultural and academic background” (p. 18). While Du Bois (1935) provided insight into the need for separate schools, this need stemmed out of the racial barrier that existed and the lack of access that African Americans had to attend or teach at predominantly White institutions (Clewell & Anderson, 1995). Separate and segregated schools provided the means to instruct African American students in such a way that was nurturing. Educators and administrators were conscious about the racial divide that existed because of the color line, and took ownership for educating African American students. Despite the outcomes of separate schools, Du Bois (1935) asserted and raised the question of whether
there would be a need for “mixed” schools or racially segregated schools if the emphasis were placed on providing a proper education. For Du Bois, the existence of “mixed schools” or integrated schools was a small part of the broader and more profound issue about the education of the African American student. Instead, two main tenets that are required to educate all children is a “sympathetic touch between teacher and pupil and knowledge on the part of the teacher; not simply of the individual taught, but his surrounding and background and the history of his class and group” (p. 328). Du Bois (1935) discussed and pointed out the issue of the color line and the impact the racial climate of the times would have on education. Similarly, multiculturalism addressed similar issues in the 1980s, as culturally relevant pedagogy currently addresses the necessities and requirements of teacher education programs and the pedagogical practices of the 21st century, which focus on improving the landscape of academic achievement for African American and Latino students.

**Developing an Understanding of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Developing a better understanding of culturally relevant and responsive education was personally important for my knowledge base of research, goals, and implications on the academic achievement of African American students. As a result, I made personal connections with and attended a series of seminars presented by leading researchers involved in the work of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. What I gleaned was an understanding of what cultural competence meant and its foundation to culturally responsive education. Cultural competence is the ability to accept and respect that other individuals have different values than one’s own; yet, despite that fact, there is a willingness to identify ways to discover those differences, destroy the barriers between them, and celebrate the commonalities. In addition, cultural competence is the concept of self-knowledge and embracing others despite their
differences. Thus, developing one’s cultural competence rests in the process for which one becomes aware of oneself as well as others, whereby one grows in knowledge and understanding. According to Sealey-Ruiz (personal communication, 2017), cultural competence occurs when students are able to bring their authentic self and cultural identity into the space where their academic excellence is compatible. Furthermore, it is the ability to embrace, challenge, and convey varying thoughts and ideas as a result of cross-cultural interactions. Cultural competence thus laid the groundwork for culturally responsive pedagogy to come to fruition, for which Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) provided the framework as a means of improving teacher education programs for pre-service teachers.

Research scholars around the country have conducted substantial research to respond to the need to improve teacher education and pedagogical practices. These scholars included Christopher Emdin and Felicia Mensah (science education), Erica Walker (mathematics education), Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (adult learning, racial literacy, and culturally relevant pedagogy), and Tyrone Howard and Richard Milner (culturally relevant pedagogy and African American boys), to name a few. Therefore, the urgency for which culturally responsive education is considered and implemented is now—not as an afterthought but as standard practice for one’s instructional pedagogy that is habitual and intentional within the classroom. Moreover, as a theoretical framework, culturally responsive education allows students to learn from multiple vantage points, including a historical, political, cultural, and social perspective that can be used in all disciplines. Teachers who employ culturally responsive educational practices respect the students’ culture and use it as a point of leverage to acclimate the students to the content, while fostering mutual respect and transparency between students and teacher.
While I could not refer to my own experiences in the past to what researchers have defined as culturally relevant pedagogy as we know it today, I was encouraged to be proud of my cultural heritage of being Haitian American and being taught by the only African American/Latina (Black Costa Rican) math teacher I had in high school, who impacted my life in such a way that I was influenced to pursue a career as a mathematics teacher. Thus, the need for culturally responsive/relevant pedagogy (CRP) is essential as the teacher in question encouraged and validated who I was as an American with Haitian heritage. This teacher identified who I was and appealed to my “inherent intellectual capability, humanity, physical ability and spiritual character” (Delpit, 2003, p. 16). Therefore, an underlying goal was to investigate how race and culture can be used to identify various ways to improve the academic achievement of African American students and the cultural competency of the educators who teach them.

**Learning on a Continuum**

From childhood to adulthood, one continuously engages in the process of learning. Children are taught through socialization; to this extent, their perspectives are often influenced by the adults around them (Mezirow, 1991). Once children can participate in discourse and exercise rational thinking, they transition into the realm of adulthood (Mezirow, 1991). As an adult, one questions one’s assumptions as well as the assumptions of others. As such, one’s perspective is challenged, allowing for new viewpoints to take shape. Over time, adults are able to grow and adapt to changes based on their experiences. Inevitably, they are able to transform as a result of the self-reflection they undergo during the process. As individuals develop from childhood into adulthood, they transform and are able to “transfer a hypothetical thinking to the presuppositions upon which our norms are predicated” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 150). The ability to self-reflect and challenge one’s own assumptions are characteristics that must be held by adults
who seek to become culturally competent. In turn, teachers are able to develop into culturally responsive pedagogues who can teach African American students when they recognize the intellectual prowess of the students they service; only then can they guide them towards academic success.

Numerous aspects of unconscious learning affect our worldviews and time is not indicative of one’s experience. Sorokin and Merton (1937) indicated that time is merely a “necessary variable in social change” (p. 615). A course of events is rarely remembered by the dates on which they occurred; instead, they are primarily remembered by what Sorokin and Merton (1937) referred to as a social event, defined as the time that is “qualitatively differentiated according to the beliefs and customs of a common group” (p. 623). My involvement in various organizations has shaped my identity and worldview; however, the primary influences have been my family and experiences. My compassion, responsibility, and duty to others, particularly the students I service, are impacted by my interactions with others and my environment. Just as my growth and transformation are ongoing, so are those of the African American students who yearn for opportunities that are often limited or denied to them because of their race and socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, transformation is an ongoing process as students begin to evolve into their authentic selves; academic achievement is improved as a result of the balance between social interactions within their culture and the experiences they have with others.

**Critical Race Theory**

For the purpose of this study, critical race theory was used to examine the disparity between opportunities, resources, access to the quality of education that African Americans received in the United States, and its impact on the academic achievement of African American
students. CRT originally began as the basis for evaluating the unfair treatment of African Americans within the judicial system in reference to the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) of the 1970s (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 2011; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado, 1995; Horsford, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT stemmed from the legal analysis and framework of Derek Bell and Alan Freeman that addressed the racial inequities in society and how the social disparities are perpetuated between the dominant and marginalized groups based on the impact and fundamental role race and racism has in the United States (Hiraldo, 2010). While some have argued that the premise of CRT highlights the assumption that to be White is to be racist, the underpinnings of CRT have allowed researchers to interpret the status quo of the dominant culture by analyzing how race and privilege impact implicit and explicit biases and behaviors that exclude marginalized people—in this case, African Americans—from fully participating in society (Hiraldo, 2010). The major tenets of CRT are:

1. Racism in the United States is pervasive in all aspects of life.
2. Questions the dominant culture’s approach to being neutral, objective, and colorblind when it comes to decisions where disparities exist as a result of race.
3. Contextualizes, challenges, and makes the assumption that an event has occurred and contributes to the advantage of one group at the disadvantage of another group within relation to race and racism.
4. Challenges that change or results of any gains for minority groups must occur incrementally.
5. Interest convergence in which nothing ever happens for African Americans unless the dominant culture benefits from implementation of policies or decisions.
6. Stories and personal narratives provide a context and serve as evidence in which discrimination and disparities are experienced by African Americans to counteract the story told by the dominant group. (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Horsford, 2011)

CRT recognizes that race and racism serve the benefit of the dominant group as a result of the slow pace in which progress for marginalized groups occur. To this extent, social progress and mobility for marginalized groups is often delayed in order to maintain the status quo and power structures such that (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004), to be White in America is to own an invaluable asset, which Harris (1993) referred to as “whiteness as property” (n.p.). Whiteness as property identifies how whiteness or to be White comes with a set of privileges and benefits that can only be possessed by White individuals. Additionally, whiteness is valuable; therefore, it must also be protected. Moreover, over time the benefits and privileges that are associated with whiteness are expected. White people are further “affirmed legitimized and protected by the law” (p. 1713). The history of white as property is rooted in White supremacy. According to Harris (1993), the concept of race and racism coupled with slavery laid the foundation on which race and property led to the oppression of African Americans in the United States. Racial and economic subordination was established as a result of the relationship between Whites and African Americans during slavery, which has also been the foundation on which Whites have sustained power and control as the dominant culture.

For many African American students, race often overshadows their culture and the cultural assets they bring into the classroom; to this extent, race is often confused with culture, rendering them indistinguishable (Harris, 1993). As a result, educators fail to see the whole child with individual qualities (Delpit, 2003), for which race becomes the means by which biases, assumptions, and perceptions are often derived towards African American students and their
ability to succeed. These assumptions often produce different experiences for African American students in comparison to their White counterparts, thus resulting in a different experience for African American students that is not the same, compared to the experience of their White counterparts. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) argued that CRT serves as the driving force by which researchers are able to question and critique overt and covert racist school policies and practices. Essentially, CRT is utilized as a tool to magnify the inequalities and inequities with which African American students are confronted.

Initially, contributions of CRT to the field of education came from the work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), who provided not only the context for which educators, particularly African American educators, should view their roles, but also charging and allowing researchers to give voice to the marginalized and disenfranchised. However, the relevance of CRT began in the earlier part of the 20th century, to which Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) gave Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois credit for “placing race as the central construct for understanding inequality” (p. 50), despite their own marginalized positions. According to Ladson-Billings (1998), developing a CRT analytical standpoint allows for the ability to unmask and expose racism from multiple perspectives. However, at the core are several constructs that are profound within this literature review. As indicated before, storytelling or the counter-story as an approach to the historical and contextual nature provides a “cultural viewpoint, derived from a common history of those that have been oppressed” (p. 15). As such, CRT gives voice to the voiceless and allows the invisible to become visible, giving African American students and educators the ability to act with agency and urgency in accessing and asserting that academic attainment and a quality education are their birthright. CRT also allows the ability to challenge the status quo, the dominant culture in which one is able to understand one’s position in the
world (Freire, 2014; Harris, 1993; Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner; 2012, 2014; Tripp & King-Jupiter, 2008). Culturally responsive education and pedagogy provide the catalyst for improvements to be made in educating African American students and improving their academic performance. CRT provides the opportunity for process or action to develop the praxis to achieve the desired change once one’s consciousness is raised. Praxis and waking individuals towards “concientización,” as described by Friere (2014), or critical awareness of their social reality is critical.

Much like Friere’s (2014) idea of “conscientization,” CRT allows the marginalized to understand one’s truth from a racial framework in which one is able to determine personal subjectivity depending on how one perceives himself or herself as the oppressed or the oppressor. Such roles are dependent on the impact of class, skin color, and educational level. Therefore, the dichotomy of the education system with regard to access, type, and quality of education must be explored as a means of improving the academic achievement of African American students and closing the achievement gap that exists as a result of educational systems that focus on “reify[ing] the cultural practices and ways of knowing and being” from the lens of the “white majority” (Milner, 2017, p. 3). To this end, this study sought to document the way in which the alumni students of WAHS experienced an alternative to the rhetoric of the literature that views the academic achievement of African American students from a deficit model and provides insight into aspects of what is possible for African American students.

**Racial and Cultural Congruency**

All too often, African American students are presented as deficient in their academic achievements (Capellaro, 2013; Chambers, 2009; Fryer & Levitt, 2004). These deficits are often categorized with regard to the lack of resources, teacher perception, or established policies
intended to improve educational outcomes, which instead fall short in the quest to make education equitable (Gardner, Ford, & Miranda, 2001; Kohli, 2009; Malcom-Piqueux, 2011; Morris, 1999). Questionable advancements toward equitable educational opportunities for African Americans have occurred since 1954 and the decision of Brown v. Board of Education.

Initially, Brown v. Board of Education I (1954) provided hope of integration and giving African American students the “same educational access, resources, opportunities and subsequent rewards and quality of life associated with education attainment as white children” (Horsford, 2011, p. 2). Yet, even as the Civil Rights Movement was making gains towards desegregation, Martin Luther King Jr. before his death metaphorically conveyed to Harry Belafonte (Civil Rights Activist) that he feared he was “integrating people into a burning house” (Autodidact 17, 2017, p. 2). While it was important to fight for integration as a means for African American to gain access and be treated as equal in America, King seemed weary of the process and the readiness of the nation to integrate with fidelity. He expressed concern that even though the courts mandated integration as a result of law, the nation needed to be concern with “the plight of the poor and the disenfranchised” (Autodidact 17, 2017, p. 2). Additionally, while Guinier (2004) acknowledged the efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense Education Fund for Brown v. Board of Education (1954) as a case which “caused a social revolution,” years later the “social, political and economic problems” are still prevalent today (p. 92). Although the NAACP offered support to African American students for college, there was limited support in the public schools. Lowe (2004) argued that while the NAACP contributed to many aspects of the dismantling of racial injustice, the desired outcomes of Brown v. Board of Education did not bring forth the desired outcomes in education.
In urban settings, other policies of school choice and the establishment of charter schools have replaced the mandate for desegregation. “The reality is that an unequal education process continues in America, despite the legal and moral mandates” (Gardner et al., 2001, p. 241). Therefore, it is important for educators and educational leaders to have an understanding of how race as a construct of oppression has impacted the academic achievement of African American students (Horsford, 2014).

In essence, actions of a school system should be built around the students’ safety and social and emotional wellness through a curriculum that reflects who they are and enhances their existing intellect and academic achievement while promoting college-bound scholars, despite their socioeconomic status or their ethnicity. According to Knight and Marciano (2013), policies and practices are significantly influenced by the staff’s cultural background, which could limit the level of support they provide to students as well as the rigor of the content and pedagogy in the class (Butler 2003; Casteel, 1998; Chambers, 2009; DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2011; understanding of culture, educators will continue to have a predisposed view of what students are able to accomplish, often casting out many talented African American students because of their preconceived views (Emdin, 2016; Gay 2002; Kohli, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2007). Teacher behaviors that overlook the talents of their students, particularly their African American students, often project what is referred to as unconscious or implicit biases. Unconscious biases often subjects marginalized groups to unintentional racism, such that the racism is covert and often invisible to those who commit the behavior (Moule, 2009). These biases are based on preconceived notions of stereotypes and prejudices that often go unchallenged. Many of these behaviors are learned through the socialization and lived experiences of the individual that becomes a normative way of thinking.
When there is racial and cultural congruency between the teacher and the student, there is a higher rate of academic achievement. This is partially due to the relatable qualities African American teachers possess and process when serving African American students. That is not to say that because one is of African, African American, or Caribbean descent, one can automatically relate to students of the African diaspora. However, the cultural congruency of being of the African diaspora encourages teachers to take a personal interest in educating such students; as a result, students can relate to teachers as an extension of their “family” (Mungo, 2013; Sealey-Ruiz, 2014). To this extent, African American teachers are able to improve the academic achievement of African American students and increase the number of first-generation college-bound students because of the influence on and expectations they have of their students (Knight & Marciano, 2013; Kohli, 2012; Milner, 2012; Mungo, 2013).

In conjunction with cultural and racial congruency between the student and the teacher, a reciprocated relationship between the school and the parents is necessary for student success. Parents who are involved and part of the school community often receive information and have access to additional opportunities that enhance their child’s educational experiences. Parents are able to receive information about what the student needs to graduate high school, which further enhances the student-parent-teacher relationship, where teachers serve as a resource to help the student through the college application process, as they simultaneously support them in getting academically prepared for such endeavors (Mungo, 2013). Also, when students and parents are informed and understand the larger purpose or meaning of learning, they begin to internalize the possibilities of actually attending college, regardless of financial barriers. One of the main contributing factors to student performance is rooted in teacher expectations (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). It is important that teachers set expectations that students can meet, yet know that if they
fall short, they are supported. Furthermore, teachers who can identify opportunities outside the classroom for their students demonstrate their interest in the students’ academic, social, and emotional progress.

**Racism, Access, and the Need for Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

Teachers cannot move forward in the endeavor to educate all children if the pervasiveness of race and the racial history of the United States are ignored. While African American students have access to elite, predominately White institutions of higher learning, this does not mean that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are no longer necessary. In fact, HBCUs have always prepared African American students to “navigate and productively negotiate” racism (McMickens, 2012, p. 41). In 1872, during the Reconstruction Era (1865–1877), collegiate departments were established for African Americans at seven institutions of higher learning. These institutions included Atlanta University, Howard University, Fisk University, Leland College, Lincoln University, Shaw University, and Wilberforce University. By 1895, Black institutions of “higher education produced 1,151 graduates who entered teaching, ministry, or other professions to serve their people” (Clewell & Anderson, 1995, p. 56). This movement of African Americans educating African Americans established the fundamental need to deconstruct racism and the idea that African Americans were intellectually inferior. HBCUs served to cultivate and harvest the intellect of African American scholars and to uplift them toward social mobility and the greater good of their community.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities were not about “school choice,” but arose out of the necessity to educate African American students who did not have access to the likes of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale (Silverstein, 2017). Many of the African American scholars who
existed were graduates of the Historically Black Colleges. Prior to 1954, 82,000 African American teachers were responsible for the education of two million African American students (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). These teachers taught exclusively African American students. Moreover, HBCUs served the needs of the African American community. They were some of the first institutions of higher education that understood CRP as a means of providing education to African Americans that would change the social conditions of those who were disenfranchised. HBCUs were designed to educate and uplift the African American communities when predominantly White institutions were exclusive and did not allow African Americans to attend. In fact, the HBCUs took on the responsibility to educate a larger number of African American educators and other professionals who existed before Brown v. Board of Education (1954).

For many African Americans, higher education was the means to which they would “gain access to economic prosperity, political influence, and social status” (Clewell & Anderson, 1995, p. 56). Teaching was a desired profession within the African American community, which enabled many African American women to take on leadership positions. Additionally, the educational philosophies of Black educators generally reflected the collective ethos of the Black community that believed education was the key to enhancing the life chances of their children (Tillman, 2004, p. 282). Yet, as African Americans began to fight for equal resources, with regards to facilities and textbooks, the purpose and value of schooling for African Americans became obscured (Mungo, 2013) as schools began to change their admissions policies and compulsory education was required to desegregate. Few schools sought to integrate, educating both African Americans and Whites together. The more common sentiment was to keep African American students out. In 1904, The Day Law was passed by the Kentucky legislature barring integrated education in all of the institutions of higher learning within the state. As a result of the
law, institutions like Berea College ceased admissions to African Americans and became totally segregated by 1908 (Strong-Leek, 2008). Du Bois (1935) indicated that despite the integration of schools in the North, African Americans were “admitted and tolerated, not educated; they were crucified” (p. 329). Therefore, regardless of whether an African American student was in the South or the North, the quality of education they received in desegregated schools remained inadequate.

The viability and existence of HBCUs today are essential to fostering an environment where students then and now continue to work within a society that consistently questions their place. Significantly important are the pedagogical practices employed by teachers, coupled with the systems that are established by educational leaders who consider the whole child along the continuum of Pre-K to Grade 12. Additionally, educational leaders connect the systems and pedagogical practices to the students’ experiences as part of the teaching and learning process. For African American students, it is essential to engage them to think critically and analytically, questioning the inequities and the very institutions and people who have the moral obligation to assist and guide them through the learning process, where they are able to attain academic success.

**Culturally Responsive College Readiness Culture**

High schools that have a culture of college preparation and a curriculum, which includes the rigor of college preparatory courses, strive to work collectively with all stakeholders towards one goal. Fundamentally, the goal is for all students to pursue a course of continued studies in college or at the university. According to Conley (2010), some fundamental principles guide a college-going culture. These principles include but are not limited to:

1. Creating a core academic program, such as advanced placement courses;
2. Aligning academic program and expectations with college and career readiness standards;
3. Teaching key self-management skills and expecting students to use them;
4. Aligning assignments and grading policies with college expectations;
5. Preparing students for the complexity of applying for college; and
6. Building partnerships and connections to postsecondary education. (Conley, 2010, p. 49)

Educational institutions that cultivate an environment where the local community affiliates, such as businesses, colleges and universities, parents, and neighborhood residents who are active members of the school’s community, support students towards a common goal and assist in facilitating a college culture. These extended external collaborations provide students with enriching opportunities within their traditional course of study. In addition, educators have to continuously assist students to develop, internalize, and execute desired outcomes of “time management, and prioritize tasks, improve their study skills, learn how to set and achieve goals, and develop necessary academic skills systemically” (Conley, 2010, p. 115) throughout all courses. More importantly, an educator guides students towards self-resiliency, where they can “persist through difficult task” (p. 115) and adversity. According to Patry and Ford (2016), resiliency serves as a set of “internal characteristics that facilitates adaptation” (p. 9), where one is able to develop an adaptive coping process whereby positive outcomes despite adversity are reached. As a possible means of developing this character trait, high school students must develop effective communication skills that enable them to advocate for themselves, as opposed to their parents advocating for them. Conley (2010) further noted, “readiness is a function of the ability to continue to learn beyond high school, and particularly in postsecondary courses
relevant to students’ goals and interests, as represented by their choice of major or certificate program” (p. 51). As a result, students are not only able to go through the process of becoming college-ready, but also participate in civic engagement and the democratic process. Additionally, African American students must have the opportunity to envision themselves and believe that college is a viable option towards the trajectory of upward mobility. Hrabowski (2013) pointed out the necessity of support and collaboration as requirements for African American students to succeed in STEM-related fields; however, the concepts can be applied to all disciplines at all levels. Building community among students is critical to success (Emdin, 2008, 2016; Hrabowski, 2013).

**Culture and Its Impact on Achievement**

Teacher bias can influence how students are perceived in the classroom. Therefore, it is important that teachers are reflective and develop cultural sensitivity and competence. As teachers develop an understanding of the cultural relevance of their students, they begin to understand how the role of the family and community becomes critical as the foundational aspects of one’s aspiration to pursuing education. Likewise, when teachers start to interact with students from other cultural backgrounds, the shared experiences begin to shape and inform their thinking. The reciprocated relationship then begins to serve as a cultural bridge as the similarities and differences of each person are treated with respect. As a result, teachers can motivate their students to the next level of engagement and success (Dee, 2005; Hudson & Holmes, 1994).

**Perspectives of ‘Achievement’ for African American Students**

Racism and race relations represent one of the main underlying reasons for the inequalities and disparities that exist in the educational systems throughout the United States. The United States in many ways has failed to provide equal or equitable education to all children.
and particularly to African American students (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Those who refer to the disparities of African American students in relation to their White peers as an achievement gap fail to recognize or admit to the unleveled playing field that African American students in urban communities endure because of race relations (Horsford, 2011, 2014). Additionally, it is often African American students who get blamed for their lack of academic achievement “when the system that perpetuates these issues remains unchallenged” (Emdin, 2016, p. 13). This notion must be identified and interventions must be put in place for academic achievement to occur.

Ladson-Billings (2007) suggested that policymakers and educational stakeholders reconsider the verbiage used concerning the achievement gap that exists, not as it relates to achievement but rather as an “educational debt” that is owed to African American students for the lack of fair share they have not acquired. Similarly, Milner (2012) suggested that an achievement gap is too narrow in its scope in the discourse of disparities as achievement and success on scores of standardized tests, and graduation rates are “only one dimension of a much more complex and nuanced reality” (p. 694) that affects the achievement of African American students. Instead, the concern regards the lack of opportunity that exists for African American students. The two aspects of educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2007) and opportunity gap (Milner, 2012) support the researcher’s goal in investigating the academic achievement of the alumni students of WAHS as a means of identifying the “optimal learning opportunities” for African American students, and the social and cultural factors that led to the educational experiences that impacted their academic performance and academic achievement.

The historical impact of desegregation, as a result of the landmark ruling of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954), was a plan unrealized (Guinier, 2004; Lowe, 2004; Morris, 1999). Brown v. Board of Education failed to meet the intended goals of integration.
Instead, its impact continues to have repercussions on the quality of education African American students receive today. For many, Brown v. Board of Education gave America hope that a new era of race relations would be attainable through education. Rather, the strain on race relations increased as a result of Whites refusing to accept desegregation, and to the extent that desegregation led to the dismantling of schools and communities that encompass African American people (Erickson, 2011; Rothstein, 2015). Communities were left in disarray and abandoned as students were relocated to share the same space and integrate with their White peers (Malcom-Piqueux, 2011; Morris, 2002; Mungo, 2013). African American students were required to adapt and assimilate, adopting the ways of the dominant culture. According to Emdin (2016), students were, as they might be today, required to disassociate themselves from their communities to succeed academically in an environment where, often, who the students are and/or how they are represented is obscured by those whose perceptions devalued them.

African American students entered into settings that rejected their presence from the onset. Desegregation occurred in a single direction for African American students; they were displaced into the environment of the dominant culture, resulting in an effort of futility. According to Morris (1999), integration never occurred; rather, desegregation created even further disparities for African American students. Neighborhood schools that were once the epicenter of the communities where African American students thrived, acquired knowledge and gained confidence and self-pride from the African American teachers, eventually becoming institutions that were deemed inferior (Morris, 1999). Despite the lack of resources, there were understanding and commitment on the part of the African American teachers to give more than was required.
Desegregation and the relocation of African American students to White schools implicitly or explicitly conveyed to African American students that they were inferior (Stovall, 2005). To experience the privileges that White students enjoyed on a daily basis, African American students had to leave their communities to receive a quality education to be successful. In doing so, African American students endured the rejection and hostility of Whites in the name of integration (Morris, 1999, 2002). The impact was not just on the students, but also on the loss of teachers. As students were bussed to White communities, this resulted in the unemployment of 38,000 African American educators, significantly leaving schools in Black communities empty and in disarray. African American teachers became jobless in 17 southern and border states (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). During 1954 to 1965, many communities were impacted by the lack of African American teachers in the classrooms as a result of desegregation. According to Tillman (2004) the decision of Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) that led to desegregation, created one of the greatest social injustice of the twentieth century. The ruling resulted in the displacement of a large number of African American educators, which impacted the academic success of African American children. Moreover, African American communities were not only threatened but suffered further disparities economically, socially and culturally. However, it would not be the last time that African American teachers were not represented in the classroom. From 1984 to 1989, approximately 21,515 African American teachers were removed from the classroom as a result of teacher certification requirements and teacher preparation programs (Tillman, 2004). Subsequently, many African American children continued to incur the cost of desegregation where their communities and schools remained marred by the remnants and repercussions left behind. In 2011-2012, African American teachers represented 6.8% of the total number of teachers across the United States, while the African American student population was
The disproportion of African American teachers continued to have an impact on the academic outcomes of African American students, where consideration and efforts were not made to hire more teachers of color. Over the last three years, New York City established a program named New York City Men Teach (NYCMT) as a means of increasing the number of men of color in the classrooms from 2% to 10% (R. Haynes, Assistant Director of NYCMT, personal communication, January, 2017); such efforts are necessary if equitable education is the goal.

**Desegregation, Not Integration**

The ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was expected to offer educational equality based on desegregation, yet the nation’s schools have become more segregated over the last 25 years (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hannah-Jones, 2015; Kucsera & Orfield, 2014; Mungo, 2013). It is important to understand the distinction between desegregation as opposed to integration. Desegregation occurred by displacing African American students into White schools, but did not encompass embracing the whole child into their institution (Campbell-Jones & Campbell-Jones, 2002; Day-Vines, Patton, & Baytops, 2003). There were many problems with desegregation. Within desegregated schools, neither the curriculum nor the social aspects incorporated or reflected the African American students’ culture. In addition, while the student demographics changed, staff remained White, as African American teachers were not often part of the instructional staff of the desegregated schools. According to Mungo (2013), desegregation was a “second-class integration” that relegated African American students and educators to marginalized settings (p. 113). The dominant culture presided over the control of the educational process within desegregated schools, and behaved with “unwillingness on the part of desegregated school to integrate black oriented subject matter into the curriculum” (Nelson,
1987, p. 453). These disparities propelled a vicious cycle of inequality and deprivation for African American students and further perpetuated marginalization.

As a result, the cultural capital of African American students who attended desegregated schools was not of any value. African American students were “socialized to believe that their cultural currency is low relative to the Euro-American counterparts” (Campbell-Jones & Campbell-Jones, 2002, p. 134). Devaluing African American students in segregated and desegregated schools led to similar results. Resources and opportunities for African American students were often rationed, particularly in communities that were less affluent and had a higher rate of minority students and residents (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Irvine & Irvine, 2007; Rothstein, 2015). “African-Americans learn[ed] early on that their minority group status predisposes them to discriminatory treatment and constant reminders about their subordinate position in a society that devalues blackness” (Day-Vines et al., 2003, p. 45). Moreover, African Americans were not considered equals but rather property; as a result, allocation of resources remained subpar.

Lowe (2004) contended, “one manifestation of white hostility was the effort to starve black schools of resources” (p. 1). The academic achievement of African American students is often compared to their White peers, who are given educational resources. Therefore, if African American students are expected to compete, the resources must be made available to them. The rationing of resources limits the kind of opportunities and experiences students can have. One assumption often is that an abundance of opportunities is available and access to these opportunities exists for all students; this suggests that the continued lack of achievement for African American students is a result of their cultural norms or lack of effort. Both Milner (2012) and Darling-Hammond (2010) refuted and explained that lack of academic achievement for
African American students is a function of unequal access to educational resources and opportunities. Although resources are not defined, one may argue that additional financial resources are not the solution to improving the academic outcomes of African American students; therefore, one must consider that increased funding for schools has the ability to offer more opportunities.

In suburban areas surrounding NYC, property taxes often impact school funding. For African American students in urban areas who may live in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood, tax allocations are often lower than White suburban neighborhoods (Darling-Hammond, 1998, 2010), thus impacting the resources they receive. The disparity in funding creates “stark differences in funding, teacher quality, curriculum and class sizes” (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 2). Darling-Hammond (2010) suggested that one way improvements for African American students could be accomplished is by effectively allocating the financial resources towards hiring qualified teachers, offering a challenging curriculum and having smaller class sizes.

Each component mentioned has direct implications for improving the academic performance of African American students. For example, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2014) found that when high school students were in classrooms with less than 25 students, engagement increased. Subsequently, students were willing to participate and less likely to have disciplinary occurrences as their time on task was maximized. Furthermore, NCTE found significant benefits for students who attended schools with smaller class sizes. These benefits included but were not limited to increased: (a) earning potential, (b) civic responsibility and participation, and (c) probability of attending college (p. 3). This in part was due to the attention teachers provided each student. For African American students, the probability of long-
term success as a result of smaller class sizes was 5.4%, while for the poorest third of U.S. schools; it was 7.3% (NCTE, 2014). To this end, the academic achievement of African American students could improve when resource allocations are more equitable and African American students are afforded access to the opportunities that their White peers have experienced outside of NYC.

**Lack of Investment and Resources in Education**

Race relations in the United States have hindered the progress of African Americans to gain access to resources. African Americans have endured disrespect and the attempt by the White dominant group to indoctrinate African Americans to thinking being Black is synonymous with being inferior (Chambers, 2009). To this extent, the current state of affairs is not a new phenomenon, as our investment in education remains disproportional along racial lines. The lack of investment exacerbates the inequalities that continue to plague communities that are largely people of color. In 1857, evidence of such allocations were apparent when African American leaders protested the New York Board of Education’s expenditures for spending “$16 per white child and only one (1) cent per Black child for school buildings” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 28). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), the national average spent on public education for the fiscal year of 2015 was $11,392 per student; for New York State, the cost was approximately $21,206. However, in 2016, New York City allocated an average of $23,560 in per-student cost towards programs, resources, and human capital, which included instructional support, leadership support, building services, and ancillary services (NYC DOE, 2017). While there may be an overall estimate for New York City as a whole, different districts within the city allocated varying amounts. In 2016, District 13 spent an average of $21,303, while surrounding districts spent an average of $22,802 (NYC DOE, 2017). However, determining the per-pupil
cost as a result of race by district is complex as many factors contribute to varying costs for each district, since each district does not serve the same number of students and may have varying populations of English Language Learners (ELLs) or students with disabilities (SWDs).

In 2012, the student population K-12 consisted of 18% African American students. Fifty percent of the students were categorized as low income on the basis of receiving free or reduced lunch, while 22% live below the poverty line (Educational Trust, 2015). Many students who attended schools in New York State were concentrated in New York City; this is important because students in the highest-poverty districts resided in New York City and received $2,142 or 10% less in funding. When the data were adjusted for additional needs of low-income students, they received $3,452 or 16% less. Additionally, districts serving the most students of color received $2,525 or 11% less funding (Education Trust (2015), p. 11).

Schools have “shifted from the desegregated settings mandated by Brown vs. Board of Education (1954), to neighborhood schools that reflect the segregated populations of their neighborhoods” (Mungo, 2013, p. 112). Neighborhood segregation continues to impact the financial allocation and resources schools receive. In many cases, neighborhood segregation was as a result of establishing laws enacted by the federal government concerning housing that denied African Americans access to both housing and quality education (Eaton & Rivkin, 2010; Rothstein, 2015). The policies of the past have led to many of the disparities that exist today.

Access to educational opportunities for African American students living in the inner cities has been limited. The lack of resources in districts that have a population of African American students creates the disparity of access and opportunity that perpetuates the achievement gap (Horsford, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Nelson, 1987). According to Klein (2015), the former U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan suggested that one factor which
contributed to an increase in the disparity of current educational funding is the bipartisanship that existed in Congress. Republicans attempted to rewrite the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002), by proposing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), which in turn “would give even more money to well-off school districts at the expense of struggling districts” (p. 1). In the past, federal funding has supported state and local government to rectify educational inequalities (Klein, 2015); its primary purpose was to support the neediest students and not necessarily balance state and local funding for education. Ultimately, the purpose of federal funding is to provide necessary resources that would supplement districts servicing poor children, ELLs, and SWDs (Klein, 2015). Nevertheless, the impact of the ESSA is referred to as “Title I portability,” in which federal funding allocations apply to where the student is enrolled. The provision of the ESSA allows federal money to be reallocated to the new school.

For example, a child who leaves a high-poverty school to enroll in a more affluent one will also carry the funding to the new school. The potential impact of implementing the ESSA was an estimated $700 million affecting the highest-poverty districts (Brown, 2015). The absence of such funds would stagger the progress of a significant number of students in poor districts who need it the most. According to Richmond (2015), in two reports presented by the Leadership Conference Education Fund and the Education Law Center, funding disparities continue to exist in large proportions in schools that service students residing in high-poverty and low-income districts. The per-student spending in districts with the highest poverty “receives about $1200 less per students than the lowest poverty districts” (Ushomirsky & Williams, 2015, p. 3). Coincidentally, in districts serving a large population of students of color, funding allocation “is $2000 less than districts serving” fewer students of color (p. 3). For many African American students, the degree to which their schools are disproportionately underfunded and
under resourced is a part of the factors that may contribute to their lack of access to opportunities which are often readily available to White children. The lack of financial resources does not necessarily contribute to or impact the academic achievement of African American students from achieving their greatness, but it can restrict their exposure and access to opportunities.

Researchers continue to argue that increased funding does not impact student achievement; however, the desire is not to have an abundance of resources but to have resources that are equitable, allowing for all children to be on a level playing field. Parents of school-age children are often seeking to live in neighborhoods where school districts are able to demonstrate high student achievement. In suburban areas outside of NYC whose demographics are predominantly White, such as Scarsdale Union Free School District (SUFSD), the per-pupil expenditure for 2016 was nearly $30,099, with a graduation rate of 97.3% (Scarsdale Teachers Association Contract, 2017). While the district has a number of international students, the percentage of LEP students reflects only 2% of their population; for students who are economically disadvantaged, there are no reportable data. The racial and ethnic demographic of the district is 70.5% White, 16.9% Asian, 6% Latino, 5.5% multiracial, and 1.1% African American (Niche Report, 2017). According to the Niche Report (2017), the student-to-teacher ratio was 12:1, of which 69% and 79% of their students were proficient in reading and mathematics, respectively. The students have an average SAT score of 2030 and an ACT score of 31 (Niche Report, 2017). Perhaps this is relative since more affluent districts can “lobby more effectively for academic programs, computers, libraries, and other supports—and tolerate less neglect when it comes to building maintenance and physical amenities” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 27). To this extent, while they receive federal support, they are not necessarily dependent on federal funding to meet the needs of the children since the median income in
Scarsdale, New York (as of 2016) was approximately 259K per year (City-Data, 2017). In summary, school districts that have the financial resources also have the ability to provide their students with more opportunities while attracting and compensating their classroom teachers. The income range for teacher in Scarsdale is $59,520 to $148,204 (Scarsdale Teachers Association Contract, 2017), making it more desirable and competitive to recruit high-quality teachers in comparison to larger urban environments.

Factors Impacting the Achievement Gap

Examining institutional racism as the underlying cause of educational disparities that exist between policy and pedagogical practices essentially require an analysis of the impact of cultural and racial congruency on the academic achievement of African American students. According to Davis and Palmer (2010), there is enough evidence documenting institutional or systemic racism embedded in public policies that impact the academic performance of African American students, further limiting access to college. According to Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Watson (2014), when educators embrace the whole child—mind, body, and soul—students are apt to be more successful without compromising academic rigor and excellence; this then places culturally responsive education as a mechanism for supporting the academic achievement of African American students. As such, culturally responsive education recognizes the students’ culture as an asset and value to the classroom environment (Gay, 2002; Jackson et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2007). “Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of ethnically diverse student as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). This inherently facilitates the development of productive and intellectual learning initiated and sustained by culturally rich educational
experiences that exist within the classroom and can be utilized if teachers are trained to incorporate them into their pedagogical practices.

Subsequently, the literature draws on the importance and purpose of culturally responsive pedagogy as a means of preparing pedagogues to serve all students, but in particularly those who are marginalized and disenfranchised (Gay, 2002; Kohli, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2007). Jackson et al. (2014) argued that both rigor and excellence are achieved when educators respect the communities and cultures of their students, believe in their abilities, and develop meaningful relationships with them as individuals. Many factors speak to the existence of the achievement gap from various perspectives, and while the causes are numerous, the discourse is often skewed towards and viewed from a deficit model framework in which African American students are at the root of their own deficiency. Rather than identifying possible approaches to curtailing the expansion of the achievement gap, many strategies remain unexplored, thereby creating greater disparities.

The Gap: Academic Performance of African American Students

Reference to an educational debt is used to hold society accountable and responsible for what has been accumulated—or its lack thereof, which for years has gone unaccounted for (Capellaro, 2013). In addition, Chambers (2009) also argued that it is not an “achievement gap,” but rather a “receivement gap” or “opportunity gap.” The former places the responsibility on students, inferring that students’ lack of performance is a result of their intellectual ability—an inaccurate inference. The achievement gap supports a deficit model of thinking, which is not by the fault of the students, but rather of the structures. These structures include tracking, which is in place to limit what African American students are able to receive or access regarding opportunities that would prepare them to achieve at the same rate of their White counterpart.
(Butler, 2003; Chambers, 2009). Furthermore, even when African American students attend mixed schools or racially diverse schools where the dominant culture is White, in many instances they are “marginalized, de-culturalized, academically tracked, and disproportionally disciplined” (Morris, 1999, p. 318). To this extent, only a small number of African Americans are able to navigate in environments where the greater their needs are, the less they seem to receive.

According to Milner (2017), data have indicated that African American males graduate at a rate of less than 50%; 50% of African American males in Grades 6-12 have been suspended at least once; and 17% have been expelled at least once. Even more distressing is the fact that African American preschool-age boys are nearly four times more likely to get suspended (Love, 2016). Milner (2017) documented that African American students attending preschool were suspended at least once at a rate of 42%, while 48% of those suspended occurred more than once. For African American female students, their graduation rates are often higher than 50%, yet they are suspended from school at a rate of 35% and expelled at a rate of 8.2% compared to White female students, which occur at a rate of 9.7% and 1%, respectively. Additionally, “Black females are three times more likely to be incarcerated than white women” (Milner, 2017, p. 4). The effects of schooling of African American students appears contradictory to the goal of educating all children when they are disciplined at far higher rates than their White peers. Moreover, they are also overrepresented in special education. African American students are three times more likely to be categorized as mentally retarded and 2.3 times as emotionally disturbed.

Black students continue to be grossly and miserably underserved in schools across the United States. Because of the racist and inequitable educational system and society in
which Black students live [in] and the inadequate and racist practices common in too
many schools serving Black students. (Milner, 2017, p. 4)

Data has shown an apparent difference in the rate of discipline occurrences of African American
students and its potential impact on the academic performance of African American students.

Factors Contributing to the “Achievement Gap”

The achievement gap is not a result of the African American students ability to achieve
academic success, as that would imply a deficiency and a lack of capacity to engage
intellectually (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Capellaro (2013) instead used this premise to argue that
“Educators need to get past thinking black kids as having ‘deficits’ and ‘disadvantages’” (p. 2).
Research on the academic achievement of African American students often focuses on the deficit
model. As Kohli (2009) stated:

Deficit thinking is a framework that blames the deficiencies of communities of color for
the low academic achievement; those who subscribe to this paradigm believes that 1)
students enter school without normative cultural knowledge and skills; and 2) parents
neither value nor support their child’s education. (p. 246)

This model further implies that African American students are either not capable of meeting the
standards of performance of their White peers or are given a Eurocentric curriculum that is
devoid of who they are as human beings, thus contributing to the makeup of society past and
present. However, according to Ogbu (1992), African American students when compared to their
White counterparts lag behind as a means to rebel against schooling and to avoid being labeled
as “acting” or “adopting” White perspectives. This ideology, which was once popular, has been
rejected by scholars in recent decades. However, Ogbu explained the lack of academic
achievement of African American students stems from oppositional cultural differences that are
reflected in a “product of the reaction to a contact situation,” as a result of being “an involuntary minority, as a result of slavery, conquest or colonization” (p. 290). Subsequently, access to opportunities experienced by the dominant group becomes barriers implemented to distinguish the minority group—in this case, African Americans. To this extent, African American students experience school through an “inferior curriculum, denigrating treatment, and cultural and language barriers, as well, as social and economic barriers” (p. 290). Similarly, Rust, Jackson, Ponterotto, and Blumberg (2011) argued the effect of biculturalism on the academic achievement of African American students.

Biculturalism is defined as one’s sense of belonging to two different cultures, without losing sense of one’s original cultural identity; one’s ability to differentiate between the rules, norms, and values of both; and one’s ability to interact in both cultures without relating them in hierarchical manner. (p. 131)

For many African American students to succeed, they must learn to navigate between the culture of school, what it means for them to be formally educated in this society, and the culture of their community which may be different. It is the balance of understanding one’s self in relation to others whereby African American students are able to code switch in order to navigate both settings. To the extent they are mutually exclusive, students must disconnect from one culture to be accepted or belong to another culture or way of being.

Furthermore, Rust et al. (2011) indicated that self-esteem had greater influence on the academic achievement of African American students rather than their cultural identity. Nevertheless, academic disparities among African American students are often evaluated from a deficit model, ignoring cultural strength, resilience, and fortitude, which often perpetuates and causes institutional racism to impact all aspects of the social welfare services within the African
American community (Butler, 2003; Rothstein, 2015; Warren, 2002). Rothstein (2015) noted that the lack of achievement of African American students is directly linked to the social conditions set forth by intentional public policies, such as community segregation which supports the notion of institutional racism, and “differential access to educational opportunities” (Butler, 2003, p. 53). African American communities have always fought for education, but were dismissed and denigrated by their White counterparts during any attempt to integrate schools as a result of the dominant culture’s perception of the safety and academic performance of African American students (Butler, 2003; Glass, 2015).

**School Quality and Community of Stakeholders**

Fryer and Levitt (2004) speculated that the gap between African Americans and their White peers is a result of the quality of the school. While this may be feasible to accept based on their research findings, school quality was not measured as a potential variable. However, when considering the race of the student-to-teacher composition, Fryer and Levitt found that African American students who had White teachers would lose more ground than African American students who had African American teachers; thus, racial congruence seemed to have an effect on the outcomes. When African American students had at least one African American teacher, they performed below “their white peers in math and slightly better in reading, relative to African-American students who had no African-American teachers” (p. 8). This seems contrary to much of what the research has indicated. According to Rosen (2017), when African American students are taught by at least one Black teacher, there is a 29% less chance of the students dropping out of school; for African American boys, the rate is 39%. This is not to say that by virtue of African American students having an African American or a Black teacher, they will be successful and achieve academically; however, “Black teachers have engaged and empowered
Black students (both pre and post desegregation)…and have succeeded in fostering optimal learning opportunities” (Milner, 2006, p. 100). Similarly, Hanushek (2010) argued that teacher quality, not race, is the contributing factor to improving student performance and thus reducing the achievement gap. Yet, when the teaching workforce is predominantly made up of White women, and African American students are lagging behind, there is an urgency to identify alternative approaches to closing the achievement gap by recruiting, hiring, and supporting teachers of color, and particularly African-American teachers in the profession (Vilson, 2015).

For African American students who had at least one Black teacher, by the end of first grade, the gap between test scores was greater for students who did not have any African American teachers. In the analysis of African American grade-school students in the Tennessee Project STAR, Dee (2004) found a 3 to 5 percentile-point increase in math scores and a 3 to 6 percentile point increase in reading when students were taught by teachers of the same race. Additionally, if students had same-race teachers for 3 to 4 consecutive years, the performance on exams increased by 2 to 3 percentile points with each additional year (Dee, 2004). This is in contrast to Darenbourg and Blake (2013) who identified that academic achievement rates could improve for at-risk students in math, but not significantly in reading based on behavior engagement and achievement values. Fryer and Levitt (2004) analyzed the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study; Kindergarten Cohort compiled by the U.S. Department of Education which indicated that African American children and their White peers with “similar personal and family background characteristics” had test scores that were similar (p. 1). It was not until students moved along in school that the disparity in achievement grew by one standard deviation below White students (p. 4).
Stakeholders such as staff, parents, and the community’s commitment play an important part in the success of the students’ academic achievement (Morris, 2002; Mungo, 2013). Cultural and racial congruency allows African American students the ability to compete locally and globally against all people, but particularly against their White counterparts. Schools foster a positive relationship and a sense of community: “Teachers were caring and supportive…ensuring that Black children received an adequate education” (Mungo, 2013, p. 117). The educational experience of African American students in segregated schools, coupled with the expectations of the community, created an environment where relationships were fostered and maintained and education was valued. The investment of staff, along with their commitment to the students they serviced, were some of the major reasons that African American students were successful in segregated setting.

**Residential Segregation and School Community**

“Few children can succeed in a highly segregated and impoverished community no matter how good the schools, no matter how well-trained the teachers, no matter how well-designed the standards and curriculum” (Rothstein, 2015, p. 28). Rothstein (2015) further indicated that the “racially conscious policies” of the 1930s to the 1950s on all levels of government created the poverty and segregation that exist today. An example that reflects such policies was during the period of the New Deal era; the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) guaranteed construction loans to builders who agreed to create suburban subdivisions as long as they agreed not to sell to African Americans. As a result, African Americans were denied access to purchase homes in the same areas as Whites, relegating them to subpar accommodations and schools (Rothstein, 2015). Irvine and Irvine (2007) made a similar claim that “school segregation is a result of residential segregation” (p. 298); to this extent, the social conditions and disparities
are not a coincidence. Moreover, “the struggle for African-Americans to gain access to resources that was deemed right[ful]ly theirs was met with resistance, disrespect, and accusations of Black inferiority” (Chambers, 2009, p. 419). The ability to integrate into American society was closed off to African Americans as a result of lack of resources and access caused by race.

Rothstein (2015) proclaimed, “We cannot desegregate schools unless we desegregate neighborhoods” (p. 32), and further predicted that as long as schools are segregated, the achievement gap cannot be narrowed. One of the main factors contributing to the disparity in performance for African American students is the socioeconomic status of their parents. When socioeconomics are controlled, they reduce the estimated racial difference in “test scores by more than 40% in math and more than 66% in reading” (Fryer & Levitt, 2004, p. 5). When considering other factors, such as the number of books in the home, birth weight of the child, and eligibility for social services such as Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the achievement outcomes of African American students are not affected—other than indicating they were poor. Test scores “suggest that children with characteristics similar to their white peers score slightly better than whites in reading and only slightly worse in math” (p. 5). Despite these outcomes from Kindergarten to Grade 1, the achievement gap begins to grow due to the “substantial racial segregation in schools” (p. 6). There are a number of potential barriers perpetuating the achievement gap, which further stagnates the readiness of African American students in the classroom.

Furthermore, the performance of African Americans is often affected by neighborhood composition, in addition to school composition. First, one must acknowledge that desegregation of schools has subjected African American children to many unfair practices that caused irreversible psychological damage. “When African-Americans were bussed into hostile
environments, societal perceptions of their ‘innate’ inferiority, criminality and excessive sexual behavior were never addressed” (Strong-Leek, 2008, p. 854). Second, schools prior to and during the Jim Crow and Civil Rights era were able to inspire and promote self-knowledge, “racial pride and resilience in their students,” which led to academic achievement (Mungo, 2013, p. 113). Furthermore, before desegregation what contributed to the academic achievement of African American students were the high expectations of African American teachers (Irvine & Irvine, 2007). As a result, education was seen in various parts of the country as a means of obtaining freedom despite segregated communities (Mungo, 2013). Morris (2002) provided evidence suggesting that when racial congruency exists, as in the case of the Farragut Elementary School in St. Louis, a community bond is developed. Similarly, Sealey-Ruiz and Lewis (2011) reinforced that the sentiment of “the unique bond the Black teachers and students share improves educational outcomes for Black students” (p. 187). Such bonds allow the community to serve as a supportive environment where African American students succeed, despite their socioeconomic status. Schools that were desegregated after the Civil Rights era have subsequently become re-segregated, or what Saddler (2005) referred to as de facto segregation after Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954), by their locations and social structures. Segregated schools have often served as a means of stabilizing the community when there is a shared sense of ownership of the school.

**Cultural and Racial Congruence**

For many, segregated schools provided the cultural congruence necessary within the student-teacher relationship that nurtured the success of African American students’ academic achievement (Irvine & Irvine, 2007; Mungo, 2013; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Strong-Leek, 2008). Cultural and racial congruency reflects the relationship where teachers and students are both
African American, providing a commonality that allowed for African American students to flourish then and to continue doing so today. Despite the inequities and difficulties faced by African American students, the pairing of racially congruent students and teachers resulted in high academic achievement for students because the teacher’s expectations remained high. (Strong-Leek, 2008). Similarly, St. C. Oates (2003) referred to a concept known as racial consonance, where similarities in attributes such as race, ethnicity, and gender can shape one’s self-concept and or identity. Nevertheless, when there is “race-based dissimilarity” (p. 509), there is a greater possibility that the teacher’s perception and bias will have a strong effect on academic performance and, as a result, student achievement (St. C. Oates, 2003).

In contrast, culturally and racially congruent settings such as segregated schools not only provided an environment which embraced the cultural capital of African American students, but also had the potential of impacting their academic achievement (Campbell Jones & Campbell Jones 2002; Mungo, 2013). Despite the unequal infrastructure of segregated schools, they provided a setting that empowered African American students and those in their community through self-knowledge, caring, and nurturing relationships developed over time. Racial congruency within the classroom allowed for children to survive and withstand the oppression of “white supremacy” (Strong-Leek, 2008, p. 853). As African-American students began entering predominantly White schools, Whites abandoned the cities and fled into the suburbs.

Government policies of de facto segregation along with individual choice of de jure segregation created the disparities for further segregated schools, due to residential segregation (Erickson, 2011; Hanushek, 2010; Rothstein, 2015). In fact, “the state regulatory body supervising the real estate industry considered it an ethical violation to sell a home in a white
neighborhood to a black purchaser; doing so could lead to a loss of a real estate license” (Rothstein, 2015, p. 3).

Neighborhoods became segregated as a result of federal and local policies; some school districts completely closed in order to avoid desegregation. White families were given vouchers to attend private schools as a means of resisting school desegregation. In addition to vouchers and school choice, public funds were no longer available to city schools and were reallocated to the private schools (Anderson, 2016; Rothstein, 2015). Some states resisted desegregation by arguing that the federal government could not impose desegregation laws on local municipalities that were under state authority. As a means of defiance, the state of Virginia enacted the Southern Manifesto (Anderson, 2016). The legislators in Virginia and Georgia introduced the Southern Manifesto, indicating the Supreme Court was undermining and “violated states’ rights” (Anderson, 2016, p. 44).

For those in the South, the Southern Manifesto represented the indignation of the Southern states to resist Brown v. Board of Education (1954) by any means. As a way to exhaust the efforts of the advocates of Brown v. Board of Education financially, southern states used the court system to circumvent desegregating schools, knowing the litigation cost would be expensive. Ten years after Brown v. Board of Education, resistance accounted for only 1.63% of African American students attending desegregated schools in Virginia (Anderson, 2016). Today, segregated communities continue to result in segregated schools and even when gentrification occurs, which often means more affluent White middle-class families move into predominantly African American neighborhoods, schools remain separate. According to Harris (2015, 2016), White families often opt out of neighborhood schools, enrolling their children in charter schools or gifted and talented programs.
Role and Impact of African American Teachers

As educational opportunities improved for African-Americans, one must acknowledge the impact and important role that African American teachers played in the academic achievement of African American students (Gardner & Miranda, 2001). The court ruling of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954), to a large extent, did not meet the demands it was intended or was designed to accomplish. Brown v. Board of Education was established to provide access to the same facilities, financial resources, or access to education, as was intended (Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Irvine & Irvine, 2007; Mungo, 2013; Saddler, 2005). Instead, it forced desegregation to occur by enacting legislature, whereby African American students were almost always marginalized both academically and socially by their White peers and teachers as a result of racism (Emdin, 2012; Mungo, 2013; Saddler, 2005; Rothstein, 2005). Bussing students out of their neighborhood and into White schools fostered an inferiority complex that ‘white is right,’ which often challenged their self-identity (Chambers, 2009; Mungo, 2013). Additionally, desegregation stripped African American communities of social and educational environments that students needed to strive academically. “These beliefs have a negative impact on teacher expectations, school climate, and the quality of educational experience of students of color, leading to enormous negative consequences for the lives of thousands of children and youth in the US” (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015, p. 9). As a result, critical roles and responsibilities of educators are essential to the quality of education that African American students deserve to receive.

Rowley and Wright (2011) indicated “if a teacher perceives a student to be inefficient in the dominant culture due to atypical behaviors or codes of speech, or to be of average or lower intelligence, there is a possibility of academic failure” (p. 94). According to King (1993), Vilson
(2015), and Walker (2016), of the 3.4 million teachers from 2011 to 2012, “nearly 83% were white, and approximately 18% of teachers were of color” (Vilson, 2015, p. 29), while the population of African American and Latino students are on the rise. The ramification of such a disproportional ratio of White teachers, compared to 17% of African American teachers, has an impact on the academic performance of students, as more African American students receive referrals to special education (Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Jackson et al., 2014; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). Nevertheless, it is important to consider the hiring of more African American teachers to increase teacher congruency in our nation’s classrooms, as student populations continue to grow with African American and Latino students (Vilson, 2015).

While the recommendation is to increase the pool of African American educators, it does not mean African American students cannot learn from White teachers (Dee 2004, 2005; King, 1993; Vilson, 2015). Instead, Vilson (2015) suggested “children of color need access to the ways and means of the dominant culture” and “if white teachers and teachers of color can show children of color the values and norms of our dominant culture, then we can close the vision gap for those students” (p. 30). When the dominant culture is examined, culturally responsive teaching and familiarity with student culture will provide adaptations necessary to teaching and learning environments that may improve the outcomes of African American students.

If closing the achievement gap along racial lines is a priority; then the urgency for educators to act as agents of change has never been more prevalent and necessary. The need for all teachers to undergo training in culturally responsive pedagogy is now. Potential pedagogues must immerse themselves in settings that are different from their self-identified identity, to confront, reflect on, and address their biases (Kohli, 2012; Moule & Higgins 2007; Puchner &
Critical to the process is recognizing that their role as educators is to serve and guide all children towards an ability to think critically and become autonomous in their thinking; fundamentally, this will contribute to the collective good of humankind, both nationally and globally. If society is to consider education as the civil rights cause of the 21st century, then everyone has a part to play in the edification of all children. Stakeholders, particularly White individuals, would have to address the wrongs of the past to make the future a better place.

According to Gay (2002), cultural congruence in the classroom is not solely dependent on the same race between student and teacher, but the teacher can use appropriate instructional techniques for the learning styles of diverse students. When racial incongruence exists, it can lead to unintended consequences, skewed perceptions, and low expectations of African American students. To this extent, Saddler (2005) argued that cultural incongruence causes African American “children to suffer because of school staff, who have the power to label, classify, and define” (p. 43) students as a result of race, class, and socioeconomic status. What emerged in the classrooms of desegregated schools was the widespread belief that African American students were ineducable. White teachers underestimated African American students and their ability to learn; if the students did, White teacher still believed that African American students would remain deficient in their ability to think critically (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). As a result, teacher biases and stereotypes often influenced how they perceived African American students in their classroom (Kumar & Hamer, 2012). Therefore, it is important that teachers be reflective and develop cultural sensitivity and competence (Gay, 2002). As teachers develop an understanding of the cultural relevance of their students, they begin to understand how the role of the family and community becomes critical as the foundational aspects of one’s aspiration to pursuing education. Likewise, when teachers start to interact with students from other cultural
backgrounds, these shared experiences begin to shape and inform thinking (Gay, 2002; Kohli, 2012, 2013; Kumar & Hamer, 2012). Reciprocated relationships then begin to serve as a cultural bridge as the similarities and differences of each person are treated with respect. As a result, teachers can motivate their students to the next level of engagement and success (Dee, 2005; Hudson & Holmes, 1994).

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Despite increasing graduation rates, the achievement gap continues to exist with minimal gains of less than 2% (Bidwell, 2015). The limited gains affecting the narrowing of the achievement gap is a result of the time it takes to adequately educate, empower, and cultivate teachers. Teacher education programs must facilitate and allow teachers to develop an understanding and employ culturally responsive education practices as a viable approach that can impact student performance (Gay, 2002; Campbell-Jones & Campbell-Jones, 2002; Day-Vines et al., 2003, Jackson et al., 2014). In other words, while teacher education programs are charged with and accountable for preparing individuals to enter the teaching workforce, many teachers enter the profession unable to meet the demands of school districts to improve the performance disparities that often relate to the academic performance of students of color.

Equally as important to using culturally responsive education as an instructional practice for pedagogues is increasing the recruitment and retention of African American teachers. In addition to hiring, creating a curriculum of inclusion connects the students and his or her cultural identity to the educational process (Dee, 2004; Jackson et al., 2014; Mitchell & Stewart, 2012; Rust et al., 2011). All too often, there is an absence of a curriculum that does not appeal to students and to what he or she brings to the classroom. Instead, the curriculum is often presented from the perspective of the dominant culture’s viewpoint that is devoid of the African American
student as a victor, but rather a victim (Chambers, 2009; Rust et al., 2011; Saddler, 2005). It should be noted that a curriculum that is relevant to the cultural background of the students does not deter from the standards of the Common Core or its intended rigor, but rather enhances the content, thus making it relatable to the students. To this extent, the curriculum that African American students are exposed to limits their opportunities to “see” themselves outside of the traditional rhetoric of being marginalized and disenfranchised (Emdin, 2012; Vilson, 2015). Furthermore, according to Hanushek (2016), because of the modification and relative interpretations made by the states in adopting the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS), some opponents feel the CCLS are not as rigorous in comparison to the policies that already exist in some states. Therefore, if the curriculum includes the perspectives of the students receiving the educational services, it can improve both the rigor and the performance within the standards of the dominant culture. While the debate over the CCLS remains a part of the public discussion, thus far the implementation of standards is not a factor in “improving the overall performance of the US education system” (Hanushek, 2016, p. 105). To modify these systems, significant data and research will have to inform instruction to enable change.

There is ample evidence that relates educational disparities to disenfranchised districts and communities of predominantly African American students as a result of funding (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Morris, 1999; Mungo, 2013). However, funding alone is not enough to improve the quality of education that African American students deserve and are entitled to. It is important to realize that culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy can be used as the catalyst necessary to transform the educational outcomes, giving urgency and agency to educators to support and educate African American students to sustain high academic achievement.
Review of Methodological Issues

Throughout this literature review, various methodological approaches were used in the research in an effort to understand and describe the academic achievement and performance of African American students. The findings provided varying perspectives about the academic achievement of African American students and the possible ways in which the achievement gap can cease to exist between African American students and their White peers. From a historical perspective, developing an understanding of race as a construct that deliberately oppresses, marginalizes, and disenfranchises a group of people for the gain of another is critical (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Horsford, 2011; Kohli, 2009).

Extensive research has been conducted by leading researchers and educators such as Gay (2002) and Ladson-Billings (1995, 1998, 1999, 2007) on the institutional racism that exists in the hands of classroom teachers. According to Puchner and Markowitz (2015), unconscious racial bias is held by all people. Racial bias perpetuates the stereotyped assumptions made about African American students before they arrive in the classroom, thereby influencing the unconscious beliefs that teachers hold and often resulting in profound negative effects on the lives of African American students (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2011; Puchner & Markowitz, 2015).

A large amount of research has attempted to understand the achievement gap existing along the racial lines, which divide African American and White students. While some gains in closing the gap have been made, the academic achievement of African Americans still lags behind their White peers. Within this review, overarching themes, methods, and methodologies of both qualitative and quantitative research gave insight into the scholastic achievement of African American students in the United States. Some of the studies used numerical data to
explain trends in the academic performance of African American students. To this extent, quantitative research has focused on statistical tests to conduct analysis, which allows for a broader generalization. Moreover, reliability and validity are largely dependent on the tools used to measure the data. By contrast, qualitative studies are more subjective; much of the data are documents, observations, and interviews that give voice to the subjects and the experiences they encounter. The validity and reliability of qualitative study are also dependent on the researcher to appeal to the sentiment of the audience.

**Qualitative Inquiry**

The strength of the qualitative research in this review lies with the historical studies that explored past events as a means of understanding the context of academic achievement in relationship to the present. According to Milner (2014), African American students are not succeeding at the rate of other minorities as a result of race relations of the past, and poor performance reflects the consequences of the historical ramifications stemming from their ties to Whites. Literature that uses a qualitative approach concentrates on the experience of the individual lives, giving attention to the external causal factors and processes that function to create the individual perceptions.

According to Creswell (2013), the purpose of qualitative research seeks to “study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 74). Grounded theory methodology allows the researcher to develop a framework by examining those who share in the same process, actions, and interactions. The findings are often generated from observations comparing and defining the hypothesis, as opposed to imposing or having a preconceived theory applied to the data. In other words, the theory or supposition is developed from the data that are collected and analyzed.
Evidence of grounded theory can be found in the analysis of racial incongruence of teachers in the classroom and the biases they bring into the classroom (Horsford, 2014; Kohli, 2012, 2013; St. C. Oates, 2003; Strong-Leek, 2008).

The very nature and strength of qualitative research lie in the shared narrative as it is understood, giving an account of events or a series of events chronologically connected (Czarniawska, 2004, as cited by Creswell, 2013). In some cases, the very aspects of qualitative research that makes the researcher credible and viable are also its weakness because it often describes what is researched from the point of view of those experiencing it. For example, when ethnography is used, the individual’s story in the context of their culture is shared, but it also brings a level of bias, crossing the line between the researched and the researcher. The quality of the research is dependent on the researcher and his or her biases. In the case of advocating for the cultural congruence of the student-to-teacher composition, Vilson (2015) and King (1993) argued for the need to recruit, hire, and retain teachers that reflect the growing population of African American and Latino students in urban school settings.

The limitations of qualitative research are the biases that occur within the interpretation of the data and how the researcher conveys the information. Qualitative entails “thick” description or, rather, an explicit description in which the researcher has a desire to be engrossed in the subject matter to develop an understanding of the behaviors as well as the intentions both current and in the future (Ponterotto, 2006). Evidence for such claims have been made by Horsford (2011, 2014), King (1993), Kohli (2009, 2012, 2013), and Sealey-Ruiz (2011), in which there is a personal connection between the research and the subject matter of the underlying factors of educational inequality and race. As the researcher interviews the subjects or analyzes the data, he or she is able to offer a full description. A rich or full description allows for
a detailed interpretation, which gives credibility and enhances the verisimilitude of the experience (Schwandt, 2001, as cited by Ponterotto, 2006, p. 544). The researcher offers the audience insight into the complexity of the relationship where the personal viewpoint is suppressed in order to present the information objectively and with limited biases as a means of fostering credibility. Subsequently, skewed responses can occur as a result of the nature of the questions asked, the sensitivity of the information, and who is gathering the data (Darensbourg & Blake, 2013; Rowley & Wright, 2011).

**Quantitative Inquiry**

In contrast to qualitative studies, quantitative studies are narrow in their focus and use specific variables and subgroups to determine the factors that support or impede the academic achievement of African American students. As a result, the focus of quantitative studies is to categorize and quantify the variables, measuring their impact or relationship by constructing statistical models that are conclusive. For example, Darensbourg and Blake (2013) focused on the academic progress of at-risk first graders over a period of 3 years and found that by quantifying achievement, the impact of achievement values and engagement produced moderate outcomes in reading and mathematics performance. As in most statistical research, Darensbourg and Blake documented the survey instruments used to measure the data, allowing other researchers to examine the findings. In addition, they also provided a standard approach that can be used to replicate the research and conduct a comparative analysis in the future. Quantitative analysis provides an opportunity to interpret the outcomes accurately. In the case of Darensbourg and Blake, it was clear that behavioral engagement supported gains for at-risk African American students in mathematics and limited benefits towards approaching achievement levels in reading as compared to achievement values on academic performance that were not impacted.
The limitation of quantitative research is its rigidness to the committed instrument used to conduct the study. Furthermore, self-reporting may cause some inaccuracies due to the limitations of only being able to attain information on what another party perceives. According to Darenbourg and Blake (2013), the study was limited to the teacher’s assessment of the observable aspects of behavioral engagement. Therefore, other factors that may have intrinsically or extrinsically impacted the results were not considered. Additionally, sample size must be taken into consideration because it allows accurate representations of the subjects in the study. When the analysis is focused on a particular subset of a larger group, it is important to consider the size of the sample, providing for a comprehensive analysis. In addition, when the sample size is limited to only a few subjects, it becomes difficult to make broad generalizations. In some cases, it can lead to false assumptions and conclusions that can be harmful and detrimental to the group in question.

The process of quantitative research is not an extension of the researcher. Instead, while there may be a personal interest in the research conducted, the approach of quantitative research appears impersonal. Quantitative research is rooted in the scientific method. The approach is rigid and linear, and it utilizes five elements including the question, the hypothesis, collection of data, analysis of data, and sharing the findings or conclusions (Helmenstine, 2014). In contrast, qualitative research allows for various forms of data collection, which interact with the subject on a more personal level.

Researchers often focus on socioeconomic status, but rarely has there been an investigation of academic performance based on family decision-making styles, as studied by Engerman and Bailey (2006). They considered the influence of peer groups on education achievement for more than 16,000 participants, of which only 10% was used in discussing the
findings, as factors contributing to the academic achievement of African American students. As different variables were controlled, Engerman and Bailey (2006) conducted an in-depth analysis using the data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988 to examine how family decision-making styles, peer group affiliation, ethnicity, and socioeconomics can be used to predict the academic achievement of African American students.

A logistical regression was used as a means to identify and analyze which variables can be considered predictors of academic achievement for African American students. However, the results of the Engerman and Bailey (2006) study failed to prove that any of the variables impacted the academic achievement of African American students. In fact, the results indicated that the state of education for African American students was dismal. According to Engerman and Bailey (2006), African American students remained in the lowest academic achievement levels as they moved from 10th grade to 12th grade. Their quantitative study demonstrated the lack of insight that is gained when variables such as family decision-making styles, which are dependent on the situation, cannot be categorized or quantified. While the findings were statistical, they led the researchers to some assumptions that could affect teacher perceptions in the classroom. For example, “African-American students are at risk of continuing to achieve on low levels” or “Their [African-American] previous academic achievement strongly influenced the level to which they would achieve in the classroom” (p. 454). Therefore, particular attention to the uniqueness of each individual student is foregone and a personalized teaching opportunity is missed.

A weakness of quantitative research is that the data gathered through questionnaires may be incomplete or inaccurate. “Data analysis is only as good as the quality of the data obtained during the data collection process” (Regoniel, 2012, p. 1). In Darenbourg and Blake’s (2013)
study of at-risk students, one-third of the participants completed the questionnaire each time the survey was administered. The remaining two-thirds of the participants completed at least one part of the questionnaire at various points of the study. The data gathered were inconsistent and resulted in an inaccurate analysis, given that over 60% of the surveys were incomplete during the collection of the data. As a result, the accuracy of the data collected appeared to be compromised because of the inconsistencies of the participants’ thoroughness in completing the questionnaire in its entirety. Such inconsistencies and discrepancies can cause individual researchers or research organizations to misinterpret the data, which can lead to inappropriate assumptions that negatively influence decision making. Consequently, if the data are poorly collected, then the analysis of the data will not be accurate, resulting in poor outcomes. Despite the discrepancies of the data collected, Darenbourg and Blake indicated little difference between the data of the 56 participants who completed all the variables each time and the 111 participants who had missing data.

In the case of Engerman and Bailey (2006), the data sample was disproportionally skewed towards African American students, and considering socioeconomics as a factor, the details of income may not be forthcoming from the subjects to the full extent required by the study because income related questions are often sensitive. However, the correlation produced in this study may have ignored underlying causes to the findings because “predictor variables were deleted that did not add to the explanatory power of the analysis” (p. 448). In other words, variables overlooked during the investigation may lead to an incorrect interpretation of the findings.

Whether qualitative or quantitative, some characteristics are essential to conducting research and common to both approaches. Some of the common characteristics are the fidelity to
which the researcher is conducting his or her research. The researcher has to pay attention to the way in which data are gathered, avoiding the possibility of violating ethical codes and behaviors. In addition, the researcher must understand the parameters within which the research is occurring and the possibilities of extraneous circumstances or outliers that may skew the results. Furthermore, the instruments used to measure the data must also be appropriate to avoid inaccurate analysis or the researcher’s biases influencing the outcomes.

**Synthesis of Literature**

African American communities have struggled to access the resources of their White counterparts and are often marginalized in the decision-making process regarding the direction of study; they are often excluded from taking courses that would prepare them in their pursuit of higher learning, such as advanced-level mathematics, science, and foreign language classes (Capellaro, 2013; Malcom-Piqueux, 2011). In many cases, the teachers’ perceptions and recommendations often limit African American students’ access to opportunities that are afforded to other students. Whether consciously or unconsciously, teachers should have high expectations for all students—that is, access to a quality education that engages, challenges, and prepares all students for higher education or the workforce should be made available (Malcom-Piqueux, 2011; McMickens, 2012; St. C. Oates, 2003).

However, while all teachers should undergo training to address not only cultural biases but also class biases, it becomes critically important for White teachers in particular; because they are part of the dominant culture and are “often unaware of the trauma that racism can cause” (Kohli, 2009, p. 237) or the oppression that African Americans experience, such training becomes paramount. While African American communities and experiences are not monolithic, Kohli (2009) argued that because minorities or marginalized people are not part of the dominant
culture; they often experience racism, which is internalized throughout their educational endeavors. Subsequently, teachers of color enter the classroom with a different perspective and may not address issues of race in the same manner as their White colleagues. To this extent, White educators cannot ignore their inherited status and privilege by being colorblind because to be colorblind is to ignore the disparities and to remain ignorant by not acting against the disparate historical conditions of inequity, lack of opportunity and oppression that African American and marginalized people have contended with and continues to do so today (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

When instructing from the framework of culturally relevant teaching, three criteria must be met: that students can achieve academically; demonstrate cultural competence; and understand, confront, and critique the social structures designed to perpetuate the existing disparities. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), prior to 1995, minimal research had “examine[d] academic success among African-American students” (p. 475); however, there was an understanding that African American students had to achieve academically, despite the disparities between school and home.

Further research found the academic success of African American students in integrated settings often “came at the expense of their cultural and psychosocial well-being” (p. 475). Thus, the outgrowth and necessity for culturally relevant pedagogy stemmed from the desire to maintain the cultural identity of African American students, while simultaneously supporting and encouraging African American students and ensuring high levels of academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). New teachers must be cultivated and groomed to be reflective about their practices and self-reflective of their implicit biases that impact their perception of African
American students if they are to succeed in teaching African American students or teaching in a culturally diverse environment.

Gay (2002) suggested that if we are to improve the academic performance of “ethnically diverse students,” then we have to educate in-service teachers to be culturally responsive. To achieve culturally responsive pedagogy practices, “one must use the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). Culturally responsive pedagogy requires teachers to be life-long learners who seek to engage with and identify the cultural characteristics and contributions of different ethnic groups within the classroom to use as leverage in engaging students. The pedagogue must be able to use the students’ “own culture and experiences to expand their intellectual horizon and academic achievement” (p. 109). This advocates and raises awareness for culturally diverse education and training.

What is taught is just as important as how it is taught; allowing for authentic discussions to occur within the context of race, class, ethnicity, and gender without reservation lends itself to dealing with controversy and the ability to interrupt the status quo. In addition, there are also the interaction and relationship of mass media and pop culture, which influences perceptions of ethnic groups, and how the content conveys a biased perspective of marginalized groups as it relates to their social, cultural and ethnic mores that impacts their knowledge and political views (Gay, 2002). Ultimately, culturally responsive pedagogy is about responding to the needs of the students. It requires teachers to believe they are responsible for facilitating students’ success by validating their culture “without ignoring, demeaning, or neglecting their ethnic and cultural identities” (p. 110), further creating culturally competent curriculum that effectively impacts learning and student performance outcomes.
Today, African American students are more often enrolled in vocational tracks or special education (males in particular), with limited to no access to Advance Placement (AP) courses and gifted programs, and being offered a watered-down curriculum with teachers who may not be qualified to teach and have low expectations of their academic performance (Capellaro, 2013; Irvine & Irvine, 2007; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Strong-Leek, 2008). According to Saddler (2005), “African-American youths are being systematically excluded from the education system and being systematically destroyed within that system” for multiple reasons (p. 43). Nevertheless, to overcome the disparities and discrepancies of cultural and racial incongruity in the classroom, school districts must make a concerted effort to recruit more African American teachers to meet the demands of servicing African American students.

“Children can’t be what they can’t see,” argued Vilson (2015, p. 3). Allowing African American students to “form relationships with professionals who may share their cultural background and possess powerful narrative for success” (p. 29) is necessary. Studies that include improved pedagogical practices which consider the whole child, coupled with the deliberate action to recruit and hire more teachers of color, particularly African-American teachers, have not implied that only teachers of color can successfully teach students of color (King, 1993). On the contrary, various studies have indicated that when teachers are trained to consider their biases and reflect on their personal biases—implicit or otherwise, they are better prepared to teach in more diverse populations. It is important for students to have African American teachers, but increasing the performance and achievement of African American students requires more than just African American teachers; it requires the appropriate training that meets the needs of marginalized students (Emdin, 2008, 2012; Kohli, 2009, 2012; Saddler, 2005).

Teacher education programs can be agents of change in providing prospective teachers
with continuing education in culturally relevant and culturally responsive training during and after their certification process. Subsequently, they are able to serve as a resource in conducting in-service practicums in areas that reflect large populations of diverse students. While all teachers can benefit from such coursework, it is imperative to engage in discourse within these classes, the question of bias as a result of racial stereotype and the perception of the academic performance of African American students (Moule & Higgins, 2007). Teacher education programs must take charge of engaging in discussions related to race and racism because of their prevalence and effects on the African American students they may service, thereby providing a forum to grow in their awareness to potentially confront their own biases and/or comfortability in a safe space. Moreover, teachers should be conscious and reflective of their biases. The benefit for teachers to employ a practice that is culturally responsive allows teachers to demonstrate their compassion and their caring by developing “an ethical, emotional, and academic partnership that is anchored in respect, honor, integrity, resource sharing, and a deep belief in the possibility of transcendence” (Gay, 2002, p. 109). Finally, teachers should undergo a self-assessment of their cultural competence concerning “biased language and media…understanding oppression and racial identity development” (Moule & Higgins, 2007, p. 609). Fundamentally, teachers must take into consideration their own cultural beliefs in order to deal with a diversified student population.

**Summary**

This literature review developed a unique conceptual framework through an examination of institutional racism, racial congruence, and culturally responsive pedagogy in order to understand the historical factors and current practices that contribute to and influence the quality of education producing a high rate of academic achievement among African American students.
One must acknowledge that the prevalent achievement gap is the result of the disparities, lack of opportunity, and educational debt that are owed to African American children. However, Rothstein (2013) suggested that the focus should not be on the gap as we know it, but rather on the gains that have been reached, whether in graduation rates or the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). “Examining the causes of the improvement might inspire policymakers to wonder what policies, if any, were responsible for the gains and then try to intensify them” (p. 8). Therefore, there is adequate reason for believing that an examination of the impact of the practices at an urban public school in NYC will yield significant findings. The researcher, therefore, claims the literature review has provided strong support for pursuing this research project to answer the following multipart research questions:

1. How do urban, African American high school alumni perceive and describe the quality of education they received as impactful to their success?
   a. How do alumni students recount the educational experience and relate teaching practices to their academic achievement and success?

2. How do alumni students describe the social and cultural factors that contributed to and influenced the quality of education they received?
   b. How do such factors influence their trajectory towards high academic achievement and/or success?
Chapter 3: Methodology

Despite the many studies focused on the education of African American students (Capellaro, 2013; Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Kohli, 2009; Ogbu, 1992; Rust et al., 2011), there continues to be a significant gap in understanding what factors contribute to and impact the academic achievement of African American students. This study specifically highlighted critical race theory (CRT) as the conceptual framework from which the disparities to opportunity and access were examined. Furthermore, this study assessed the impact of desegregation as a result of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) to understand how the education and academic achievement of African American students was impacted as a result of race. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and methods of this intrinsic, single-site case study and how results were used to understand the academic achievement of African-American scholars.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do urban, African American high school alumni perceive and describe the quality of education they received as impactful to their success?
   a. How do alumni students recount the educational experience and relate teaching practices to their academic achievement and success?

2. How do alumni students describe the social and cultural factors that contributed to and influenced the quality of education they received?
   a. How do such factors influence their trajectory towards high academic achievement and/or success?
Purpose and Design of the Research Study

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to capture the narratives of alumni students who graduated from Woodbine Academy High School (WAHS) between 2007 and 2016. The researcher examined what factors contributed to and impacted academic achievement of the alumni students. The study also investigated the achievement of alumni students based on the quality of education they received and how it impacted their success during high school and in their professional careers/lives. Furthermore, it explored what alumni students found impactful and attempted to understand the lived experiences of the alumni students.

WAHS is unique. It has sustained and lived by the mantra that “Academic Empowerment is the Birth Right of Every Child” (G. E. Leonard, personal communication, July 9, 2003). As a result of the fundamental belief that permeated throughout the institution, there was, and continues to exist, evidence in the overall outcomes of student achievement. All too often, African American students have been stereotyped, observed through the deficit framework, and labeled as underachievers in comparison to their White counterparts. To this extent, they have also been perceived as one of the main subgroups that has contributed to the low high school graduation rate on the district, state, and national levels. Therefore, given the uniqueness of WAHS and the experiences and level of academic achievement the students were able to maintain year after year (see Table 1), it was important that such a phenomenon be explored and described through the perspective of the individual students who experienced the education that was provided as a result of the systems that were in place. The school has statistically demonstrated its competitiveness and has been highly sought after by parents and students seek a college preparatory program as well as by those who continue to desire such a learning environment. In addition, for many parents, their desire to enroll their child at WAHS is twofold;
one of the fundamental reasons reflects the safety of the environment and the other involves the academic opportunities the students are provided. As a result, understanding the experiences of the alumni students of WAHS could render educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders the propensity on how to improve the academic achievement of African American students throughout New York City and/or the country.

Table 1

**Woodbine Academy High School Graduation Rate of African American Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort Year</th>
<th>% of Cohort 4 Year June</th>
<th>% of Cohort 4 Year August</th>
<th>% of Cohort 5 Year June</th>
<th>% of Cohort 5 Year August</th>
<th>% of Cohort 6 Year June</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>97.6</td>
<td>97.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>95.8</td>
<td>95.8</td>
<td>95.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>97.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>96.2</td>
<td>96.2</td>
<td>98.7</td>
<td>98.7</td>
<td>98.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>92.8</td>
<td>92.8</td>
<td>95.7</td>
<td>97.1</td>
<td>97.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>95.7</td>
<td>95.7</td>
<td>97.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>98.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>96.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>96.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>95.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>96.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>96.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Data of Woodbine Academy High School: Graduation rate of African American students from New York City Department of Education Rate Report (2017)

WAHS students benefit from an extensive and rigorous college preparatory program, which includes several university partnerships such as Long Island University, Medgar Evers College, Monroe College, New York University, and St. Joseph’s College, to name a few. Building and fostering relationships with colleges and universities in the surrounding vicinity provide WAHS students with opportunities that extend beyond the traditional classroom. Students at WAHS are able to enroll in dual-credit programs in various ways. Some programs include the City University of New York (CUNY) College Now Program that gives access to
students to attend college classes while in high school. Students also have the opportunity to enroll in dual-credit programs where they go to college or university to complete college coursework. In some instances, high school teachers work with college professors teaching the same curriculum students receive at the college, but on site at WAHS. In addition, students participate in internships and networking opportunities that enhance their college readiness and future career endeavors. The Niche

Report indicated that WAHS is ranked in the top 100 out of 2,172 high schools in the state of New York (Bonner, 2015). In New York State (NYS), the state Board of Regents dictates the policies and requirements necessary for high school graduation. As a result, the number of Regent examinations that students complete determined the different types of diplomas earned. Students are required to complete a minimum of five exams (four in the core subjects of math, science, English, and history plus one additional) in order to earn a Regents diploma. In the case where students complete an additional four to five state exams and a foreign language exam administered by the city, the students qualify for an Advanced Regents diploma. For many students around the city, the focus is often on obtaining a Regents diploma over the 4 years of high school. By contrast, most of the students at WAHS complete the requirements for the Regents Diploma by their sophomore year, which allows them to focus on the Advanced Regents requirements by taking college-level courses and Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

In addition to the rigor of college and AP courses, many students continue to pursue additional coursework to complete the requirements for an Advanced Regents Diploma. In past years, WAHS was recognized as a Reward School within the state of New York. This recognition implied that WAHS was able to meet its “Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the 2012–2013 and 2013–2014 school years for all groups of students on all measures” (NYSED,
Therefore, at least 95% of all groups, which included but were, not limited to students in general education and students with disabilities (SWDs), participated in assessments corresponding to English language arts and mathematics.

Each year, WAHS results are evaluated and compared to the district and the state. The data and performance of the students of WAHS indicate a very small gap in “student performance on any accountability measures between students who were members of an accountability group (e.g., low-income students, SWD) and students who are not members of that group” (NYSED, 2015b, p. 30). To this extent, WAHS has often performed well on New York State high-stakes Regents examinations. These examinations determine whether the students have met the basic requirements to graduate from high school. As a means of challenging the students of WAHS, the school gradually increased the number of AP courses offered from three to 11 exams from 2006 to 2017. In addition, students were also able to participate in the College Level Examination Program (CLEP).

WAHS is an urban high school in New York City that focuses on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics-related (STEM) fields and has a strong history of student success, despite its demographic representation of over 85% African American students (and a total of 99% minority students). According to U.S. News & World Report (2017), 61% of the students were economically disadvantaged, receiving free or reduced lunch, yet they were proficient or exceeding targets in both reading and mathematics at rates of 100% and 96%, respectively. Researching how alumni students were able to maintain such standards and success while in high school and thereafter was worth exploring as a potential model for other institutions. What researchers and school administrators have come to understand is that when students were exposed to AP courses, International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, and dual-credit programs,
they were better prepared both academically and socially to pursue higher education. School administrators who subscribe to this thinking provide students with the opportunity to engage in a rigorous academic program that helps them, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, become “college and career ready” (“Black enrollments in advanced placement”, 2007; Ohrt, Lambie, & Ieva, 2009). In the case of WAHS, giving African American students the access and opportunity to engage in the academic rigors of AP courses was about preparation for university studies and less about the scores achieved on the exam.

Effective instruction, along with a constructive learning environment, enabled this urban public school to nurture and foster the development of individuals with normative values combined with technological skills, thereby allowing all students to prepare for careers related to law, medicine, and engineering. In a city where the average graduation rate over the last 12 years was 64.9% for all students and 54.85% for African American students (NYC DOE, 2016), WAHS has consistently maintained an average graduation rate of over 95% within the same timeframe. The school’s goal is to prepare students for the 21st century and enhance each student’s performance towards college and career readiness, while providing them with support for their social and emotional growth as they face adversity and challenges in life (Knight & Marciano, 2013).

This case study sought to understand the lived experiences of alumni students who graduated from WAHS. Furthermore, this study examined the factors, as retold by the alumni, which led to their success. Using an intrinsic case study, the researcher focused on a single case. This case was of importance primarily to the researcher without any expectations or the need to make broad generalizations or implications to other scenarios that may be similar. Creswell (2013), McMillan (2012), and Stake (2010) substantiated that a fundamental approach to
Qualitative studies as a method of research allows both the researcher and the reader to make their own conjectures. To this extent, the research remained fluid and allowed individuals to expand their knowledge through exposure to different perspectives of the phenomena studied. It also allowed the researcher to interpret without providing definitive answers to the research questions, but to merely provide details that lead readers to their own socially constructed meaning. Furthermore, case study research is defined by the interest of the individual case (Stake, 2003) as well as inquiry that investigates “phenomena with its real life context” (Yin, 2002, p. 13). This case study combined both characteristics and therefore had the potential to guide readers in developing and/or gaining insight into the case study and, subsequently, other issues and effects as a result of the outcomes or consequences of the case.

Qualitative studies are unique as they assume a subjective position from which an understanding of topics from a sociocultural perspective is provided (Melnyk & Fineout-Overholt, 2011). According to Yazan (2015), case study designs and implementation is less structured and ambiguous as research methodologist have not been able to agree on a set of standard practices. Some studies extract meaning and are concerned with discovery and inquiry, while others recognize that “knowledge is constructed rather than discovered” (Stake, 1995, p. 99), in which case the researcher serves as the interpreter. The researcher constructs perspective and knowledge through the analysis of the data collected. According to an analysis of case studies by prominent researchers Merriam (1998), Stake (1995), and Yin (2002), Yazan (2015) identified areas in which the researchers supported or differed in their approach to conducting and using a qualitative case study as viable research methodology in educational research. Therefore, several factors were unique to the case studies, depending on which lens the
researchers used to frame how knowledge was acquired and interpreted as a result of the epistemological position taken.

For Yin (2002), a positivist stance defined the case study as “a phenomenon in real world context in which boundaries and context are not clearly defined” (p. 13). The main purpose attempts to answer questions related to the “how” or “why” of the case study or phenomenon. Yin viewed case study as an approach that finds how case studies “best fit program evaluation” (as cited by Yazan, 2015, p. 139). In contrast, Stake (1995) defined an intrinsic case study as a methodology that involves exploration and inquiry as a result of the interest of the researcher without the intention of creating or building theory. Stake further defined the case study as an integrated system in which the working parts function within a given set of conditions and parameters.

As a result, a case study is the understanding of the complexity of the phenomena based on the circumstances in which it existed (Yazan, 2015). Similar to Stake (1995), Merriam (1998) asserted and supported the epistemological stance that a case study is built on the philosophical viewpoint of constructivism. As a result, “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (p. 6), thus allowing for multiple interpretations of one’s experiences given the same situation or conditions. To this extent, the researcher considered the perspectives of multiple data sources; focused and concentrated on an individual, group, or setting; performed a comprehensive examination of said person, group, or setting; and extracted meaning from the observation of said individual, group, or setting (Melnyk & Fineout-Overholt, 2011). While Yin (2002) supports the simultaneous use of both qualitative and quantitative design approaches to gathering and mapping data out in advance, both Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998) required the exclusive use of qualitative data sources. Despite the similarities between Stake (1995) and
Merriam (1998), some characteristics were profoundly different. Stake (1995) presented a more flexible design in which the researcher used the research questions as a means of guiding the course of the study, but had the freedom to make modifications depending on the results of the data. The defining characteristics for Stake (1995) were that the case study was holistic, empirical, interpretive, and emphatic. By contrast, the defining characteristics of a case study conducted from Merriam’s (1998) perspective were that it is particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. As a result of the characteristics of a case study presented by Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998), the present research was guided by the underpinnings presented by both researchers. The interview process permitted and documented authentic voices and experiences as described by the alumni participants, while also presenting the counter-narrative of the academic achievement of African American students in an urban setting.

**Knowledge: Paradigms or Philosophical Assumptions**

Various paradigms or philosophical assumptions are used in qualitative research to determine what is known and what approaches can be used as evidence to demonstrate and evaluate what is known or respected as truth. These paradigms or philosophical assumptions become the tools to decipher what is meant by knowledge and how knowledge is acquired. According to Milner (2012), in order for students to understand their position in relation to knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge, they must know “what the culture of power actually is, how it works and how power can be achieved” as a means of fostering students to succeed (p. 703). Therefore, within this study, the researcher used an epistemological approach as a means to reduce and distance him or her from the personal connection to the study as a result of the subjectivity of the self-reporting data received from the alumni participants. (Creswell, 2013). This in turn allowed the participants, who were African American students...
who attended WAHS and achieved academic success, to share their lived experiences in order to offer readers insights into how to impact the academic achievement of African American students.

According to Stake (2010), qualitative research allows readers to construct their own understanding while respecting the uniqueness of the situation. In addition, it allows reflexivity to exist by which the researcher is able to establish his or her point: “how it informs [the researcher’s] interpretation of the information in a study, and what [the researcher has] to gain from the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). Ultimately, the characteristics of qualitative research grant the researcher the opportunity to be an integral part of the research without influencing the research but rather “laying out multiple realities” (Stake, 2010, p. 16). Therefore, the characteristics of qualitative research were important to this study because it provided several benefits to both the researcher and the reader.

**Research Population and Sampling Method**

The targeted participants for this study were alumni students who graduated from WAHS, an urban public high school in New York. The sample for this study focused on alumni who graduated between 2007 and 2016. The rationale for sampling during a wide span of time was to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of success of the students who graduated from WAHS, a relatively new urban public school that has sustained and consistently achieved a graduation rate of 95% or better for a student population that was over 85% African American.

The researcher contacted via email approximately 30 alumni as potential participants, based on professional relationships outside of the student/administrator role. Contact information was acquired informally from alumni who visited WAHS, thus generating an alumni roster. The 30 alumni students reflected a pool of potential alumni participants that was larger than the
average class size and also one-third of any graduating class from WAHS; as a result, the pool of participants provided a diverse perspective to the varying experiences. Moreover, since qualitative studies were non-probability studies and not dependent on quantifiable data, smaller populations and sample sizes were permitted. Inclusion in the study involved purposeful sampling (Kothari, 2004; NHS England, 2017; Yin, 2011), which involved deliberate selection of potential research participants. As a result, the sample was based on the participants’ relationship to the research topic, which focused on the academic achievement of African American students who attended WAHS. The sampling in this capacity was also referred to as convenience sampling since the potential participants selected for consideration were based on ease of access in obtaining data (Kothari, 2004).

The volunteer participants were selected according to the order in which they responded to the invitation, with a final pool of 8 potential participants. In the case of more than 10 participants who qualified for the study, participants were selected on a first-come, first-serve basis, with the goal of meeting maximum variation based on the year they graduated from Woodbine Academy High School. Semistructured interviews were then conducted, coupled with member checking; extensive, rich, thick, and descriptive data were produced and collected (Geertz, 1973). As a result, the number of participants for this study was less than 10. In this qualitative study where the focus was on a single case, saturation occurred with less than 10 participants; therefore, to conduct interviews of additional alumni would have been counterproductive since doing so would not have added value to the study.

While gender was not a factor in the study, the researcher attempted to keep an equal number of male and female participants. The purpose of maintaining a balance was important because in the past few years, an emphasis of current research has focused on African American
and Latino males. Nevertheless, the purpose of this study was not to focus on one gender. On the contrary, the purpose was to provide evidence that African American students could be successful academically, regardless of their gender, when they are engaged to learn in a nurturing environment.

Participants were asked to correspond with the researcher via email or by telephone once they received the introductory letter to confirm their participation in the study. The researcher allowed a period of two weeks from the date the introduction letter was sent out to confirm the participation of each alumni. Once participants were confirmed, individual interviews were scheduled and conducted. The interviews, which ranged between 60 and 90 minutes, were used to capture the lived experiences of the alumni students that influenced or impacted their academic success while at WAHS and beyond. As indicated by Baxter and Jack (2008), using a case study gave voice to the participants. For this case, the unit of analysis was the encounters of the alumni students and their description of how their experiences at WAHS contributed to their success.

**Instrumentation**

The advantages for the researcher in utilizing a qualitative study included the use of subjective evidence, comprehensive evaluation of a phenomenon, flexibility with variables, exploration of new areas to study in which new theories were constructed, and difficult questions to be thoroughly examined (Melnyk & Fineout-Overholt, 2011). For this intrinsic case study, the researcher used nine demographic questions followed by 11 open-ended questions to obtain pertinent information on the factors that contributed to the academic achievement of each participant. The alumni participants were not restricted in how they answered any of the questions. Alumni participants were welcome to answer the questions how they felt most
comfortable. However, if a participant did not want to answer a question or did not have an answer which fit the category of responses, they were free to respond how they felt best described their current status and identity. To facilitate this, the researcher used a semistructured interview protocol that allowed for flexibility in the way the interview questions (see Appendix D) were designed and asked. While a loose guide was used during and within the semistructured interview process, the interviewer had the discretion to modify the order in which the questions were asked. The researcher created a set of predetermined questions that were asked of all alumni participants as a means of identifying any emerging patterns from the participants’ responses. Additionally, other probing questions arose and were permissible to gain more information and elicit further details (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005).

“Interviewees [were] encouraged to elaborate on their answers” (NHS England, 2017, p. 2), allowing the researcher to “follow the direction of the conversation and change the interview questions accordingly” (p. 2). The fluidity and openness of the conversation allowed for the alumni participants to share their experiences openly.

Semistructured interviews allowed the researcher to gather data in a style that was fluid and conversational. The researcher was able to thoroughly investigate the topic as a means to understand the responses that were provided (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Furthermore, semistructured interviews provided participants with an opportunity to express themselves and share their lived experiences within the research process, in a way that would otherwise not have been shared. Demographic data (see Appendix C) were collected from each participant at the time of the initial interview to include: age, gender, highest level of education, year of graduation from WAHS, and current work status. A pilot survey eliciting the demographic data was collected to determine the effectiveness and accuracy with which individuals would complete the
survey. The purpose of the pilot was to further reinforce the validity and credibility of the survey, thereby permitting the triangulation of the data.

Prior to conducting the interviews and collecting any data, the researcher met the requirements for the institutional review board (IRB). The researcher provided the IRB with the research proposal narrative that would qualify the researcher to continue in the process of pursuing the study. To this extent, the proposal included a) the purpose of the study, b) method for identifying and recruiting the potential participant population, c) a description of the researchers role/relationship to the participants, d) Inclusion/exclusion criteria and the justification purposely include or exclude vulnerable population groups, e) how the sampling procedures would occur and how the researcher would arrive at the appropriate number of individuals in the sample. In addition to the narrative for the proposal, the researcher as the principal investigator (PI) was required to provide the IRB, with the details of how it would maintain the security, privacy and confidentiality of the alumni participants and the data that would be collected for the study. After extensive review by the dissertation chair and all documents were sent to IRB and approval was granted for the researcher to proceed.

**Data Collection**

The primary source of data collection was through conducting semistructured individual interviews with the alumni of WAHS. An email was sent to all prospective participants of the study that included an invitation letter introducing the purpose of the study (see Appendix A), with an allotted time of two weeks for their response. Interested potential participants were asked to contact the researcher via email at the contact information listed on the invitation letter. The email indicated the researcher’s request for a phone, video, and/or in-person interview, which was held at a convenient time for the participant and researcher, and at a location selected by the
participant; this satisfied the criterion that the location had to be conducive to conducting an interview with minimal distractions (Mack et al., 2005). During the process of collecting the data, the privacy of the participant was always maintained (NHS England, 2017). Therefore, regardless of whether the researcher or the participant chose the location, the researcher was responsible to ensure confidentiality of the participants. Furthermore, alumni student participants were asked to bring an artifact that spoke to something they were proud of. The artifact needed to relate to an experience, an occurrence or contributed to or associated to an accomplishment the alumni participant achieved while at WAHS or as a result of attending WAHS.

Phone or video interviews were made available for alumni students who did not reside within the tri-state area but desired to be a part of the study. Each phone and/or in-person interview was audio-recorded and the researcher also took notes. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Audiotaped interviews were conducted with an Apple iRecorder for participants who were in the tri-state area (within 50 miles of NYC). The researcher conducted the interviews using the web platform gotomeeting.com for participants who were not in close proximity. In addition, while the original emailed invitation was sent to 30 potential alumni participants, the researcher did not anticipate including more than 10 in the one-on-one interviews. This was due to the natural attrition that happens with recruited participants who have families or are employed and unable to participate or need to cancel for one reason or another. The busy nature of everyday living and the unexpected plans or events that conflicted with participation in this study was probable and taken into consideration.

When conducting a qualitative study, restricting the number of interviews to 10 or less allows a researcher to focus on the purpose the interviews were designed to investigate. Semistructured interviews allowed these participants to “relate rich detailed, sincere account of
how the research issues occurred in their daily lives” (Mack et. al., 2005, p. 37). The participants were required to reflect, recalling their lived experiences; as a result, thick and rich descriptive data (Geertz, 1973) were collected from the eight interviews conducted, all of which cumulatively yielded a substantial amount of data.

Once the researcher collected the data from individual interviews, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis by outsourcing to a web-based service rev.com. Once the interview notes were transcribed, the researcher manually reviewed the transcriptions and incorporated additional notes made throughout the interview process. Such notes included, but were not limited to, the alumni participants’ facial expressions as they referred to a particular incident or experience. After each interview, the researcher elicited clarification from the participants on additional or expanded notes taken during the interview, a process known as member checking (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2009).

Member checking was conducted in person and by email, and was an opportunity for the participants to review the transcripts of their interviews. This resulted in a second interview on three occurrences in order to obtain additional information the researcher required from the participants. Additionally, member checking also allowed the researcher to share some of the analysis with the participants to confirm and obtain feedback from them on whether the data were accurate. Thus, feedback received from the participants was used to make adjustments to the codes as necessary and was included in the final narrative.

Using various data sources allowed for triangulation (Creswell, 2013) of the alumni’s heuristic knowledge and the impact on their ability to articulate their experiences. The various sources included interview data, high school academic transcripts that were obtained with permission from the alumni participants, documenting their academic performance during their
tenure at WAHS, and artifacts. In addition, triangulation allowed the researcher to compare the information from the participants as a means of providing a comprehensive and well-developed explanation and understanding of the findings. Participants were allowed to request that any information gathered during the semistructured interview not be used in the study. Semistructured interviews were the main source of data gathering because they allowed for utilizing the attributes of a formal interview process as well as inviting a conversational approach to help alleviate any anxiety. As a result, this method increased the opportunity for unfiltered, honest conversations.

Triangulation of the data depended on multiple sources that included, but were not limited to, the alumni participants’ ability to recall their encounters as they attempted to provide robust, detailed, and thorough accounts of their lived experiences throughout the interview process. Additionally, their ability to speak to their academic transcripts then, in comparison to their accomplishments since attending WAHS and the artifacts, also provided insight into what contributed to their success. A conversational approach was used during the interview as a way to foster a more relaxed and forthcoming participant who was willing to share openly; by contrast, a formal approach that might have resulted in the participants’ apprehension to share and caution or reticence to speak about and convey their experiences. Nonetheless, the goal of triangulation is to extract information that can validate and verify the alumni students’ experiences and success.

Qualitative research allows the researcher to observe and gain direct firsthand information about the participants’ experience (Melnyk & Fineout-Overholt, 2011). Using multiple data sources enhances the credibility of the data and of the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). To this extent, data were also collected from the alumni participants’ academic transcripts and
the school’s publicly available test scores from both city and state databases that reflect graduation rates. This additional source of information provided evidence and captured the scholastic achievements that might have impacted the students’ further success, while also highlighting other factors that occurred at WAHS that propelled their success.

It is important to note that for many school districts, success has often been defined in terms of statistical data such as student performance on high-stakes examinations, number of AP courses offered and student enrollment, SAT/ACT scores, number of college acceptances, and graduation rates, to name a few. These measures of success are often framed from the dominant perspective, defined by White people, with their beliefs and experiences as the norm by which African Americans “are compared, measured, assessed, and evaluated” (Milner, 2012, p. 697). Yet, for the alumni student participants, success was self-defined as a result of other achievements that were not necessarily academically related. Therefore, for this study, the researcher defined success as positive outcomes and results, with an emphasis on identifying and understanding the contributing factors that impacted the academic achievement of the alumni students while in high school or once they left high school. In addition, the researcher elicited from the alumni student participants their definition of success as a means for understanding how they evaluated their own academic achievements and/or success. This allowed the researcher to further understand the role of varying occurrences experienced at WAHS that impacted their success. Additionally, allowing the alumni participants to define success acknowledged and allowed the students to be authentic, which then validated their lived experiences accurately. Documenting the alumni students’ experience using rich, thick description to convey the findings offers readers the opportunity to make their own conjectures about the transferability of the data provided. Rich and thick description was used to convey the findings in which larger conclusions
were extracted from smaller examples through descriptive or “very densely textured facts” (Geertz, 1973, p. 15) to support how alumni students were impacted by the education they received at WAHS.

Table 2 illustrates the source of the data collected and how the data were analyzed in relation to the study’s research questions. The alignment between the research questions, the data sources, and the methodology used to conduct the study was determined by the unit of analysis.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Unit of Analysis</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Research Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do urban, African American high school alumni perceive and describe the quality of education they received as impactful to their success?</td>
<td>Alumni Student</td>
<td>Alumni Student Interviews, Alumni Transcripts</td>
<td>Semistructured audiotaped interview, Rich and thick descriptive analysis, Member checking Participant profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do alumni students recount the educational experience and relate teaching practices to their academic achievement and success?</td>
<td>Alumni Student</td>
<td>Alumni Student Interviews, Alumni Transcripts, Alumni Artifact</td>
<td>Semistructured audiotaped interview, Rich and thick descriptive analysis, Member checking Participant profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do alumni students describe the social and cultural factors that contributed to and influenced the quality of education they received? How do such factors influence their trajectory towards high academic achievement and/or success?</td>
<td>Alumni Student</td>
<td>Alumni Student Interviews, Alumni Artifact</td>
<td>Semistructured audiotaped interview, Rich and thick descriptive analysis, Member checking Participant profile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The researcher utilized the alumni student participants as a means of capturing evidence that supported the basis for understanding the academic achievement of African American students who attended WAHS.

**Identification of Attributes**

The attributes that defined the success of African American students at WAHS and beyond were access and opportunity to a rigorous academic program, racial congruency of the teaching staff to the student body, high expectations for student achievement, academic support, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Culturally responsive educational practices (Gay, 2002; Jackson et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2007) invite the student into personal and private conversations that recognize the student without asking. For teachers, counselors, and administrators to develop their cultural competence and capacity, they must be aware of who they are and how their own biases can have an impact on student achievement. Furthermore, cultural competence and capacity mean having sensitivity to who the student is without assumptions and/or judgment and being responsive to the narrative of the student.

According to Knight and Marciano (2013), policies and practices are greatly influenced by the staff’s cultural background, potentially limiting the level of support they provide and the rigor of the content offered. Unless educators take inventory of themselves and consider the cultural background of African American students as an asset to their academic achievement, educators will continue to have a predisposed deficit view of what their success resembles, thus denying many talented students of African and Latino descent from having access.

The provision of support and strategies for academic engagement in the class must be on a continuum to enable students to progress seamlessly through the academic rigors of courses which prepare them for future endeavors such as college or otherwise. Academic support must
be relevant to the specific needs of the students. Only through the efficacy of an improved education system will African American students be prepared to achieve and obtain higher levels of education and training.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Data, including demographic data, were collected during the interviews to determine if there were any similarities or differences in the students’ experiences based on age, gender, highest level of education, year of graduation from WAHS, and work setting. These data were used to identify who the participants were in the study and provided an overview of the participants. However, analyzing the interviews was critical to this case study. Data analysis of the phone and in-person interviews followed grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) principles, which allowed for analytical themes to emerge during the process of (re)reading the transcripts and exploring coding responses for aspects of the data that were unanticipated. Using a grounded theory approach allowed the researcher to analyze the data, identify the causal conditions to determine the strategies that supported the phenomenon, and provide the conditions and context in which the phenomena existed. Moreover, it allowed for the data to be coded by identifying as many categories that emerged until all possible outcomes were exhausted and data saturation occurred—that is, no new categories were found (Creswell, 2013). According to Saldaña (2009), coding is the “analysis and interpretation” (p. 7) of data that exist from the researcher’s subjective perspective. Therefore, subjectivity and bias are an inevitable part of any research that occurs during the coding process as a consequence of the constructs, language, models, and theories used in analyzing the data (Merriam, 1998; Saldaña, 2009). To this extent, the coding process was influenced by the researcher’s coding decisions that shaped the study.

The researcher coded the interviews by using descriptive coding within the first cycle as a
means of recording the attributes identified through the participants’ experiences. In addition, descriptive coding allowed the researcher to construct the students’ understanding of the phenomena and the common relationships that existed between the participants’ experiences. In the second cycle of coding, the researcher identified specific words, phrases, and sentences as well as how frequently they occurred, which is referred to as pattern coding. Additionally, the data were coded based on actions, activities, concepts, or what emerged as relevant because such themes were repeated or made explicitly important by the participants. Emerging themes were placed in categories for further analysis, such as the role of the individuals who impacted the students and the attributes of the persons in question who influenced their success. According to Saldaña (2009), coding patterns allow the researcher “to find repetitive patterns of actions and consistencies” (p. 5) within the data. Coding is a multilayered, reiterative process. To this extent, the researcher was required to first decode the data—that is, making sense of the data with an initial coding, or what Saldaña (2009) referred to as “first impressions” of the data in which a single word may be used to describe the data. The researcher organized data by categories whereby themes were generated. Ultimately, coding allowed analysis to take place and a connection to be made between the data and the idea or phenomena that were being studied.

**Limitations of the Research Design**

Several limitations to the research design were noted. The sample size for the study included only alumni from WAHS and was considered a small sample size (n = 8). Small sample sizes have often affected the trustworthiness of the study. According to Mason (2010), “frequencies are rarely important…as one occurrence of the data is potentially as useful as many in understanding the process behind a topic” (p. 1). While this may be an acceptable practice, it did not allow for reliability and generalizability, particularly when the data came from a single
case study and a limited number of subjects was involved in the study. However, while statistical
generalization may not be well received when studying a single case with limited subjects,
providing a sound analytical argument that can resist logical challenge offered insight into a
phenomenon that could be transferable and applied to other circumstances similar to the study in
question (Yin, 2009).

The academic success of African American students was often overshadowed by negative
stereotypes and their ability to compete or achieve at the level of their White counterparts. The
achievement gap was often presented as a deficit due to the genetics of being African American
and not of the constructs that seemed to be intentionally designed to hinder the progress of
African Americans. Yet, when an institution of learning such as WAHS exists, serving
predominantly African American students, there is the assumption that the students who attend
are academically prepared for the rigor they encounter. The researcher assumed that the students
were mature, self-motivated and disciplined, ready to learn. On the contrary, while some were
focused, many of the students were much like the average young adult, who wanted to spend
more time socializing with peers, in person or on social media, and were reluctant to engage in
school activities such as afterschool tutoring. Nonetheless, while specific criteria or student
profiles are sought, WAHS is not exclusively selective as the specialized high schools. In NYC,
specialized high schools have been able to circumvent inclusion and limit the number of African
American students, SWDs, and ELLs in comparison to non-specialized high schools. If students
do not meet the criteria on the specialized high school exam, they are excluded from admission.
In contrast to specialized high schools, WAHS has demonstrated that the systems that were
implemented yielded higher rates of success, as defined by student achievement on high-stakes
examinations for all students.
Another assumption that is often insinuated is that African American students at WAHS cannot possibly be successful without the assistance of their teachers. In other words, African American students do well because their teachers are perhaps unethical in their practices. However, if one were to investigate further the African American students who attended WAHS, they would find the trends reflecting a significant disparity between their performance on state exams in Grades 4 and 8 and what they accomplished at WAHS over 4 years. For example, of the students who graduated from WAHS in 2014-2015, the New York State data reported that during Grades 4 and 8, they were underachieving and performed poorly on their state examinations. However, the same students were able to flourish in high school as a result of the structures and systems in place that guided their success. Rarely do people speak of the teachers who make it possible for the students to succeed as a result of the culturally responsive pedagogical practices and curriculum they use to include students and give them a voice. Moreover, these practices do not hinder, but rather enhance the alignment of the core academic program to the standards that prepare students for college by the time they reached Grade 12.

If success is solely determined by student performance on high-stakes examinations, then the assumption that the students who attended WAHS were prepared coming into high school is actually substantiated by the end result. However, the research study documenting the academic achievement of African Americans from WAHS offered a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contributed to the alumni students’ success while at WAHS and once they left as they shared their personal experiences. To this extent, while success may often be related or quantified by test scores and graduation rates, it does not offer a complete picture of what occurred to achieve their desired level of success; nor can one assume that everyone defines success in the same manner. This research, therefore, explored how the alumni student
participants defined their own success during the interviews.

The researcher was, and continues to be, an instructor and administrator at WAHS, which increased the potential for barriers to hinder open communication from the students out of fear of saying something that may have been offensive; this situation thus could have posed additional biases. There was also the assumption that because the participants were not current students, there was limited or virtually no fear of power imbalance or recourse; as such, there were few or no biases. It was an assumption that even when there were no foreseen consequences to an individual’s participation in a research study, the participant was forthcoming and truthful. However, such an assumption was false when one considered the data gathered during the semistructured interview process, in which the alumni participants self-reported their experiences and truths. Some participants limited how much they disclosed about their experiences to avoid becoming vulnerable or to preserve how they appeared to the researcher. To this extent, self-reporting may be a bias and limitation within the study. If the participants were unable to be introspective and honest, self-reporting could have caused discrepancies and inaccuracies during the data-gathering phase of the research.

The main disadvantage of qualitative studies is researcher bias. This evolves from the closeness and length of time that the researcher knows or has contact with an individual, group, or setting. It seemed that researcher bias would be unavoidable here. Therefore, the researcher engaged in reflective journaling. Ortlipp (2008) suggested the use of a reflective diary to keep track of notes, themes, and extracts that are identified at each stage of analysis. This served as a means to keep the data organized so the researcher can demonstrate how the data were derived, interpreted, and presented. Additionally, a reflective diary assisted the researcher in presenting the data and supporting the trustworthiness of the analysis as they underwent critical self-
reflection as a result of conducting the research. To some degree, this impacted the study and helped the researcher avoid some of the pitfalls that novice researchers often experience. However, because there is no absolute way to keep one’s bias completely out of the research, the researcher utilized language that reduced personal bias throughout the study (Creswell, 2013) by avoiding confirmation bias and using leading questions.

Confirmation bias exists when the researcher only uses information that supports his or her belief, thus skewing the analysis of the study. Sarniak (2015) offered the following suggestion to researchers to minimize the effects of confirmation bias. Researchers have to continuously “reevaluate impressions of the respondents and challenge pre-existing assumptions and hypothesis” (p. 1). Within this study, the researcher used a reflective diary to reflect and reevaluate thoughts about the participants’ responses in order to maintain objectivity.

Leading questions and wording can lead to unintentional biases within a study as well (Sarniak, 2015). By elaborating on the participants’ responses, the researcher may have influenced the participants’ thoughts or limited their ability to express how they truly felt. However, to avoid misinterpreting or interpreting the data, the researcher asked additional questions to gain clarity of the participants’ responses. Effective questions elicited clear responses, whereby the researcher was able to avoid imposing his own thoughts on the experience of the alumni student participants.

Cultural bias could also be a limitation to any research study. According to Knight and Marciano (2013), cultural bias can be limited through a combination of the three tenets of culturally relevant education and the understanding of how reflection and one’s own cultural identity influence and impact teachers’ expectations of students of color towards both access and preparation for college. As a result, teachers have to be more knowledgeable and cognizant about
other cultures beyond the “holidays, religious custom, dress and food” (Trumbul, Rothstein-Fisch, & Greenfield, 2000, p. 1). Instead, as cultural integrators, teachers and administrators need understanding of how their own values and behaviors influence the type of instruction that is delivered in the classroom. The concept of self-knowledge and embracing others despite their differences is important to the level of equity we seek to bring to our institutions. Therefore, to avoid cultural biases and judgment toward the participants and their experiences, the researcher was mindful and understood her own potential barriers to be able to analyze cultural dynamics and position without imposing views related to culture, belief, expectations, and perceptions.

While avoiding cultural bias is almost impossible, the researcher provided a supportive environment that embraced different perspectives for optimal outcomes.

As previously mentioned, the method of in-person and/or phone interviews might have given inaccurate assessments based on the participants’ knowledge of the identity of the researcher. Likewise, the relationship between the participants and the researcher may have led to the participants answering questions based on the answers they perceived the researcher wanted to hear, instead of based on their actual lived experiences. Studying the academic achievement of African American students along racial lines was important; however, other factors may have been critical to consider as influential to their success, including resources, family commitment, parent involvement, and socioeconomic status that were not explored or considered in this study. This limitation could have been crucial to the analysis needed to evaluate the academic achievement of African American students effectively. Although the above factors were not included or directly explored in this study, it is possible that such factors could have provided insight to remedy the negative effects or lack of academic achievement related to African American students.
These limitations and assumptions suggest there are considerable opportunities for future research. Yet, the difficulty of increasing the academic achievement of African American students is for all educators to consider the idea that African American students can be successful, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach; rather, it is the ability of pedagogues to be willing to understand the students they service. The challenge is to ensure that existing and new school systems benefit from the research. According to Melnyk and Fineout-Overholt (2011), replicating the findings of qualitative studies can prove to be difficult because findings are mainly informative, not generalizable. Despite the lack of generalization, one can glean from the research myriad practices that might improve the academic performance of African American students in other settings.

**Validity, Credibility, and Triangulation of Data**

Using interviews as a means to collect data from participants offers an authenticity to the lived experiences of each participant, and thus credibility and confidence about the truth of the data. As the researcher conducted interviews as the primary source of data collection, it was critical that a trusting relationship be established between the researcher and the participants. To this extent, active listening and restraining from judgment were emphasized. However, the experiences of the participants alone were not enough to justify credibility. Stake (1995) argued that the researcher should be empathetic to the experience of the participants as opposed to making any assumptions.

According to McMillan (2012), several aspects demonstrate credibility within a qualitative study. Such procedures include prolonged engagement, member checking, triangulation, negative case analysis, peer debriefing, external audit, researcher reflection, and thick descriptions. For this case study, while the researcher was involved with the participants on
a professional level, the relationship was infrequent, and as a result, the researcher learned from the participants. Therefore, the two main approaches that were used to authenticate the credibility of the study were member checking and triangulation. In the member checking process, participants reviewed the information for accuracy and thick descriptions, whereby the research method was described in a comprehensive, detailed manner (McMillian, 2012). The process of member checking with the participants subsequently assured that the findings and interpretations were accurately and fairly presented (Creswell, 2013) and, as a result, aided in the validity of the study. Therefore, it was important that as the researcher actively collected, organized, and interpreted the experiences of the participants, triangulation occurred, resulting in the credibility of the data to exist.

Triangulation is the process in which the data converge, ensuring there is accuracy and a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ experiences and perspectives. Triangulation was essential while conducting this case study as it spoke to the reliability of the study (Stake, 2010; Yin, 2009). Fundamentally, triangulation allows the researcher to gain insight into a phenomenon from using different sources. Furthermore, it also limits the impact of bias as data are gathered from multiple sources. According to Thurmond (2001), triangulation increases the reliability and confidence in the data produced from the study. Additionally, triangulation offers “innovative ways of understanding a phenomenon, revealing unique findings” which might challenge or incorporate other theories (p. 254).

While qualitative research often leads to the development of more questions than absolute and/or definitive answers, it is a viable approach to research in which the researcher attempts to “gain insight, and explore the depth, richness and complexity inherent” (Lartec, 2016, p. 3) in studying the phenomena. In general, qualitative research is important to future research because
it allows the researcher and the reader to develop conjectures. For the researcher and the reader, conjectures or interpretive analysis are often done at different times, resulting in further investigation of the phenomena and discourse between the reader and the researcher. While the researcher conducts the study and offers a final analysis, the findings are not absolute because the researcher does not encompass all the knowledge related to the phenomena. Instead, when future research is conducted, valued perspectives of others allow for readers to develop their knowledge through an autonomous approach through which they experience the research. To this extent, Stake (2010), McMillan (2012), and Creswell (2013) all indicated that qualitative research allows a researcher to conduct research that is fluid in its ability to expand on one’s thinking by exposing the phenomena being studied from multiple perspectives.

There were three main reasons for using interviews as the primary data source for the study. The first was to offer the voice of the alumni as a means of understanding their perspectives. Second, interviews resulted in a rich narrative description of direct data collection from the participants’ perspective (McMillan, 2012), enabling readers to determine if the study could be transferred to other settings even if the findings from a single site cannot be generalized. Lastly, interviews lend themselves to data triangulation, which strengthens the research by obtaining data from multiple sources—in this case, giving more insight into the success of the alumni of WAHS. Moreover, while this case study examined one site, looking at alumni from a wide range of graduating years reduced the potential for inadequacies that might have occurred and thus produced a more comprehensive study.

It was important to realize that one of the goals of qualitative research was not to determine “cause and effect,” in which the researcher defined the solution. Instead, the researcher sought to extrapolate and understand the phenomena’s uniqueness from an approach
that was holistic or natural. The purpose was not to provide a single solution or even a
c omparison per se, but rather to provide details within the context of the situation by using a
thick and rich description (Geertz, 1973). As a result, the qualitative researcher painted a picture
in which individuals vicariously experienced the phenomena, constructing their reality based on
their perceptions and past experiences. Qualitative research is subjective; however, this
subjectivity is not regarded as a detriment but “as an essential element of understanding human
activity” (Stake, 2010, p. 28). Furthermore, according to Stake (2010), qualitative researchers are
c oncerned with the validation method of gathering data, particularly related to observation;
nonetheless, there are routines established for triangulation, despite the shortcomings of the
 procedures to test subjectivity. A clear and concise description of the key characteristics of
 qualitative research is provided below.

Table 3

**Characteristics of Qualitative Research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural setting</td>
<td>Study of behavior as it occurs naturally in specific context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct data collection</td>
<td>Research collects data directly from source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich narrative description</td>
<td>Detailed narrative that provides in-depth understanding of context and behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process orientation</td>
<td>Focus on how and why behaviors occur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inductive data analysis</td>
<td>Generalization induced from synthesizing gathered information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant perspectives</td>
<td>Focus on participants’ understanding and meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially constructed meaning</td>
<td>Knowledge is based on experience and social interactions with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent research design</td>
<td>Research design evolves and changes as the study takes place</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The characteristics of qualitative research were important to this research because they provided several benefits to both the researcher and the reader. According to Stake (2010), qualitative research allows readers to construct their own understanding while respecting the uniqueness of the situation. Here, Creswell (2013) suggested that researchers have the flexibility to acquire their own point of view as the objective of the study and its uses. Nevertheless, if the case study is credible and dependable, it should provide alternative perspectives, offer substantial evidence, and engage others (Yin, 2009). In addition, McMillan (2012), like Merriam (1998), offered rich description as a way to give readers a context within which the study is conducted and allow them to come to their own actualization of how it might connect to their own situation. An additional method used to further establish credibility for the interview/survey questions is to norm the questions. Norming the questions assists in determining if the open-ended questions in the survey yield the information that helps answer or give insight into the factors that impact the academic achievement of African American students. Additionally, for this study, norming consisted of an evaluation of the questions and feedback from educational administrators, teachers, and school counselors from WAHS. There were two main benefits to having individuals from WAHS norm the interview questions. First, it allowed the researcher to receive feedback from individuals who were reliable. Second, due to their familiarity with the setting, they could offer more feedback on the validity of the questions and their ability to effectively elicit the experiences of the alumni student participants in the study.

**Expected Findings**

The findings of this single intrinsic study revealed the lived experiences and other factors that contributed to the success of the alumni who graduated from WAHS. These factors included the resources that students had access to, the learning opportunities/exposure they were afforded,
the support they received from the staff, and the racial make-up of the staff and others who were critical in preparing them for their academic achievements that influenced their social and upward mobility. According to Harrington (2017), it is “a person’s high school experience that is pivotal to his or her future and defines their trajectory in life” (p. 3). The academic achievement of African American students who received a culturally relevant and responsive secondary education and graduated from WAHS was the result of what can be described as the pedagogy of care or pedagogy of love, which are interchangeable (Jackson et al., 2014; Sealey-Ruiz & Lewis, 2011).

According to Freire (2014), “Love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others” (p. 89). Therefore, pedagogy of care or love was the fundamental premise for which Freire (2014) explained the purpose of education and praxis as a means of liberating those who are oppressed and disenfranchised. When the student-teacher relationship is positive, prevalent educators are able to respond to the needs of African American and Latino students in aspects related to intellectual, personal, social-emotional and spiritual growth, particularly for African American males (Jackson et al., 2014). While Jackson et al. (2014) focused only on the male population, giving attention should be inclusive of all African American students. Giving attention to students reflects the behavior that the pedagogues employ as an act of love, which is referred to as compassion, altruism, or concern about the well-being of another (Clingan, 2015). As a result, the success of African American students became deeply impacted by the teachers’ ability to be genuine, or to what Palmer (2004) referred to as their authentic self in an effort to develop autonomous thinkers. To do this effectively, caring became a foundation from which individuals taught. Moreover, caring was the inclination and obligation that existed, “a deep moral obligation” that was fostered in the supportive student-teacher relationship in order for
successful outcomes to be achieved academically and socially (Nicol, Nacakowski, Ghalib, & Beairsto, 2010). Supportive relationships allow for mutual respect, trust, commitment, and dedication between the student and the teacher. “Caring and the ethics of caring…is an interaction or relation between a person giving care and a person being cared for” (Nicol et al., 2010, p. 236), whereby the teacher becomes fully aware and attentive to the needs of the student. Caring and love require both parties to be engaged and the interaction to be reciprocated (Jackson et al., 2014; Nicol et al., 2010). To this extent, culturally responsive educational practices, coupled with the pedagogy of care/love, places the needs and interests of the student first.

**Ethical Issues in the Study**

Improved academic outcomes for African American students can be achieved if educators are taught how to develop cultural competence and employ culturally relevant pedagogical practices as a means to educate, engage, and empower their students. Educators need to gain a broader perspective and acceptance of diversity, whereby awareness is raised. While schools may be culturally diverse, they are often not culturally aware. To this extent, individuals within the school needed to assess their readiness and aptitude to care for a multicultural student base. Cultural awareness is not only a fundamental key to understanding the student, but a necessary and vital aid to improving overall academic achievement. According to Hart (2010), cultural competence “requires a conscious and concerted effort on the part of the provider to learn about different cultures and acknowledge one’s personal responses to cultural differences” (p. 222). Palmer (2004) further implied that when we have not internalized that which is our moral duty, we behave as if our beliefs and ethical standards are only temporary and
merely a facade. Consequentially, if the beliefs of educators are temporary, then so too is their ability to be authentic to others and the students they service.

When educators explore the culture and climate of their schools and the diversity of the students in their classroom, they can begin to facilitate student-centered instruction. Developing cultural competence and cultural awareness in schools allows for improved cross-culture communication and reduced racial and academic disparities. Educators who developed these skill sets are often able to ascertain and better understand the values of the various student populations. Subsequently, educators become better equipped to negotiate academic interventions based on these understandings by showing respect to the students, their rights, and their cultural diversity, while providing a quality education (Jackson et al., 2014; Kohli, 2009, 2012, 2013).

Calabro and Tukoski (2003) suggested, “no single philosophical approach is the absolute justification for every instance of ethical decision making” (p. 83). However, researchers have an obligation to comply with the ethical codes of practice when conducting research. This includes to protect not only the participants but the data collected. As a result, all participants in this study were informed about the nature and broader context of the study. The purpose of the interviews was forthcoming and truthful in order to explain the study’s objectives. To ensure transparency, the researcher conveyed the anticipated risks and benefits to all parties, including staff, administrators, and, most importantly, individual participants. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher obtained informed consent in writing and verbally via tape recording to ensure that all protocols of ethical research were maintained and followed. Participants were also informed of how the interviews would be conducted, who had access to the data, and who was the contact person for the study if they had any questions. At the beginning of each interview, the
participants were given an overview of what the interview entailed, what questions they would be asked, and how the data would be used. Securing the data was important; as a result, the researcher kept the data protected on her personal password-protected computer and in a locked drawer in a file cabinet in her home office. All files, audio recordings, and documents will be shredded and disposed of immediately after the study is concluded. The participants were adults who voluntarily gave their informed consent to participate in this study. Therefore, approval from WAHS administrators was not required for this study as the participants were alumni and not current students.

Summary

The nature of this research was to understand the lived experiences of the alumni of WAHS. Furthermore, this study sought to examine what influenced the success of these African American students who attended WAHS between 2007 and 2016. By identifying and memorializing the lived experiences and practices that impacted and led to the success of African American students within a public, urban high school in New York City, it is possible to begin to understand how to make a broader impact on closing the achievement and access gaps. This current research study was conducted utilizing a qualitative approach with the desire to present valuable information from those who have experienced an education that served as a response to conversations on race, culture, access, and opportunities for the majority of the nation’s African American students.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

This case study was designed to examine and document the factors and impact of the quality of education received by African American alumni students from WAHS, which is an urban public high school. Additionally, this study sought to understand the social and cultural factors that contributed to the academic achievement and/or success as defined not by the traditional data of grade point averages and standardized test scores, but rather by the alumni students. The primary research questions for the study were addressed based on the narratives of the lived experiences of the alumni students, which were reinforced by the concepts that supported this study. The study used critical race theory (CRT) as the conceptual framework for which the attributes of (a) access and opportunity, (b) a rigorous academic program, (c) racial congruence of the teaching staff, and (d) high expectations and culturally responsive pedagogical practices served as the vehicles to the success and academic achievements of the alumni students. The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. How do urban, African American high school alumni perceive and describe the quality of education they received as impactful to their success?
   a. How do alumni students recount the educational experience and relate teaching practices to their academic achievement and success?

2. How do alumni students describe the social and cultural factors that contributed to and influenced the quality of education they received?
   a. How do such factors influence their trajectory towards high academic achievement and/or success?

This chapter presents the results of the study, which demonstrate how the analyzed data related to and supported the case study attributes presented in the framework. Data were
collected from three sources: face-to-face semistructured interviews that were recorded and transcribed using rev.com, high school transcripts, and artifact narrations or artifacts that were physically provided by the alumni students. Since the researcher did not transcribe the interviews, additional time was invested to compare the interview transcriptions to the audio files. Data analysis proceeded as each interview and source of data were gathered. Analysis of the data involved line-by-line close reading of the transcripts, which were then organized and color-coded for a distribution of frequent words, as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Words used by alumni students describing their experiences at WAHS.
Initially, descriptive or in vivo coding was employed, whereby topics were coded as a result of the frequency of a word or noun used during the interviews based on the interview transcripts. Following the initial coding, the data from the interview transcripts were organized using in vivo coding as a means of sectioning and labeling the data whereby short phrases and single words are extracted from the given section of the data (Saldaña, 2009). This method of coding, in broad terms, is referred to as open coding to analyze the data into initial concepts, primary headings, and eventually sub-headings that support the identified attributes and categories. Initial codes are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

*Initial Data Codes Produced From Alumni Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alumni Participant Interview Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close-knit family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading by example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believing in me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations and accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mirror Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care/Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, axial coding allowed for further analysis of the data to occur whereby the relationship between the categories and concepts began to emerge as a result of deductive and inductive reasoning, in which “the code is sharpened to achieve its best fit” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 160). Furthermore, thematic coding also assisted the researcher to uncover attributes and develop the categories that were represented. The convergence of the data offered an understanding of the phenomena as defined by the case study. Similarities and differences began to develop as the researcher continued to make comparisons of the experiences of the alumni participants, despite the period of time students attended or what kind of leadership existed.
Throughout the iterative and cyclical process of analyzing and coding the data, the primary goal was to identify and compare common and emerging attributes, concepts, and themes that answered the fundamental questions of the research study. To this extent, a descriptive case study approach was applied “yielding a rich, thick description of the phenomena” (Yazan, 2015, p. 148). Moreover, out of the multiple sources of data emerged the categories and corresponding attributes that were supported by the conceptual framework, thus ensuring and enhancing the constructs of reliability and validity (Yazan, 2015).

As a result of the four overarching categories that guided the research—quality of education, educational experiences, social and cultural factors impacting alumni student, and factors influencing success, four reoccurring themes emerged. The emerging themes were: (a) Power of Passionate Educators, (b) Feeling of Belonging: Empathetic and Nurturing Teachers, (c) Access to Opportunities That Supported Success, and (d) High Expectations Through a Rigorous and Structured Environment. The implication of the study further emphasized the impact of racial congruency of teachers, facilitating and inspiring African American students to greatness and believing that greatness, academic achievement, and success are not only possible but also attainable.

The researcher initiated and executed a descriptive single case study design. In this particular qualitative case study methodology, the researcher was pivotal in the position of primary investigator and collection agent. The role of the researcher in such a capacity allowed for a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Creswell, 2013). During the study, the researcher served as an administrator of the high school. She has worked at the school since its inception and has a very strong tie to the institution as a founding staff member. The researcher was
interested in identifying, understanding, and telling the counter-story of the academic achievement of African American students in an urban school, particularly WAHS. During the period in which data were collected, alumni participants were aware of the researcher’s affiliation as an employee of WAHS. As an educator for 21 years, the researcher has been in the trenches working with students, parents, and staff to develop and sustain a rigorous academic program that prepares high school students for college and beyond. The researcher is motivated to continue to dedicate herself to ensuring that New York City public school students who attend WAHS receive an enriching educational experience that is built on solid educational leadership, grounded in sound practices through “love, discipline and structure” (A. A. Muhammad, personal communication, September 2007). Through these consistent practices described by the alumni participants can high levels of academic achievement be attained and sustained to reduce, if not eradicate, the gaps that exist between African American students and their White peers to level the “playing field.”

**Description of the Sample**

This single case study was conducted at a small public urban high school in one of the largest school districts on the East Coast. The research site was a 9–12 college preparatory public high school that primarily focuses scholars towards Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematic (STEM) fields. The alumni participants graduated WAHS from 2007 through 2016. Table 5 presents the demographics of the alumni student participants in this study; pseudonyms are used for students’ names as a means of maintaining anonymity.
Table 5

*Alumni Student Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year Graduated</th>
<th>Attend Other HS</th>
<th>Final HS Average</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Current Employment Status</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alvin</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>89.54</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>95.65</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Program Coordinator</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Yes (3)</td>
<td>81.07</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>School: Dean/Coach/Tutor</td>
<td>Working on Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dental Hygienist/Mother of 1</td>
<td>Some College/Plan to go back Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shely</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>71.58</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Social Services: Counselor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay-P</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>76.60</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Social Services: Counselor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Yes (1)</td>
<td>96.96</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>In College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Yes (1)</td>
<td>85.54</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>DA’s Office: Social Worker</td>
<td>Working on Master’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>93.85</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>In College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher sought to include an equal number of male and female participants who could speak to their experience at WAHS, giving voice to and insight into what occurred at WAHS that contributed, impacted, or led to their success as a result of attending WAHS. Purpose and convenience sampling were used because they permitted the deliberate selection to include African American students who attended WAHS based on the ease of availability, access, and willingness of the alumni participants. Of the 75 students to whom the flyer was sent, approximately 30 students responded within a week and stated they wanted to be part of the
study. Subsequently, the introduction letter was sent out via email to the 30 alumni students formally introducing them to the study, and explaining both the purpose and scope of the study. The researcher was able to secure 10 interviews; however, two participants cancelled due to child care concerns, reducing the total number of interviews to eight.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face using a semistructured approach, lasting 1–2 hours in duration. Moreover, the face-to-face interviews offered the lived experience of the students, allowing them to share their experiences of when they attended WAHS and what their experiences were like that led to their success as per their definition of success. Each student chose the location and time for the interview that was convenient to them. In cases where the venue was not conducive to conducting the interview, the researcher’s vehicle became the mobile office. The participants consisted of five males and three females. The researcher scurried through the city to accommodate and facilitate the interviews. Despite the various weather conditions and locations, alumni participants were willing to be a part of the study, giving credence to their own commitment to the study.

Research Methodology and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to understand the academic achievement of African American students from an urban setting as they described their experience of attending WAHS. The researcher selected a case study to capture the authentic experience of the alumni participants as a means to give voice to the counter-narrative of African American students attending schools in an urban setting; this provided insight into the factors that contributed to their academic achievement while attending WAHS and beyond. A case study approach was used by the researcher because it offered the capacity to understand the impact of the experiences of the alumni participants, as well as the social and cultural factors impacting their trajectory
towards achievement through their lived experiences. To this extent, the case study design provided a means of capturing the lived experiences of the alumni participants that would appropriately answer the research questions based on descriptions of the phenomena in question based on what happened and within the context of the real world (Yin, 2009). The research was focused on a single site because of the consistency of high academic achievement of African American scholars. Furthermore, case study research allows for the use of multiple data sources to examine an issue critically, thus, offering different perspectives from which the phenomena can be understood.

In an attempt to understand the academic achievement of African American students in an urban high school, the researcher sought to determine the social and cultural factors that contributed to and influenced the quality of education that impacted the academic achievement of African American students, as conveyed by the alumni participants. While the researcher’s main source for collecting data focused on one-on-one semistructured interviews, other sources of data included high school transcripts as well as personal artifacts. However, face-to-face interviews were the primary means of collecting data to obtain detailed information. To this extent, the face-to-face interviews were optimal, allowing alumni participants to speak openly to the questions asked and providing context to the memories that were recalled (Seidman, 2006; Turner, 2010). The alumni student interviews offered rich descriptive narratives of their educational experiences, the perceptions of the quality of education they received, the impact of the social and cultural factors contributing to the quality of the education they received, and the influence that such an education had on their trajectory towards high academic achievement and/or success.
Alumni student participants’ transcripts offered insight into their academic progress while in high school, and how such academic process progress may or may not have influenced the trajectory for success once high school was over. Moreover, participants’ transcripts offered information on the students’ academic progress and performance based on class grades and state exam scores, but failed to give insight into mitigating factors, such as social and cultural factors that have a greater impact on the academic achievement of African American students. The alumni participants’ artifacts were often symbolic of a way of thinking and philosophical in nature. In some cases, the artifacts represented an array of how the students felt and how their experiences were related to and impacted by the education they received at WAHS. The participants shared artifacts that were philosophical and more situated in ideas, character behaviors, or intangible items that were not easily accessible.

At each phase of the data-gathering process, the researcher performed analysis and reflection using member checking and reflective journaling. Given the nature of research, particularly qualitative research, the researcher as the primary investigator engaged in the iterative process of reading the interview transcripts multiple times and reflecting on the data. This cyclical pattern of reading, rereading, and reflection helped limit researcher bias as a result of the familiarity of the site and the alumni participants who were interviewed.

Appendix E presents the emerging themes that aligned with the corresponding attributes identified in the conceptual framework of the study. With each iteration of analysis, more connections were identified between the categories and the attributes. Based on the conceptual framework of CRT as well as culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy, Appendix F represents the classification according to research questions, attributes, and themes that emerged to answer the research questions. The researcher identified which themes existed in the
individual interviews, followed by how well the categories and attributes corresponded to each other. Through member checking and reflective journaling, the process confirmed and validated the researcher’s coding practice, thereby strengthening the validity of the research.

**Summary of the Findings**

Throughout the data-gathering process, each aspect provided a new dimension to the overall experience of the alumni participants and the researcher. Three components of collecting data were: (a) alumni interviews, (b) artifact review, and (c) alumni transcripts. Through these, the researcher was able to use the interviews and disaggregate the data by organizing broad categories of quality, experiences, social and cultural factors, and factors influencing trajectory towards the success of African American students. These attributes led to themes that offered a counter-narrative of the plight of African American students in urban public schools around the country.

Throughout each phase of data analysis, the researcher gathered patterns to determine how the attributes of expectations, access, opportunity, belonging, and passion contributed to understanding the success of the alumni participants who attended WAHS. These patterns revealed how the attributes were embedded or engrossed in what teachers/schools expected and how much access and/or opportunities were available. Other attributes included the educator’s passion to content, connection to students, and what the environment offered. The conceptual framework, described in Chapter 2, detailed the underpinnings to the counter-story for which the academic achievement of African American students was attainable when racial congruency existed and when race was placed at the center of the conversation, as supported by CRT.

However, while CRT examined racism from the position of exclusion and disregard of racial minority, exclusion or isolation of the racial minority from the dominant culture became
the catalyst, which allowed African American alumni participants to succeed in this case study. The alumni participants of WAHS perceived the practices of educators as intentional. They felt that when students’ voices were heard, they were valued as individuals; their background and their experiences were used as a means to engage and empower them. The alumni participants were unable to label what they were expressing, but they made reference to what Ladson-Billings (2009) and Gay (2013) described as culturally relevant and responsive pedagogical practices, in which students are placed at the center of the teaching and learning process.

Moreover, the social and cultural factors that impacted alumni students were a direct result of educators who sought to value the knowledge and cultural background of the alumni participants as an asset. According to the alumni participants, teachers were intentional in their pedagogical practices to engage, empower, and educate students who attended WAHS. Throughout the descriptive narrative of the alumni participants, as well as their artifacts and transcripts, one begins to understand the impact the intentional behaviors can have on the students of WAHS.

Presentation of the Data

“Education is a human enterprise involving children, and data failed to give educators and onlookers all of the information they need to help students learn” (Murray, 2014, p. 171). With this understanding, such data may provide some information about an institution, but they do not offer a complete comprehensive understanding of the factors that led to the success and/or achievement of the students who were serviced. To this extent, the presentation of the data begins with an analysis of the alumni participants’ academic achievement as is often reflected through student performance on standardized tests or high-stakes examinations (see Appendix G). When looking at Appendix G, one might assume that the alumni student participants did not
complete a number of exams, which would be accurate. However, while this observation may be true, one would have to dig more deeply to understand the causative factors. For example, one might wonder why 75% of the alumni participants did not take the Earth Science exam. A response would reflect the idea that Earth Science is an introductory science course and does not challenge or prepare students for the rigor that other science courses such as Chemistry and Physics require. As a result, if students are preparing for the rigor of college and university in STEM-related fields, it is imperative that they be exposed to science courses they will encounter later on in their academic career. Access to science courses such as Chemistry and Physics allowed alumni participants to compete with their White peers outside of WAHS; these are courses from which African American students are often excluded.

Mathematics is another course for which student representation is often misunderstood or misinterpreted. The different years that alumni participants entered WAHS would determine which exams they took in mathematics. For example, alumni participants Alvin and Jay-P were required to complete the mathematics sequence by completing Math A and Math B, which were equivalent to what became Algebra I, Algebra II and Trigonometry, and Geometry in subsequent years. The content of Math A and Math B was a combination of the latter three math exams, which were completed in a year and a half. Instead, many students at WAHS completed each course in one year, allowing them to complete the mathematics requirements within 2 years instead of 3 years. This acceleration in completing the mathematics sequence allowed the earlier graduates flexibility in their schedule, along with access and opportunity to take higher-level math courses, AP courses, and college courses. On the other hand, alumni participants like Ryan attended high school as the state was transitioning from one set of exams to another set. Therefore, in an attempt to acquire an Advanced Regents diploma, Ryan sat for the Math B and
Geometry exam in the same academic year, with the hope of meeting the requirements to earn an Advanced Regents diploma. While Ryan did not achieve a passing grade in Math B, much can be said about his attempt that was not reflected in the scores, but was revealed in the narrative of the experience that Ryan had in attending WAHS. By contrast, Anita, Kate, and Harry completed all assessments except for Math A and Math B as they were no longer the required mathematics exams nor were they available. Nevertheless, many students at WAHS exceeded the state requirements for graduation. Additionally, 75% of the students in the study acquired the Advanced Regents diploma.

This data represented an accurate level of performance for almost all graduating classes since 2007, in which more than half of the cohorts met all requirements for the highest diploma they obtained. However, while state test scores were often the benchmark by which success was judged, the data in Appendix G did not provide the factors contributing to the cause of the academic achievement of the African American students in this study. Similarly, if we look at alumni participant Shely, one might consider this student to be a low achiever, meeting the bare minimum to get out of high school; yet, while the latter may have been the case, other mitigating factors hindered Shely from achieving at the same rate of other students or to the expectations of the school. As a result, Murray (2014) further expounded on the pitfalls of using one source of data, particularly student achievement on exams or grade point averages, as the sole source of information. More often than not, student achievement as a result of standardized test scores is emphasized as a means of accountability purposes, which often implies or informs the public about the quality of the school and the education one can receive. To this extent, Murray argued that only when student achievement is connected with other data sources can educators, administrators, and researchers begin to understand the factors that impact the academic
achievement and success of students and, in this study, African American students. Therefore, this presentation of the data describes the themes and a synthesis of findings as related to the research questions and which emerged from the qualitative narrative of the alumni students. This, thus, permitted the researcher to incorporate the narrative passages based on the alumni students’ responses during the interviews.

**Power of a Passionate Educator**

The role of an educator is extremely complex and requires a range of multifarious skills and personality traits. As educators, there is a great need for self-evaluation of biases, implicit or otherwise; moreover, as one continues throughout a career, it is equally important to reflect on why one chose to enter into the field of education and why one continues to stay in the profession. Educators are expected to inculcate academic and social skills in students from different backgrounds, and despite the heterogeneity existing in classrooms, an educator’s goal often entails unifying students towards working in a harmonious environment for the purpose of learning, while simultaneously respecting and acknowledging their uniqueness. Many of the alumni participants in the study conveyed much about the quality of the education they experienced: the environment was loving, much like a family type of experience where teachers were passionate, as the following statement from Ryan indicates: “The education was thorough, there was passion and purpose to the education I received.”

In addition to the multifaceted requirements and role of an educator, being passionate about content, students, their beliefs about education, and the purpose of their work is critical to the academic achievement of African American students. Educators who are emotionally driven and passionate about their work and the impact their work has on young scholars selflessly carry out their duties as a means of impacting their students. Critical to the teacher’s passion was
whether the students were able to feel and experience the power of this passion through the instructional or personal encounters they experienced. As Jay-P noted:

   Educators were very passionate! The math teacher was one of the most passionate teachers in Woodbine Academy because she put her whole heart in everything that she did, and that would be something that you can never question. Her passion and her love for what she did and to make us better was partially unexplainable.

To this extent, it is often this aforementioned passion and genuine motivation that enables educators to overcome challenges and relentlessly strive to ensure that students achieve academic excellence and become well-rounded individuals who are empowered to potentially make positive changes in themselves, in their community, and, subsequently, the world. During her interview, Kate recognized her teachers were determined and resilient about what they did, “which was infectious.” Thus, their passion was able to motivate students to be passionate about their own learning. According to alumni participant Kate, teachers motivated students to be passionate about education and to pursue their goals fervently. Kate stated:

   My math and my science teachers made sure that I understood the material, by giving me extra practice questions or being available during lunch time to sit with me and work on the problems with me. I received attention, and as much help, to get me to where I am today.

   Passion and drive to succeed sometimes entail sacrifices in reaching one’s goals; therefore, educators are considered passionate when the impact of their teaching and the relationships that are fostered are able to transform the lives of the students they service. The passionate educator understands that time and nurturing allow students to grow and progress towards greater proficiency and excellence that are not dependent on academic grades, but rather
on the progression toward growth, maturity with the subject, and self and self-awareness. This requires a sense of understanding and compassion that is in tune with the social-emotional development of students in order to push and hold them to high standards, while providing them with the necessary support to achieve academically. Rick noted that “Teachers were passionate and knowledgeable; they helped to foster self-realization and actualization. Teachers were passionate and pushed us to do more and be more.” Jay-P echoed this sentiment and noted:

The staff did not play, but at the same time you knew they cared. They were on top of you, but you knew it was for the right reasons. It’s like every time the principal spoke, you knew you were supposed to listen because he had an authority in his voice. He had a love in his voice, and a genuine concern to make us better.

Finally, Kate concluded that “Teachers were determined, resilient, and passionate about what they did, which was infectious.”

As a result, passionate educators work toward progress, which entails the molding and grooming of average students into exceptional scholars. Passionate educators maintain their focus on the long-term benefits of learning and education, and reiterate concepts and theories until each and every one of their students understand what is taught, thereby making their students owners of their own learning. Rick was willing to speak to his own motivation and remembered:

I was motivated to learn; I looked forward to going to class, which was unheard of for me. Never in my life was I looking forward to coming to school. It wasn’t because of my friends or anything like that. It was really to learn. I feel like just being in the classroom in general, especially in math class, really was the true experience that changed my life because it was confusing to me why I wanted to come to school and why I wanted to
learn. I didn’t know, but I just had that desire. . . . Perhaps I wanted to be there because the teachers cared enough about me and were pouring into me…love…because they were passionate about what they taught.

Evidence of students taking ownership is the paradigm shift that occurs when students become motivated if they can pinpoint what has caused the shift. Whether or not the change in attitude occurred towards their school work, the students recognized that someone at the school cared and had a vested interest in their well-being, and as a result could guide them towards improvement. Shely recalled that “The education I received was exceptional because even when I did not care someone else cared. My education encompassed academic improvement, social improvement and mental health improvement.” For this reason, passionate educators are not only teachers, but also serve as mentors and practically parents. It is quite possible for students to spend more time with their teachers at school than with their parents/guardians at home. An average student spends 7 hours in school during the weekdays—approximately a total of 35 hours a week. With the increased time that educators at WAHS offered the students for Saturday and afterschool tutoring, it became inevitable that the teachers took an interest in the students who connected with them and therefore these teachers served to mentor them. Harry found that:

There were some teachers that I didn’t need to have that type of relationship with, but for the ones that I did, I really felt that love. The relationship that existed contributed to my success because I spent long periods of the day with my teachers who had different views than my parents.

However, teachers, whether they wanted to or not, served as student mentors directly and indirectly as students made various observations of how their teachers interacted with adults and students, how they dressed and comported themselves, and which other staff were willing to
work with them, even when not directly teaching the students. Alvin stated that “Teachers were mentors, willing to stay after school, long hours to help us”; Ryan echoed these thoughts:

Experiences were not only academic but also entailed making sure that I was okay emotionally, and mentally, and also physically as it pertained to food, and getting to school on time, and dressing appropriately and presenting myself. My mentor was an example outside of the academic world.

As indicated in the narrative above, for many students, educators at WAHS were the only mature adults with whom they came in contact since some students did not have parental figures at home due to various factors. For these students, passionate educators became their sole source of support and encouragement. Often, these educators almost always went out of their way to ensure the emotional and psychological stability of their students. To this extent, the academic achievement of African American students was attained when educators believed that students learned and embodied this belief in their knowledge of content, their commitment to their students, and their passion for a subject. Passionate educators understood that if students are to reach their highest potential, they must have the necessary support to maintain focus in order to perform their academic tasks diligently. The by-product of the passion offered by educators then becomes a driving force to aid students in becoming successful citizens in all aspects of their lives, thus creating a brilliant future generation of scholars.

As a result, the success of African American students becomes deeply impacted by the teacher’s ability to be genuine, or what Palmer (2004) referred to as the teacher’s authentic self in an effort to develop autonomous thinkers. However, to do this effectively, caring becomes a foundation for which individuals teach. Additionally, caring is the inclination and obligation that must exist—"a deep moral obligation” that is fostered in the supportive relationship between
student and teacher in order to achieve successful outcomes academically and socially (Nicol et al., 2010). Supportive relationships allow for mutual respect, trust, commitment, and dedication between the student and the teacher. The interaction between the student and teacher demonstrates an act of caring that reflects mutual respect, which exists between the one who gives care and the one who is receiving the care; this is achieved when the teacher is fully aware and attentive to the needs of the student. Caring and love require both parties to be engaged and reciprocate the interaction (Jackson et al., 2014; Nicol et al., 2010). To this extent, culturally responsive educational practices, coupled with the pedagogy of care/love, place the needs and interest of the student first.

**Feeling of Belonging: Empathetic and Nurturing Community**

Education and the act of teaching and learning are social, and through social interactions, learning takes place. From social interactions, one develops a sense of belonging, which often offers students a form of protection as they establish their identity. Naomi Hattaway (2013, as cited by Pogosyan, 2017) interpreted the word “belonging” as follows: “Belonging is like stepping up on a platform and feeling like you are fully supported” (p. 2). The belonging is an important aspect of life. However, when it comes to education, the power of belonging is what either makes or breaks a student’s thirst for learning. Therefore, for students of all ages, belonging to a school community is critically important, to the extent that schools have an important role in creating a forum in which social networks are created (Allen & Bowles, 2012). For the alumni participants, WAHS offered protection from a world that often debilitating the spirits of young African American students who are viewed through a deficit framework, by which they are perceived as intellectually inferior because of their skin color or as “the common portrayal of the urban minority youth describe[d] as an individual who is experiencing daily
hassles, growing up in a family undergoing economic hardship, and embedded within an impoverished community” (Li, Naussbaum, & Richards, 2007, p. 21). That is to say, some students do not experience adversity, but broad-stroke assumptions are often applied to the majority—a large majority—of students as an absolute norming.

Students who attended WAHS spoke of their experiences as life changing due to feelings of empowerment. Alumni participants discussed how teachers encouraged and exemplified the success they wanted to emulate. They shared that the racial congruency of the teachers had a great impact on their academic achievement. For adolescents, fitting into peer groups has an enormous impact on academic performance. For many students, a “sense of belonging to peers and teachers can positively affect academic performance and motivation” (Pogosyan, 2017, p. 1). In fact, the power of belonging can either enhance or destroy the thirst for learning among African American children. As participant Jay-P noted:

The staff nurtured us in believing in ourselves; they challenge me to believe in myself, that I could do better than my environment as an African American, I would say my application from what I learned is to try to reach those who are just like me from [sic], to try to talk to them and let them know that it’s never too late to learn. It’s never too late to go back to school. It’s never too late to change your condition, no matter how bad it may seem.

Students who feel unwanted, devalued, or not acknowledged by school staff often lack the desire to attend school and, as a result, contribute to an inability to reach their highest academic potential. While this may be true overall, it is also true that if a student identifies and connects with at least one adult in the school setting, that relationship fosters and provides encouragement
and support, thereby increasing the students’ chances to become more apt to stay minimally involved to meet graduation requirements. Shely recalled that:

Even now when I’m going through certain things, I always think about the dean. He always wanted the best for me, always told me that I could be whatever I wanted to be. He saw something in me while I was in Woodbine that I didn’t see in myself. He basically pushed me a lot. His goal for me was for me to finish school, but not unfortunately [sic], I wound up becoming pregnant and I had to remove myself from school at the time to get into a full-time job. The career that I’m in right now is in the dental field.

By contrast, students who identified the school as “a home away from home,” where they perceived the staff and peers as family, were able to thrive. Education was not a chore and the school did not feel oppressive, but rather a place where students were able to grow and wanted to come to each day. Ryan noted that the “close-knit environment is what made Woodbine welcoming [sic], able to relate to students and staff. It was like a second home; it made learning comfortable and enjoyable.” Rick further noted:

Woodbine definitely played a part in my life. It really showed me how I needed to treat my education, the care and love that I had to put into it, and it taught me about being a family, the power in that. I have a younger brother that also went to Woodbine, I really wanted him to go there, because I know that family feeling. I know the love that I got, and just the ethic that I gained from going there is just crazy work ethic, really, because we were given a lot of work. We were tested. We were tested, but it definitely made me stronger. It definitely made me stronger as a person, as a man, and definitely game-changing stuff.
Such students often had very few issues or problems adjusting their time to meet the academic standards of achievement. In many cases, the students who felt they belonged to and were part of the school community experienced their schooling as a tension- and stress-free environment. Jay-P recalled:

When I was with the teachers, it felt like I was in church. It felt like a very spiritual, conscious experience, a very inspiring experience. When you can honestly go to school and be happy that you’re talking to your teacher and be happy that you’re in that place, you feel like someone is preaching to you, someone is pouring into you or maybe if I can be more clear, it felt like I was every day I was listening to a Malcolm X or a Martin Luther King. That’s what I mean it felt like I was in church. Someone who I knew was great, someone who was monumental in the community, someone who was inspiring. That’s what it felt like.

Students were willing to stay at school to get schoolwork done, taking full advantage of the educational opportunities being offered. Their sense of belonging to the community of people that reflected their racial make-up in positions of leadership reassured students that their own success was possible and they were not alone as they persevered towards their goals. Anita stated that “racial congruency, made the staff relatable, allowing for ease of communication as a result of race, even when our experiences were different.” Additionally, Jay-P found that “educators were intellectually stimulating, challenging, enthusiastic, relatable. . . . Counselors and staff were relatable as well, we could share personal aspects of our lives, they were interested in us on a human level.” At WAHS, teachers and staff worked as a collective community to support students. It was not an individual teacher, but the whole system that supported students. Kate found that:
The racial make-up of the school similar to my school back home [Ghana] allowed me to being able to see that I’m being taught by people who look like me, who are successful at what they do and who are brilliant at what they do, it encourages me to know that or it lets me know that I can succeed as well if I can put my mind to it.

She was not the only student who had such thoughts, as Harry recalled:

I felt that because we came from a similar background as our teachers, our teachers wanted to work harder for us because they understood the difficulty we would have in the future based on the color of our skin alone. I felt that they cared enough so that despite how we acted, they would still try to show us love and compassion so that we would make the best of our time at Woodbine.

Allen and Bowles (2012) described “belonging in school settings as the belief of students that adults within their school community care about their learning, have an interest in them as individuals and have high academic expectations” (p. 109). When students are comfortable, they are able to bring their authentic self into a space where they feel accepted; their cognitive abilities begin to develop; and their willingness and aptitude increase towards the content, subject matter, and the desire to be in school. Their interest is piqued enough to be willing to at least put in the effort and time involved in giving more attention to their academic work. Harry stated that:

I wanted to leave after my freshmen year, I wasn’t fitting in, the workload was intense. A friend of mine actually let me know that, “Hey, the school you’re at is going to keep you on a college path. You’re actually going to be able to make it in college and actually be able to have a career. I came to realize that the workload was to prepare me as I was completing a great deal more than my friends were.
In an environment where students are a part of the community, they become more focused, limiting their attention from discerning discrimination or belittlement. Instead of dividing their attention or existing in survival mode where they create walls as a defensive coping mechanism, they are open and more receptive to learning and sharing who they are, along with their dreams and aspirations. To this extent, the students not only welcomed but were able to foster a mentee/mentor relationship with their teachers, in which they were open to receiving guidance and advice for academic and personal endeavors. The sentiments of the alumni participants explained that teachers and administrators were their role models who were able to foster and inspire more meaningful relationships because they were supportive to the students. Rick admitted: “I was in rebel stage…. I just wasn’t excelling, came to Brooklyn, teachers on my back, going crazy about this work. It was my mentor that was able to change my course and disposition; because they provided a support system.” Jay-P also admitted:

I was being disruptive in class, and the principal didn’t like that. He took me in the office, and he said to me, ‘I don’t have a problem removing you from this school.’ He said, ‘But, I understand that if I remove you from this school that you probably will have a hard time in surviving considering where you came from.’

Jay-P continued his recollection of the principal:

He said, ‘Because of that, I’m going to allow you to be here.’ I think that him making it clear to me, that showed me that he cared. It was like an incredible moment because he didn’t have to keep me there, but he knew I needed to be there and I belonged there. Otherwise my life would be . . . well . . . difficult.

Allen and Bowles (2012) further supported and confirmed the alumni students’ consciousness of belonging to the WAHS school community and its impact on their academic achievement. The
experiences and achievement that the alumni participants described were attributed to and as a result of “teacher supportiveness and caring, presence of good friends, engagement in academic progress, fair and effective discipline, and participation in extracurricular activities” (p. 109). As Ryan noted:

School often prepares students for just standardized testing, but while being [sic] at Woodbine Academy, it felt like it was not only about preparing me for standardized testing, or taking a test, or taking an exam, or even learning just the academics, it was care. Having that care gave me the strength to push forward and finish strong, that support was definitely good and necessary. However, I didn’t even expect to get in a school, in a high school, or from an assistant principal whose workload at the time was so much. Nonetheless, I was never made to feel like I was a burden.

When schools provide students access to greater opportunities for learning and social development, students feel valued, appreciated and have an affinity for taking ownership of their school. The disposition of students who experience schooling in this manner, ultimately feels that they belong to a greater community that is safe and nurturing. This space allows them to develop and assert their intellect as a tool to disrupt the status quo, or defy the rhetoric of negative statistics that often describe African American students with a deficit framework. Therefore, when students have positive teacher-student relationships, where they feel safe coming to school and belong to a community that supports them, they are then able to focus on their academic progression and success. Additionally, as students represent the core and purpose of the school community, it becomes imperative that access and opportunity be afforded to students to drive the success that schools seek to impact regarding academic achievement.
Access to Opportunities That Support Success

Since 2007, WAHS, a rigorous high school, prides itself with a 95% to 100% graduation rate. However, despite the challenges, alumni participants indicated that as a result of the teachers’ passion, amicable nature, and genuine interest in learning more about the students’ cultural background, the school became their second home. For many of the alumni participants, WAHS prepared them academically and socially for college, the workforce, and the military. The preparation was not only making students exceptional academically, but it also molded them into well-rounded, confident, and intellectual individuals. The instructional focus did not merely prepare the students for the state examinations or to meet graduation requirements; rather, it facilitated the students’ ability to acquire life skills and knowledge. Harry said:

I was given opportunity to be a leader in my participation of being in the National Honor Society. As an executive board member, we had to figure out how to involve the students who were members but not active because of factions and different personalities students had interacting with each other and sharing information, allowing for us to maintain a cohesive effort in what we were trying to accomplish. During that time, I listened to everybody and it came over me like feeling that I needed to speak, so that pushed me to stand up and express how I felt. I spoke to how we behaved towards each other and voicing my concerns. That experience really took me out of my shell and allowed me to know that no matter where I am, my voice deserves to have a chance to be heard and that not only mine, but everyone else has that chance too, but definitely for me, I need to take the opportunity when I’m given it.

Teachers were accessible to the students, offering various opportunities to engage in relevant conversations related to their experiences and the issues of their communities. The
alumni participants conveyed their appreciation for having their teachers available to speak to about their growing pains as young adults. Jay-P found:

There was the openness for us to discuss personal feelings about ethics, religion, racism, sexuality, respecting each other perspectives and ideas in life, and coming together and seeing people as people and growing together. We had so much accessibility, that word again, to those conversations to just talk about how we feel, that was equally as important as the education factor.

Significant to the academic achievement of the alumni participants were the opportunities and access in which the students engaged. This included, but was not limited to, the conversations that allowed students to think, question, and challenge the perception of others, which otherwise would not let others define who they would become. Jay-P also noted that “I was given an opportunity that a lot of people have missed and or never had; an opportunity to be empowered from people who cared and from people who wanted to see us excel on an advanced level.” One of the most important points the alumni participants indicated was that staff were intentional in every interaction that uplifted the students to recognize their greatness; as a result, they always felt encouraged to strive towards that greatness. Alvin spoke to his thoughts on how he was able to “see” success in the form of teachers and administration:

I appreciated seeing people in a position that looked like me and that come from neighborhoods that I came from and situations that I’ve dealt with, so I appreciated that and I knew that greatness was attainable by seeing that, but they expected greatness from everybody…people who looked like me in the principal’s position, the dean’s position, the math teacher’s position. I knew that I could do this if they can.

Harry echoed his thoughts:
There was love and compassion. I’ve seen it in terms of a student who was going off in a wrong path early in his high school career. The dean actually took that student to another school. The student came back explaining to us his experience. He understood the opportunity he had at Woodbine and how worse it would have been for him if he went elsewhere.

For many, the social interactions with the educators was just as important as the instructional practices. Instructionally, alumni participants indicated that the knowledge teachers possessed offered the students the opportunity to think critically. The teachers required a deeper analysis of the course material, from which students recognized that the disparity and distribution of opportunities were different based on race, gender, and economic status. For some students, the opportunities were available to take Chemistry or Physics first in their freshman year. They also were able to have college experiences and exposure to attend college classes while in high school.

Thus, teachers encouraged the students to consider their positionality in relation to the content of what they taught, the resources that were available, and how the experience impacted them as students now and in the future. Alumni participants understood their life would be faced with challenges as a result of the inequalities that existed and the current state of the country; therefore, they had the tools to make smart choices to establish their futures.

WAHS represented an academic institution that was not just rigorous, but also provided the support necessary for students to succeed beyond the 4 years of high school. WAHS provided and continues to provide a range of opportunities that ensure student success. One way that students are given the opportunity to be competitive is by offering more than nine Advanced Placement courses, which not only prepare students academically but potentially save them and
their parents’ time and money in their pursuit of higher education. Academic advisors and teachers encouraged the students to take as many AP classes to broaden their knowledge of college-related courses. As Harry said:

I completed five AP course with respectable grades, exempting me from not only remedial work but also a full semester of college. Exposure to robotics gave me the insight to understand that I didn’t want to program. I understood that I did want to do the engineering because of my physics classes and the calculus classes. I had choices and I felt like Woodbine allowed me to find those choices not just by those classes too, but also by the programs and opportunities that you would hear over the PA system.

Students who took advantage of academic advisement developed self-awareness along with self-confidence and excitement over the possibility of attending college and university. Shely found that:

With the college courses, you only got those opportunities though if you were...if your GPA [grade point average] was at a certain level. So, if you were a student who wasn’t doing that well, you didn’t have access to those opportunities. Which makes sense, because you don’t want to put effort into someone who’s not putting effort into themselves.

Many of the alumni participants began to envision the possibility of attending college due to the exposure, encouragement, and success they experienced in taking college courses. Whether on site or at the university, as a result of staff support, students understood that access and opportunity required reciprocity. Shely noted that “opportunities lost or missed was [sic] as a result of students not taking advantage of what was offered and taking what was offered for granted.” Nevertheless, tutoring was available to all students during the week from Monday
through Thursday, at the Saturday Academy that was held from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., and in Saturday Intensives, referred to as 9-to-9s. Nine-to-nines were, as they are today, essentially consecutive Saturdays specifically reserved to prepare the students for Regents examinations and other exams. The sessions were specifically designed and organized to provide students with a study period where they not only learned subject-specific content, but also built their stamina and endurance to study and prepare for their exams. During these intense sessions, students remained in school for 12 hours, interacting with teachers about their academic concerns and reviewing questions from practice exams in order to succeed in the culminating state exam at the end of the year. Rick, Shely, and Kate all commented on this:

Rick: Nine-to-Nine prepared us for the high-stake [sic] examination with the support of the community to excel; however, it was gruesome while we were going through it at fifteen years old.

Shely: When you hear nine-to-nine, you think it's a cramming session. But when you're at nine-to-nine, you get a different vibe from your teachers that you would not get on a regular day-to-day basis. They make the work fun. It did not feel like you were in school all day.

Kate: Teachers were always well-prepared to host these sessions, and made sure they were present with many activities and course-related work to keep the students focused on the content and what the student had to learn and master. Videos, debates, presentations and other interactive activities were incorporated into these programs as a means to provide the students with access to the content and to keep the students awake, enthusiastic, and interested in what they were doing.
However, not all were recalled as fondly, as Jay-P noted: “Nine-to-nine was torture, but good torture. Most of the time you need pain to grow.” Kate commiserated and stated that “Nine-to-Nine allowed us to develop the tenacity and the strength to focus on school and what needed to be done which transferred to even in college. The first nine-to-nine was grueling.”

Although the sentiments of the alumni participants were that 9-to-9s were long and draining in the thought of staying in school for 12 hours, the students felt that such an intense approach to studying undoubtedly served as an effective means of making use of their time during the weekends. Moreover, it ensured they remained productive to prepare themselves adequately.

WAHS organized SAT prep sessions every year for both juniors and seniors who desired to master the SAT on the first try or better their previous scores. The school considered the life-changing impact SAT scores had on a student’s choice and future, and made sure to offer another opportunity to earn an excellent SAT score. Alumni participants knew that a good SAT score (1200+ out of 1600) often yielded scholarship opportunities and increased their chances of being accepted and attending the school or university of their choice. As a result, students would fervently come on Saturdays and sometimes to the afterschool sessions that would better assist them in their quest to achieve higher scores on the fate-determining test. As another aspect of preparing the students to have access and opportunity to gaining admittance to the finest universities, students were afforded the opportunity to go on college tours beginning as early as freshman year. Shely found that:

Woodbine did a lot for us, for our future. We had the opportunity to enroll in college classes, college courses. If you were interested in robotics, you had the opportunity to do that. They had law programs if you were interested in that. At my best friend’s school,
they only were given opportunities like a museum. You know, regular class trips. They didn’t get the opportunity to actually do bigger and better things that Woodbine gave us the opportunity to do.

During junior and senior year, students were offered internships with various partnerships such as the NYC School Construction Authority, Brooklyn District Attorney’s Office, and the U.S. Attorney’s Office. In some cases, the internships were paid; when they did not offer financial compensation, the internships were an opportunity for students to network with professionals and learn and develop the skills necessary to making them more marketable and an asset to the workforce. The alumni participants recounted that the internships expanded their knowledge in a practical way; they had learned that by participating in these experiences, they could explore various fields that provided insight into careers they had not thought about. Kate stated:

The opportunity to conduct research through SUNY Downstate Medical Center in conjunction with CUNY Medgar Evers College. Six weeks of intense research culminating in a final project on stem cells. We would with the librarian from SUNY Downstate with regard to how to present our research. Culminating in a research presentation at Queens College which got me interested in research.

In cases where students were not employed by Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), they were hired to work as peer-mentors for incoming freshmen; thus, for many, WAHS was their first place of employment.

While WAHS’s focus was to provide students with a rigorous academic college-prep program, there were a few sports teams such as volleyball and basketball for the girls, junior varsity and varsity basketball for the boys, and co-ed track and field. Any team sport required that students maintain an 80 average or better. Other extracurricular activities included the STEP
Team, Debate Team, Mandarin Character Club, Music Ensemble, Ceramics, Chess, and Robotics, to name a few. These clubs provided students with an outlet from the rigor of academics; nevertheless, even within the clubs was an expectation of excellence, as students competed throughout the city. In summarizing his experience, Alvin jokingly said, “The expectations were high academically, but even the extracurricular activities had standards.” The expectations for WAHS students were—and remain—that students simply were and did their best in all of their life pursuits. Moreover, their success is not defined by any one measure, but by an ability to set goals and live up to the expectations of their own goals as a result of what they gained from WAHS.

**High Expectations Through a Rigorous and Structured Environment**

For many students, entering high school can be daunting. Their previous academic experience may or may not have prepared them adequately for the challenges of high school. The educators’ expectations often appear overwhelming and at times unrealistic. Despite the unmatched preparation and expectations, educators who share the belief that all students can learn and have high expectations for their students, regardless of racial or cultural make-up, are able to assist students and their parents in understanding their strengths and limitations. Harry recalled that:

The teachers were much harder on me, their expectations were relentless but not impossible. In college I have run into professors who wouldn’t pay you any attention just because of your skin color or your gender. They automatically think that you’re incompetent or incapable. However, I came from a place that had high expectations for me and pride of self and self-knowledge was ingrained in me to believe that, “Hey, I can do this,” giving little value and attention to such people when they are encountered.
Ryan also found that “The teachers assessed who Ryan was at that time as a high school student at WAHS, and set that expectation based on what they knew of me and about me. The expectation was not something that was unrealistic, or intangible. They wanted for me to see more.” This understanding is paramount in building capacity, trust, and respect between the educator and the student in order to meet set expectations. Alumni participant Shely pointed out that while “all students were perceived to have the ability to meet their intellectual capacity and the standards and expectations of the school,…their social emotional needs were not always met.” Thus, it is equally important for educators to assess students’ strengths and limitations and identify gaps in their knowledge. As they develop an understanding of the social and emotional needs of their students, they can facilitate academic and social growth. Although some students understood the expectations, they were not motivated by their own desires but rather by external factors such as pressure from parents or peers. Shely also noted:

   I didn’t go on the college tours and stuff like that, that we were offered. But now at this age I look back and I say maybe I would have wanted to go to college, actually. I understood the goals and expectations that were set for me but, when I went to college I didn’t really want to go. I just went to suffice my parents.

Therefore, educators need to incorporate different strategies such as culturally responsive and relevant practices if their intent is to improve on their skill set and knowledge to encourage students to pursue higher education as well as their dreams and aspirations.

   When teachers convey to their students “I have high expectations of you,” students immediately become aware that they have to perform at a certain standard. For students who attended WAHS, “the teachers expected nothing but the best and those expectations were for everybody and we were reminded of the expectations daily,” as Harry recalled. To this degree,
the entire school community consistently and clearly conveyed the expectations and standards, and set a lower boundary, which needed to be met at the very least with regard to academic performance. As a result, students who were challenged academically by their teachers to perform at a high level were able to generally excel and/or exceed expectations. Harry commented that “the students who meet the expectations, which was the majority, made Woodbine very competitive and pushed others to excel. Woodbine created a level playing field to which the students could compete in any field that they chose to pursue.” If they did not meet the set expectations, they were still above average as a result of how high the lower boundary was set. Alumni students were aware that the expression “failure is not an option” was not just words, but rather an affirmation that was real and tangible: success was something all students could work towards. At all times, the alumni students were required to be prepared and give their all to their academics and, ultimately, whatever they pursued. Rick found that “mediocrity was not accepted, the expectation was to do your best!” Kate also noted this concept, stating that “they expected that you were prepared when you came to class, to complete homework, to ask questions and participate. To do your best at all times!” This allowed educators to raise the levels of expectation even higher, while also applying additional rigor to the curriculum. Anita recalled how high the expectations were when her class was slated to take four Regents examinations in the ninth grade. Added rigor and increased expectations of students required further assistance along the continuum to meet those expectations and goals that would facilitate academic achievement. Yet, as students required further assistance, educators made the concerted effort to offer more of their time to make the content manageable. Educators recognized that if students were to acquire the necessary skills and make meaning of the information, they had to give students time and patience to develop the skills and maturity they needed to process content and
meet expectations. Ryan found that “the teachers were knowledgeable, empathetic and diligent. When I was lacking motivation, they walked with me, giving me the time to get to the level I needed to be, to meet the expectation.” Educational goals could then be met and sometimes even exceed teacher and student expectations.

Rigor of curriculum assesses the quality of guidelines, which in turn has a powerful impact on academic achievement. In education, rigor of curriculum sets the tone for the pace of learning and educational efforts achieved by the students. As Kate commented:

We were pushed to take more than the basic five required Regents exam to get the New York State high school diploma. While most Woodbine Academy students could graduate early, it was very rare. Students were made to take higher classes such as APs and precollege classes, to get you ready for the next step. It was rigorous because even though we were at the high school level, it’s almost like you’re made to grow up early and mature early for what’s ahead. That is part of what made it rigorous and challenging.

The workload and the maturity did not always match. While the educators’ role in determining the rigor of curriculum is vital, it can be influenced by the students; that is, the agenda can change based on students’ needs and how it impacts growth and knowledge gained. Educators become tasked to create opportunities to build students’ knowledge when students are placed at the center of teaching and learning process. Alumni participants were clear on this; as Kate recalled, “Expectations were set for everybody. It was up to the student to take that expectation and fulfill it or not.” Ryan also communicated, “The teachers’ expectations pushed me to study more. They believed in me, and because they believed in me, in my work ethic, it pushed me to study more because I know that was the expectation.” Therefore, high expectations have to be met with standards that are functionally appropriate for
students to be held accountable as they navigate multiple aspects of who they are to meet the expectations initially set forth for them.

Academic achievement encompasses and is dependent on several factors. These factors incorporate instructional methods of teaching and learning, environment or educational setting, language competency, and cultural literacy. In education, academic achievement is often measured by grades, college readiness, SAT and ACT scores, and the prestige and perceived rigor of the college or university into which one is accepted. Similarly, for professionals, achievement is assessed by socioeconomic status, such as professional titles, income, travel, home value, and assets. Harry noted, “I was pushed to do more with guidance. Teachers were role models and mentors. They depicted what Black excellence meant in their expectations for us, that if you strive and apply yourself, an education could change your life.” However, there is more to success and academic achievement than professional roles and assets. High expectations for self are not solely dependent on one’s academic achievement, but can also be defined by acts of giving, love, respect, and compassion. These acts are further sustained and maintained through the quality of educational instruction and the educators’ passion and conviction to teaching. That said, high expectations are a catalyst for academic achievement, rigor of curriculum, sustainable goals, and creating dialogue between educators and students.

Communication plays an integral role in meeting and sustaining high expectations for academic achievement. When students and educators engage in dialogue, the educational experience is transformed as aptitude and pace of learning are considered; this shows value and individualizes the learning experience. For Rick, communication among the “higher-ups” played a critical role in sustaining and improving what WAHS offered its students. As he stated, “The teachers showed love, care and had fun but they also conveyed the expectations for more and for
the best results of our academic performance as they built the relationship necessary for students
to succeed.” Ultimately, these highly skilled teaching professionals were accountable to their
students, encouraging intellectual inquiry, knowledge building, and acquiring life skills and
tools, while providing opportunity to acquire knowledge through multiple perspectives.
However, students also understood their role in the learning process—that was an expectation of
reciprocity, as Shely noted:

They taught us the work, but if we didn’t use those resources that they gave us or the help
they gave us it was up to us to get the grade, basically. It was up to us to show ourselves
okay, I got it. What I’m saying is if you didn’t put the effort out there, they weren’t
giving it back to you.

The role of the educator becomes one of communicator and educational coordinator who
addresses ‘real issues’ and coming up with ‘real’ solutions, while incorporating collaborative
efforts for positive student outcomes.

Artifacts

The artifacts presented by alumni student participants in the study reflected a wide range
of insight into what the impact of WAHS was on their success. Some participants actually did
not realize the impact of what they had experienced until they were asked during the interview,
when they were able to reflect on their experiences for the first time. Alumni participants offered
some tangible artifacts that spoke to their experiences and journey since leaving WAHS; others
offered ideas or symbols that spoke to their need, desire, and ability to give back to their
community or other people of color as a conscious and intentional choice.

The artifacts were of a personal nature for all of the alumni students of WAHS. Some had
difficulty steering away from traditional accomplishments as the benchmark of success and
academic achievement, or what otherwise was ingrained in how they perceived success. This was identified by Alvin, who initially indicated that he was most proud of his degrees from Stevens Institute of Technology and New York University. Yet what the participants shared was how they were inspired and, as a result, how this contributed to their love of learning. Alvin also indicated his travels to Uganda allowed him to live out one of his dreams and open his mind to different cultures, people, and food. Recounting how his mentor always traveled internationally whenever she had a chance, Alvin too desired to see the world. Stories that his mentor shared motivated his desire to travel. Alvin shared that his career path in education was a reflection of what he experienced at WAHS, to the point that he called his approach and strategies of teaching as the “Woodbine Way.” Alvin attributed what he does for his students as a teacher himself and the attention and care he gives to his craft is his ability to give back to my students the Woodbine spirit in my teaching, allowing them to achieve and excel as a result of what was given to me. Additionally, when my students get their acceptance letters and scholarships, I know I continue the very purpose of why Woodbine Academy continues to exist, and that is to change the lives of young people.

Love, discipline, and structure resonated with all of the alumni participants as the catalysts that allowed them to excel or as factors that influenced their trajectory toward success. Many described the relationships that were fostered with their teachers and peers, but expressed mainly that teachers pushed them to want to do better and be better. For Anita, the artifact that was most important to her was an essay she wrote in her sophomore English class that offered her a breakthrough of who she thought she was and who she would become. Anita indicated that this paper helped her to learn to love herself:
My teacher was teaching us descriptive writing. I chose to write about the first time that I was molested. After I wrote it, I just kind of got this...I had this waiting to exhale moment. Like, oh, this pressure that I had on myself. I kind of was able to just brush off because I finally wrote it down. I felt like once I wrote that, I finally became who I am today in the sense of being strong-minded and making sure that what I feel is said, regardless of what other people feel. I feel like before I wrote that paper, I never really liked myself. And I had blamed myself a lot for what happened, and I feel like I’ve learned now that when I write things down, I’m able to get over it in a way. I feel like once I did that, I just kind of broke out of a shell.

Writing allowed Anita to release guilt, shame, and blame. She felt that WAHS was “a safe place to be able to open up and be authentic” to herself and others. The impact of the love that Anita received from staff influenced her decision to become a counselor because she could foster “relationships and connections with young people, particularly teenagers.” It was through those relationships that students learned lessons that transcended the classroom and academics.

According to Rick, they were “1. Empowered to be confident, 2. Fight through obstacles, and 3. Never quit.” When Rick was asked about his artifact, he responded, “My Brain”; needless to say, the researcher was taken aback. While educators are cognizant of their work to prepare the young people they service to think critically and be problem solvers, they seldom expect to hear that what a student is most proud of is his or her brain. Nevertheless, Rick proceeded to explain:

My brain because my experience reconditioned my thoughts about life, school and passion, about what it meant giving back to community. What it means to engage with young people; relationships—respect; believing in young people and how you communicate with them. It’s easier in my position to be able to communicate with the
kids in my school because at Woodbine, I got the example. Even down to the words that I use, like “brother” and “queen” and stuff like that. It’s just family. It was shown to me while I was at Woodbine. There’s a way to talk to someone with respect, with love, and still be strict to really get a positive response, because especially at a high school age, we thought we knew it all. We were growing. We were becoming young adults, and we didn’t have to listen to anyone. It’s really how I approach each kid differently, but with love and respect. Just giving them a sense that I care about them, I respect them, and we can have fun, but at the end of the day, I want you to do better. I want you to be that king and that queen that you should be.

This, in turn, represents exactly what educators desire for education. However, if consideration is not given to the human factor that contributes to students experiencing education in this way, then we have failed to be a part of or witness to the glorious impact education can have on students. While many of the alumni participants resonated with their shared or similar experiences, Shely offered a very different artifact. She offered her son as her artifact, what she was most proud of, but more importantly, the one person who retrospectively made her appreciate what she had experienced at WAHS.

My son! Before I had him, I looked at life as...I didn’t take things serious. I really didn’t. My biggest downfall was that I did not take things seriously. I didn’t take life seriously because whenever I did wrong I always had my dad behind me. My father made me feel I was perfect. My father really made me feel like I was perfect. When I had my son, there was certain things I just didn’t know how to do. But having him, I went on to research things and figure out things on my own. Not on my own, my parents helped me, but it
was up to me to take in the help. So everything they taught me throughout my life, I’m reteaching myself. Because it stuck in my head, it’s just I never applied it.

Shely spoke about her waywardness and nonchalant attitude before she had her son and how very little she had cared about school and what was going on around her because her father made her feel protected and special. If not for the teachers, particularly the dean and the math teacher, she may not have graduated. Shely recalled, “I was forced to go, when Ms. Lavache would stand at the door and not let us out. Like, you guys are gonna go to tutoring. But if you wasn’t there, I probably would have never went [sic].” Shely knew what she was getting at WAHS was unlike what her peers were receiving at other schools, as she compared working a job and what high school required as minimally different. Shely reflected on the idea that the same attributes and skills that were required in high school were needed in the workplace. Attributes of time management and task completion in high school became the stepping stones for behaviors necessary to obtaining and keeping a job.

In retrospect, Shely recognized the value of education that she was afforded, but also realized that due to a lack of maturity and refusal to take responsibility, she did not work towards her own goals. Additionally, Shely came to understand that she was intelligent, and if she had been receptive to what was offered, she could have done more. As Shely reflected, tears welled up in her eyes as she shared her thoughts:

You guys saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself and there’s times I just gave up. I really didn’t care. I’m not a dumb child, but I made dumb decisions at that time. And I think that the mindset that I have now, my grades could have been a hundred percent better. I knew the work, I just didn’t care. But now that I’m older and I’m a mom
now, I try to instill the things that was instilled...well, they tried to instill in me, into my son.

The alumni participants understood that the relationships, care, and love that were poured into them—whether from an instructional perspective to prepare them for the next level or from a personal and authentic place—were what made the difference; in turn, they were able to not only recognize what this looked and felt like, but could also offer to others. Jay-P indicated the work that he was doing at present was his artifact because much of what he experienced at WAHS he is now able to offer to others. He has been given the authority to make a change in someone’s life in the work that he does. Jay-P explained:

My work at Central Booking affords me the opportunity to help people that have been incarcerated to be released without paying the bail. Every day I see people that are very similar to me, that come from neighborhoods similar to where I came from but did not have the privilege to have opportunities, but are smart and are intelligent.

Opportunity and compassion in how one handles the human and the human spirit made the difference in the lives of African American students who attended WAHS, as did the idea of what it means to be a community and a family. It is with this idea that we are all interdependent and are each other’s keepers, creating, formulating, fostering, and nurturing a shared experience and bond that many of the alumni students expressed. Kate’s artifact was a table base, where the arms and legs are linked together, signifying that “Together we stand, divided we fall. That was the environment at Woodbine Academy.” As many of the alumni participants indicated, WAHS was a family unit which, while not always perfect, still provided foundational support. Teacher-student relationships were strong, and while parents were very much involved, study participants
remembered the impact of teachers because they too were parents in absentia, given that a great deal of time was spent at school. Jay-P recalled:

We were all together as a family, spending a lot of time together. We were all striving for the same thing. We all wanted to graduate with a diploma, but not just graduate; you were being pushed to actually learn something, learn some morals and learn some values, and better yourself for the future.

Despite the collective experience they shared, they were still embraced and seen as individuals. They were made to feel special, recognized and seen for who they were, not because of circumstance or zip code of residence. They were acknowledged for their ability to strive through 4 years of high school; some were faced with adversity and hardship while still victorious in their accomplishments, however big or small. As a result, every year it is customary for WAHS to honor each and every senior at an annual awards ceremony for their character, academics, and athletic talent.

According to Ryan, his artifact was an award he received that night. “My artifact is the”—and he smiled as he said, “the Warrior Award: It acknowledged and recognized my overcoming the obstacles that I was faced with towards graduation and continues to motivate me to push forward my goals.” Additionally, he shared that another artifact was his resume because he credited his assistant principal for assisting in writing it when he applied to college. “I have simply updated it without changing the format. I have helped others write their resume using this format. The resume is important to me because it has allowed me to get several jobs.”

While each alumni participant experienced WAHS differently, the one factor they unanimously indicated contributed to their success was their ability to have individuals such as teachers and administrators with whom they racially and culturally identified. Alumni
participants revealed their thinking was greatly impacted by staff, to the extent that they attributed much of their success to the influence of staff. For the alumni participants, the staff represented a group of successful people of color who were tangible and accessible to students. Jay-P explained:

Having a staff that was predominantly African American showed the power of people of color, I believe Black people getting together, something that may not be considered normal unfortunately. Us African American or people of color, getting together to be successful. It’s one thing for you to get together with no real purpose or no real agenda, but it’s another thing to get together to build each other. And I think that’s really the key, that we got together to build each other because if no one else will do it, then we have to.

These types of experiences and understanding gained from attending WAHS led students to continue to strive and achieve success beyond high school. Jay-P continued:

I may have not been the best student, but it made me a lot better than what I was, and that is to adopt a spirit of excellence, to never give up no matter what’s thrown at you or obstacle that you are presented with. I came to the realization it was the environment of Woodbine Academy was what made the difference. The staff staying on top of me, their consistency in my life, that consistent love and conversation, of the reinforcement that, “You can be better!” was internalized. Now, I take that to other people with that same energy. Doesn’t matter how frustrated or angry they are, if they cursing and swearing.

I’m consistently showing them love.

The driving force behind the success of the alumni participants was the nurturing environment at WAHS, which promoted excellence for all students, but there was also emphasis on the African American students who had in the past been disenfranchised.
Summary

This chapter presented findings that emerged from the collection and analysis of data, which related to the intrinsic case study presented in its conceptual framework. The study presented a discussion of the attributes according to the themes related to (a) Power of Passionate Educators, (b) Feeling of Belonging: Empathetic and Nurturing Teachers, (c) Access to Opportunities That Supported Success, and (d) High Expectations Through a Rigorous and Structured Environment. These themes were revealed through the three phases of data collection of the alumni student participants’ interviews, academic transcripts from high school, and personal artifacts. Interviews allowed alumni participants to describe their lived experiences as students who attended WAHS and graduated between 2007 and 2016. While the high school transcript documented each alumni’s body of work as a reflection of their academic success on the high stake examinations (See Appendix G). This chapter examined and presented the data. The goal of the next chapter is to offer a summary of the results and discuss and relate the results to the literature. In addition, the next chapter presents the limitations, implications, and conclusions of the study in an effort to answer the research questions.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

In many instances, the academic success of African Americans are defined by academic achievements, which are often related to performance on international, national, and state exams, including the TIMMS, SAT, ACT, AP, and Regents (in New York State). According to Walberg (2012), “Standardized test fairly and comprehensively measure student performance” (p. 1). Policymakers often perceive such exams as tools that effectively measure students’ knowledge, skills, and understanding because of their objectiveness and efficiency to quantify student performance. It is assumed that students who are able to demonstrate knowledge and skills on standardized tests are better prepared to engage in higher education and professional goals (Walberg, 2012). While standardized exams are often used as a barometer to predict future success, there has been a recent resistance to accepting exams such as the SAT as a “measure of fairness and objectivity” (Gawthrop, 2014, p. 5). However, such testing and approach to measuring a student’s knowledge base were not designed to reflect a student’s total academic ability.

Historically, standardized exams were designed as a means to rationalize and efficiently classify student achievement in order to avoid teacher evaluations. These evaluations conducted by classroom educators were deemed subjective and biased, and therefore inaccurate in their ability to give credence to students’ abilities effectively. Subsequently, psychologists were seen as the only professionals that who create and provide objective exams. According to Gawthrop (2014), psychologists who created these exams were taking exam results, manipulating them, and referring to them as objective standards. Yet, the “standards” were reflective of the dominant culture and the perspective of White males in particular. Reeves and Halikias (2017) indicated that while “the SAT is critical in identifying student readiness for college and an important
gateway to higher education” (p. 1), the gap in SAT math scores has remained the same for the last 15 years. This should be of no surprise, considering there is evidence “that the SAT is highly predictive of [the success of] white students” (Gawthrop, 2014, p. 13) in higher education; yet the SAT fails to predict the success rate of African Americans or other ethnic groups effectively. Moreover, while young people may not adhere to the standardized exam as a prescription to their success, they are aware of its impact on their access to opportunity and, as such, “play the game” as a means to achieve upward mobility (Wiggan, 2014).

As students embark on the journey to college, success is then determined by their grade point averages, the prestige of the college they attend, and/or the acquisition of material possessions such as cars and wardrobe. For many African American students, graduating high school is often the first accomplishment towards achieving academic success. Graduating high school is viewed as a turning point that leads to attending and graduating from college. Thus, experiencing and achieving academic success in high school is often a catalyst for future endeavors that allow for upward mobility. Once students graduate from college, success is then judged by their socioeconomic status, occupation, and the zip code in which they reside.

The tenacity and perseverance of African American students to achieve academic success are often rooted in their perception and understanding of how the world views them on various levels. African American students often have to decipher who believes in their ability to be successful, and who within the school body supports their strengths and guides them to improve academically and socially. In other words, the educational experience of African American students becomes critical to their success (Hilliard, 2000). The wholesomeness of the educational experience is furthermore dependent on social and cultural factors that allow students to engage in and work towards academic success. Students begin to develop an understanding that while
test scores, college acceptance letters, and standardized test are the initial parameters that define success, these criteria have also been established by the dominant group and become an obstacle course that must be hurdled if they are to be considered successful (Hilliard, 2000; Lindsey, Nuri Robins, & Terrell, 2009). Moreover, success as a result of academic achievement is and also represents the antithesis to the rhetoric and discourse that often occur in relation to African American students. This sentiment was summarized by the alumni participant Anita who expressed herself during the interview as follows:

To be successful in my opinion means to go beyond what society expects of you. As an African American Hispanic, I am already marginalized and expected to not succeed, because that is what society seems to think is my fate. I make it my goal to go above and beyond their expectations. I want the world to see that I am better than what people from my same ethnicity are stereotyped as.

While most alumni participants subscribed to a narrow view of success, it was understood that once they achieved the academic benchmark, it was up to them to begin to define what success meant for them. To that extent, they began to construct their own definition of success: setting their own standards and working towards achieving goals; using tools they acquired from their family, school, and community; following their own inquiry to meet and/or surpass their own standards. Additionally, students also recognized that a fundamental component of success was based on their ability to provide for or contribute to their family, give back to their community, and uplift their communities as they inspired others. According to Rick, an alumni student participant, success was about “happiness, having a positive impact on the world, and being able to take care of my [their] families wants and needs.”

This intrinsic case study explored and documented the lived experiences of high school
students and the factors that impacted the quality of education that African American alumni participants of WAHS received. In Chapter 4, the researcher offered an analysis of data from eight alumni participants as a means to understand the social and cultural factors that contributed to their academic achievement and success. Additionally, data were organized using critical race theory (CRT) as the conceptual framework which guided the study. The researcher presented findings that explored the attributes of the intrinsic case study and its impact on the educational experiences of alumni participants of WAHS. In this chapter, the researcher’s goal is to discuss and evaluate the results and answer the following research questions which guided the intrinsic case study:

1. How did urban, African American high school alumni perceive and describe the quality of education they received as impactful to their success?
   a. How did alumni participants recount the educational experience and relate teaching practices to their academic achievement and success?

2. How did alumni participants describe the social and cultural factors that contributed to and influenced the quality of education they received?
   a. How did such factors influence their trajectory towards high academic achievement and/or success?

This chapter offers a summary of the results from Chapter 4, bringing forth discussions and interpretations of the results in relation to the research questions. It also discusses the relationship of the study to the literature, followed by limitations of the study and implications of the results as related to educational practice impacting the academic achievement of African American alumni participants. This chapter concludes with suggestions and recommendations for future studies and a final conclusion to the study.
Summary of the Results

This qualitative, intrinsic case study was designed as a means of understanding the educational experience of African American students who attended WAHS, an urban high school, and how their educational experiences impacted their success. Additionally, the objective of the study was to document and capture the authentic voices and lived experiences of these alumni participants.

The researcher used an intrinsic single case study approach, which was guided by several attributes that often impact the quality of education that African American students receive. Those attributes included expectations, access, opportunity, racial congruence of the teaching staff, and culturally responsive pedagogical practices. These assisted in explaining the impact and contributions of the social and cultural factors that were impressed upon the alumni participants of WAHS, and expressed by them as leading to their success as African American students. Data were collected from three different sources: semistructured interviews of the alumni participants, their official high school transcripts, and artifacts they were proud of and felt were the result of or impacted their experience at WAHS. For many of the alumni participants, the artifacts were of personal nature, and most of them could not be included in the documents due to their personal and identifying characteristics. To protect the identity of the alumni participants, revealing artifacts were excluded. Nonetheless, using multiple sources of data gave the researcher a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. According to Yin (2014), when data are extracted and synthesized from multiple resources, the researcher has an opportunity to draw from a larger scope of information. A variety of data sources allowed the researcher to identify where the data converged and thus understand the phenomena of the participants’ experiences and the social and cultural factors that impacted the success of the
African American alumni participants of WAHS.

An analysis of the attributes revealed multiple factors contributed to and impacted the academic achievements of the African American students, as a result of their experience at WAHS. The narratives of the alumni participants and analysis of the findings in Chapter 4 presented four critical aspects related to the success of the African American alumni participants of WAHS. They expressed that those four attributes were fundamentally the reasons why they succeeded. In many cases, the alumni participants described their experience as belonging to a family. To this extent, there was mutual respect and reciprocity between teachers, administrators, parents, and students, where the attributes provided the foundation on which all participants would successfully begin and end their journey at WAHS as graduates. The four critical aspects that led to the success of the alumni participant students were:

1. Passion of the teacher in relation to the subject and professionalism as a teacher;
2. Sense of belonging to a community that supported students in their endeavors and pursuits;
3. Access and opportunity that engaged students in a rigorous academic program regardless of the students’ readiness to engage in a challenging academic program; and
4. Expectations of both student and staff working towards academic excellence and success by supporting the students to grow socially and emotionally as all stakeholders, including but not limited to parents, teachers, and all members of the school community to work collaboratively to achieve this goal.

Data pertaining to the educational experiences of the alumni participants revealed the main contributing factor to the overall success of the participants was the staff’s expectations and
belief in the students’ capacity to meet the standards and expectations. Data also showed that support at all levels related to academic, social, and emotional growth, fostering the relationships necessary for the participants to thrive academically. The researcher was able to extract that, despite the different years the alumni participants graduated, their experiences continued to reflect the goals and mission of WAHS. WAHS was designed as an institution where African American students would be afforded an academically rigorous college preparatory program that facilitated the students’ intellectual growth and abilities, while grounding them with the cultural assets they bring to school. Accepting the students as they were, with their adept skills as well as struggles, allowed authentic relationships to develop with teachers, whereby teachers were able to leverage the students’ cultural assets as a means of helping them develop necessary skills to navigate the unleveled and inequitable playing field on which they much function. Additionally, the researcher also found that access and opportunity were other cornerstones that supported and allowed for student success. Subsequently, the narratives of the alumni participants revealed that teacher practices were perceived as intentional and deliberate. As a result, the valuation of the students’ cultural capital and background was an asset of the alumni participants, and led to experiences that were perceived as the contributing social and cultural factors impacting the academic achievement of the African American students who attended WAHS.

**Discussion of the Results**

**Love, Discipline, and Structure**

Success for many African American students exists within environments where they feel understood, loved, and heard; but being heard and having a voice come with expectations and responsibilities (Jackson et al., 2014; Sealey-Ruiz & Lewis, 2011). As African American students go from adolescence to young adulthood, they often believe—like all other races and
ethnicities—they know more than the adults around them. The alumni participants realized in retrospect that even when “they did not want to or did not feel like they were understood,” they eventually reached a place where they understood why things were done. As a result, they understood why the expectations and standards were established. While WAHS is a traditional public school, it is important to recognize that despite the lack of resources, financial or otherwise, WAHS was similar to the independent schools servicing African American students prior to desegregation. Subsequently, WAHS has been able to “academically prepare, culturally affirm and spiritually reinforce” (Ratteray, 1992, p. 147), the needs of African American students without religious imposition. To this extent, the staff at WAHS was relentless: their goal for all students was success. Expectations were the manifestations of the boundaries and support that were implemented and executed in order for students to aspire to and achieve success.

In many cases throughout the study, alumni participants expressed getting reprimanded for not meeting academic or behavioral expectations. They described how reluctant they were to stay after school. Alumni participants were able to reflect on the consequences of their actions as a sign of love and care that their teachers were displaying. This love and care were genuine desires of the teachers to give them the best, though at the time they were experiencing it, these signs felt overbearing and stifling. Ryan shared his experience of how the love and care were manifested by the teachers’ actions:

Teachers would highlight the students’ strengths, often reminding me of what they know [knew] that I was capable of doing. If there was a situation where I did not understand, the teachers would make time to sit with me during tutoring or their free period.

For many of the alumni participants, love, discipline, and structure was about staff
expectations. Such expectations to succeed were not limited to the individual teachers and the courses they taught; they were about a broader perspective where the educational experience and preparation received at WAHS would provide access and opportunity to achieve social mobility. While love was apparent, structure and discipline existed as a means to instill characteristics that laid the foundation for success; these characteristics included perseverance, diligence, punctuality, and resourcefulness. But most critical were the relationships between teacher and student. Harry recalled:

The staff showed love, which allowed for me to be able to connect with them. I needed a strong structure to keep focused, to remain on task, to also understand things, because their voices were powerful, their kindness, the fact that they were loving people allowed me to connect with them and want to listen to them.

Even in the face of academic and social challenges, alumni participants were willing to make multiple attempts to meet the expectations of the collective staff who believed in them. As Kate indicated, “Teachers and staff worked as a collective community to support the students. It was not an individual teacher, but the whole system supported the students.” Thus, when the school community shares the same vision, it becomes impossible for students to fail. As a result, the vision that all students can achieve, while maybe cliché, becomes a reality in an environment that facilitates working towards that goal. This fundamental vision, belief, and passion of educators at WAHS represent not only social and cultural factors that influence the quality of education received by alumni participants, but also one of the factors that most influenced the alumni participants and their desire to achieve and work towards high academic goals for academic and personal success.
Self-Discovery

Academic self-discovery is the process of acquiring and identifying insight into one’s own character and ability to persevere, remaining diligent to achieve academic success where one’s attitude, capabilities, and perceptions of oneself as a learner is realized. The process of alumni participants achieving academic success as a result of the love, discipline, and structure received over their 4 years of high school led to their own self-discovery. Understanding that their success was possible was the result of the racial congruency that existed at WAHS. Racial congruency between staff and students allowed alumni participants to relate to staff fostering their ability to work towards academic success.

The self-discovery of the alumni participants of WAHS led to not only envisioning success, but also developing their capacity to actualize such success both academically and professionally once they left WAHS. Teachers believing and trusting in their student’s academic ability can foster self-discovery. Therefore, teachers who racially identified as African American, Caribbean American, or Latinx have the ability to guide their students and lead them to the self-fulfilling prophecy that they too could be successful. While Mitchell and Stewart (2012) focused their research on African American males, similarities could be drawn with the alumni participants of WAHS, where they recognized the purpose and need for school and achieved at high rates. The alumni participants credited their success to the support and expectations set forth by teachers who were able to identify and believed in the possibility of their success. These studies supports the findings and reinforces the notion that when African American students are given support, they are able to develop their identity and self-worth, and are able to rise and meet their goals (Mitchell & Stewart, 2012).
The alumni participants’ self-discovery came as a result of the teachers’ willingness to allow students to grow in becoming their authentic selves. The educators allowed students to flourish socially in an environment where they were free to inquire and have discussions about topics that were pertinent to finding out and understanding who they were. Those discussions included topics commonly avoided: religion, sexuality, academics, and social interactions among their peers. Essential to the development of their self-discovery were the relationships formed with various members of the school staff. This included but was not limited to teachers, front office personnel, administrators, guidance counselors, the dean, safety officers, custodial staff, and kitchen personnel. Self-discovery came about as the result of the various encounters alumni participants experienced with staff that left a lasting impression on them. During her interview, Anita recalled and expressed:

Relationships were authentic and genuine. I could go back to Bedford and still feel the same love. They understood me when I was there in terms of they understood who I was, they understood how I learned. I made them laugh, they made me laugh, and those types of things you keep with you.

Everyone in the school was involved in the students’ journey towards self-discovery. WAHS embodies the African (Igbo and Yoruba) proverb that “It takes the village to raise a child.” In this case, relationships between key stakeholders, coupled with the racial congruency of the majority of staff, helped to guide participants towards self-discovery.

Additionally, employing culturally relevant pedagogical practices permitted participants to maintain their identity while adding to their cultural assets. Moreover, the alumni participants’ self-discovery also allowed them to identify the catalyst to persevere during adversity and challenges. Self-discovery afforded the alumni participants the resilience necessary to overcome
various challenges based on the relationships formed and support they received from staff while attending WAHS. As did many of the alumni participants, Jay-P remembered and conveyed the following thoughts: “The teachers were trying to build a certain level of resilience within us; where we didn’t have the mindset to give up just because something was difficult.” The success of students at WAHS, academically or otherwise, appeared inevitable due to the strong academic foundation and fundamental vision and belief of the staff. The alumni participants indicated how “the staff believed African American students could learn at the highest level,” given the support to meet the academic expectations. Subsequently, no one was exempt from working hard and developing a practical work ethic that would produce positive results. Vision, belief, and expectations, along with the action of teachers who subscribed to culturally relevant pedagogical practices not only in curriculum design, lesson planning, and delivery, but also in recognizing students as a whole, were necessary for the success of African American students (Emdin, 2016; Hilliard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Teaching is a complex cultural activity that is determined by belief and habits (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Therefore, if teaching approaches must be changed, so too must the person framing the process of teaching and learning in the classroom—that is, the teacher. According to Stigler and Hiebert (1999), if the goal is to increase student learning and performance, then at the center of this improvement is the quality of instruction that teachers must provide despite all other factors that may hinder student performance. Since the act of teaching is dependent on teachers, it is not enough to focus on policy, compliance, and standards, but rather on understanding that teaching and learning are cultural activities (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999); teachers then have to become culturally competent to meet the needs of the students they service (Emdin, 2016; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lindsey et al., 2009; Singleton, 2015).
Moreover, if the goal of education is to achieve equity and excellence for all students, particularly African American or underserved and marginalized populations, teachers must have the courage to apply passion (Singleton, 2015), coupled with the will and desire to improve and grow in the craft of teaching that will impact their students’ academic achievement. To this extent, the educational disparity that exists between the academic achievement of African American students and their White counterparts can be overcome by addressing what this researcher refers to as the teacher gap.

**Teacher Gap**

Culturally relevant pedagogical practices led the African American alumni participants toward self-discovery as well as an understanding of their self-identity as scholars. With this understanding, alumni participants were able to achieve academic success. This success began as a result of establishing high expectations and the belief that students could succeed when rigor was not compromised. Teachers were able to acknowledge and engage with students from a growth mindset, where they understood and adopted this belief; as a result, they acted in tandem and conveyed expectations to students. To this extent, students then began to believe in their ability to succeed when the “realness” of the teacher was apparent; in other words, the teacher was authentic and genuine. This resulted in the positive self-fulfilling prophecy of believing success was attainable, as Jay-P explained:

> The teachers nurtured us in believing in ourselves; challenged me to believe in myself, that I could do better than my environment as an African American male; as a result, based on what I learned, I have applied it to try to reach those who are just like me, to try to talk to them and let them know that it’s never too late to learn.
In contrast to the common discourse of an achievement gap, which is an imposed disparity to limit African Americans from being able to compete, Lisa Delpit (2012) stated:

There is no “achievement gap” at birth…the achievement gap should not be considered the gap between black children’s performance and white children’s performance…but rather between black children’s performance and these same children’s exponentially greater potential. When we educators look out at a classroom of black faces, we must understand that we are looking at children at least as brilliant as those from any well-to-do white community. If we do not recognize the brilliance before us, we cannot help but carry on the stereotypic societal views that these children are somehow damaged goods and that they cannot be expected to succeed. (p. 5)

This study demonstrated there were no achievement gap for the African American alumni participants who attended WAHS, as indicated by their transcripts and the body of work they accomplished. Additionally, while this study focused on eight alumni participants of WAHS from 2007 to 2016, it is fair to say no educational institutions exist that are without challenges in educating the students they service. However, if the researcher were to consider a larger group of participants, evidence would show that the lack of success of any student who attended WAHS, though few, was not the result of an achievement gap. Further investigation of graduation rates of African American students at WAHS revealed evidence of success from 2007 to 2016, as indicated in Table 6, with all final graduation adjustments made for the cohort year.
Table 6

Number of African American Students Graduating Between 2007 and 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Graduation %</th>
<th># of Graduating Seniors</th>
<th># of African-American Seniors</th>
<th>Graduation % of African-American Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the small number of participants in this study, the trend in the graduation rates suggests that the success of African American students at WAHS was (and has remained) consistent and is not an aberration. Therefore, the lack of academic success or achievement that few students experienced can be attributed to external factors outside of the school, which affected the academic performance in school. These factors varied for each student who did not demonstrate academic success at WAHS, but were still able to achieve success in different academic settings. As a result of the success of the alumni participants, WAHS was able to actualize its mission and vision as an academic institution, whereby “Academic Empowerment is the Birthright of Every Child!” Additionally, the myths that caused academic deficiencies, which included but were not limited to ability, race, and poverty (Hilliard, 2000), was in large part dismantled.

This study demonstrated that the success of African American students is dependent on teachers and administrators who employ social and cultural factors that nurture students socially.
and culturally towards academic success. Additionally, exposure and access to opportunities also serve as the building blocks to students envisioning and then achieving goals of academic success. Lack of academic success for African American students is a result of the teacher gap, which is rooted in ineffective teacher training and the teacher’s will, desire, and level of consciousness to question the status quo or the perspectives of the dominant culture. In a case where teachers are part of the dominant group and do not reflect the racial congruency of students they service, effective teaching of African American students begins with developing cultural competence and “the awareness of the dynamics of entitlement” of being White (Lindsey et al., 2009). It is this entitlement that requires teachers to be trained not only to develop awareness and cultural competence, but also to employ culturally relevant pedagogical practices that would impact the teaching and learning that occurs in the classrooms, and thus improve the academic success rate of African American students. Educators, whether White or otherwise, will “continue to transmit the values and cultural norms of the dominant” group to African American children, which in turn will continue to perpetuate the endless education debt (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2007, 2009) and opportunity gap (Milner, 2012) that disenfranchises African American students.

The teacher gap, therefore, includes the lack of racial congruency of staff who educate African American students, and the need for teachers who educate African American students or students of diverse backgrounds to be trained in culturally relevant and responsive educational practices. In an interview with Asa Hilliard—a Pan-Africanist educator and psychologist who focuses on culture, education, and society at the intersection of ancient African history (Edeh, 2015, as cited in Checkley & Kelly, 1999), Hilliard expressed “the methods that we teach tend to be formalistic, ritualistic, and routine—but not necessarily valid” (p. 58). This to some degree
still holds true today. Therefore, if teachers are to stay current in their craft, they need to be given “opportunities to learn about current ideas and research in education” (Checkley & Kelly, 1999, p. 58). While culturally relevant/responsive education (CRE) is not a new practice or concept, a large number of educators may be unaware of CRE and its benefit as a pedagogical framework. CRE allows the leveraging of who and what students bring into the classroom, as a means of further enhancing the students’ knowledge with additional tools to question the status quo.

CRE not only requires teachers to have knowledge of their students’ culture in order to leverage the learning that occurs; they must also have an understanding of themselves. In other words, teachers must be reflective of who they are in relation to their students and be able to engage students from where they are, in order to guide them towards academic success. At WAHS, teachers understood that if they were to support alumni students towards academic success, the students had to be given a school experience that was uncommon (Hilliard, 2000; Irvine & Irvine, 2007), where the expectations, support, socialization, and structures responded to the challenges inherent in educating African American students. Teachers at WAHS effectively used CRE to dispel, deconstruct, and interrupt the deficit thinking of the academic achievement of African American students and their ability to succeed. Additionally, CRE further allowed teachers to access their innate brilliance and encourage students to accept their greatness, which empowered the alumni participants towards academic success, both in high school and in their pursuit for higher education, as represented in Table 7.

The success of each alumni student was not limited to traditional benchmarks such as graduating college. Yet, as a result of conditioning, many of them continued to adopt the perspective that college was the credential they needed to be considered successful. As evidence of their success, 75% of the alumni participants in this study graduated from their undergraduate
institutions. Of the eight alumni participants, two did not complete their undergraduate studies, but spoke of the possibility of returning to school to finish. Nevertheless, despite their collective college graduation rate, they all developed a level of consciousness to give back to their community through their career choices.

Table 7

Achievement and Success of Alumni Student Participants After WAHS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alvin</th>
<th>Anita</th>
<th>Rick</th>
<th>Shely</th>
<th>Jay-P</th>
<th>Kate</th>
<th>Ryan</th>
<th>Harry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stevens Institute of Technology &amp; New York University</td>
<td>Hunter College &amp; Brooklyn College</td>
<td>Medgar Evers College</td>
<td>Jay College of New York</td>
<td>City College</td>
<td>Hunter College &amp; Fordham University</td>
<td>New York Institute of Technology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A teacher’s gap in knowledge and understanding of self and willingness to understand others results in the inability to use CRE effectively as a means of interrupting and challenging the assumptions that are propagated as truth by the dominant culture (Lindsey et al., 2009). Essentially, for many educators, their lack of knowledge of history and its interconnectedness are the result of the compartmentalization of the disciplines. Teacher education programs often leave educators unable to infuse other disciplines into their own knowledge base in order to provide a more holistic understanding of content relevant to the cultural perspectives and insights that students bring to the classroom. What is amplified in the study is that when racial congruency exists, coupled with CRE, African American students are able to experience school from instructional practices that are culturally responsive to the needs of the students and whose intent and impact empower the students. Moreover, teachers of color intentionally go into the profession to break the cycle of racism because of their own personal experiences (Kohli, 2009) and, as a result, have an impact on the academic outcomes of their students. To this extent, the
achievement gap is no longer the inability of the African American student to achieve at a high rate; instead, the gap exists when teachers are unwilling to seek and gain additional knowledge that fosters connections to the content as it relates to the student (Hilliard, 2000; Kohli, 2012; Lindsey et al., 2009). Students are therefore unable to acquire or access what could essentially empower them because teachers do not have the information or the fortitude to facilitate access. Alumni participants were able to thrive at WAHS as a result of the teachers’ understanding and self-reflection in relationship to history, their command of the content of their discipline taught, and the lens and responsibility they held to the students. Harry illustrated his experience:

For example, in the Physics class, the knowledge that I received in a Physics class wasn’t limited to the curriculum. I learned about calculus. I understood more about world history. I learned about African history in that class as well. My African teacher exposed more knowledge of the world than my father could based on the experiences that my father didn’t exactly have.

This relationship between content, expectations, and history rendered the gap between the teachers and the students non-existent in order to achieve student success. Additionally, lack of racial congruency between the teachers and the students often led to or increased the level of biased behaviors and microaggressions that African American students experienced, resulting in the inability or challenge to teach African American students to achieve academically (Campbell-Jones & Campbell-Jones, 2002; Casteel, 1998; Vilson, 2015).

For the alumni participants of WAHS, the staff’s belief in their success, coupled with access, opportunity, and consideration of students as a whole, facilitated learning from and connected to what alumni participants were endowed with. As a result, the African American alumni participants in this study demonstrated an ability to achieve academic success and
became intellectually invincible. WAHS students were able to compete with and surpass their White counterparts academically. Jay-P expressed, “Teachers motivated us. They instilled in us that it was our right to have a quality education, to have what others [White students] have access to.” Similarly, Kate shared:

For me personally, and a big part of being at WAHS was being an athlete, being a student athlete. As a member of the girls’ varsity basketball and volleyball team, I got a lot of advice, support and help from my coaches, assistant coaches, alumni, players, and from my fellow team members, it all kind of gel[s] together into education. Everyone who I interacted with had a positive impact on my education. For example, my basketball and volleyball coaches always made sure that I was at class, I was in uniform, or I was on top of my tests, like my ACTs. They always made sure school came first before I was on the court.

Nurturing Black Excellence: Its Relevance in Current Culture

Understanding today’s concept of Black Excellence is understanding contemporary youth culture. The idea behind Black Excellence came about as the result of two young African American graduates of Hampton University, Chris Conyers and NorSchon Sheridan, who were promoting parties for Hampton University and Norfolk University students and alumni. At the time, the two Hampton graduates used the hashtag #BlackExcellence as a means of creating and promoting events in which “like-minded people could come together”; in other words, African American college students who were doing positive things could socialize (Hashtag History, 2016). Similarly, they saw #BlackExcellence representing how they approached work and life, and a desire to be the best in both life and business endeavors. According to Conyers, Black Excellence means “You don’t have to be rich, you don’t have to be famous, you just have to be
better than you were last year and then you have to reach back and help the next person” (Hashtag History, 2016, p. 1). WAHS ultimately exemplified Black Excellence, as defined by Conyers, by recognizing and living up to its mission of providing students a comprehensive, rigorous academic program that prepared them for college and/or career pathways. Moreover, as captured by the narratives of the alumni participants in this study, students were encouraged to strive for the best. Jay-P described his experience:

A spirit of excellence was preached in everything we did. It’s one thing to be a teacher, but it’s another thing to know that when you teach that you’re going to impact someone’s life forever. Woodbine Academy created a legacy.

Educator or administrator turnover at WAHS has remained minimal since the school opened. As a result, faculty and administration have remained consistent in their ability to stay close to the original vision of the school. The staff has bought into the fundamental goal and are committed to guiding adolescents to achieve high standards of scholastic excellence. This endeavor is met by providing effective instruction within an environment that promotes the development of citizens with normative values. WAHS also strives to enhance each student’s performance to be college- and career-ready, while providing them with support towards their social-emotional growth as they face adversity and challenges in life and become positive role models within their communities.

Much like Conyers’s expression of #BlackExcellence, the release of the movie Black Panther (February, 2018) was significant to people of color around the world, especially people of African descent. The greatness of the movie was not because it was about a superhero who had African roots. Instead, “It’s a movie about what it means to be black in both America and Africa—and, more broadly, in the world” (Smith, 2018, p. 2). Black Panther offered the
dimensions of people of African descent and the possibilities that could be achieved. Similarly, WAHS teachers exposes and prepares young African American students for a world of opportunities. According to participant Jay-P, “The significance of the movie depicted an idea, a description of where we Africans as a whole, whether Afro Caribbean, African American, Afro Latino, where would we be as a nation. Where would we be if we weren’t stripped of our resources?” While Jay-P spoke of the joy he felt when he watched the movie, during his interview he compared the movie Black Panther to Woodbine Academy:

Wow! This was a great movie because it inspired people to understand that if we united, if we did something, we could be in a certain place. But, Black Panther was a fictitious movie based on a real concept. On the other hand, Woodbine Academy is not fictitious. I understand where we are when we come together, and the movie was great, but Woodbine Academy was even greater because we epitomized the ideologies of Black Panthers in the movie and the movement of the 1960s. We now represent the reality of what is and could possibly be when we unite. Woodbine Academy is a small portion of that reality being possible; I believe that it has to start somewhere, and I’m excited that I was a part of Woodbine Academy and I hope that I do something that continues to live up to the legacy of Woodbine Academy.

The significance of the movie Black Panther was not just about the superhero; it was about people of African descent and of the African diaspora seeing images of themselves and the endless possibilities of success. This success is not the result of one’s own doing, but is dependent on one’s connection and relationship with others, as well as on an understanding of one’s position as related to race and self-identity. Black Panther offered characters that were a representation of the full scope of people from Africa and the African diaspora—who they were
and who they could be to the extent that others (non-Blacks) could have a different perspective. The movie contradicted stereotypes and deficit ideologies that often preclude African Americans from “seeing” themselves, much like schools that fail to offer different perspectives other than the Eurocentric views of the dominant culture.

According to Smith (2018), Black Panther envisioned and depicted a world in which “black people have [had] wealth, technology and military might to level the playing field” (p. 12). Thus, WAHS, analogous to Black Panther the movie, challenges the institutional racism and deficit perceptions that often exist in relation to the academic capabilities of African American students as being underachievers. WAHS represents the unmitigated and endless possibilities for young African American students to achieve academic success, while leveling the playing field to facilitate college and career readiness to compete with their White counterparts. Critical to the experience of the alumni participants in the study was not only what they received, but also what they understood of their responsibility to return to and serve their communities. To that extent, many of the alumni participants in the study have taken on various career paths that led them to serving others (see Table 8).

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career Choices of Alumni Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alvin: Educator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

This study was designed with the purpose of capturing the experiences of African American students who attended an urban public high school, Woodbine Academy High School (WAHS). This study attempted to examine the impact of the quality of education these alumni students received and to document the narratives of the alumni participants, which illustrated the social and cultural factors that contributed to their academic achievement and success. In this section, the researcher offers an understanding and explicit connection between the research results and the research literature.

The overarching results of the study revealed that the racial congruency of the teaching staff did have an impact on the outcomes of student performance (Vilson, 2015). Racial congruency has a historical context whereby prior to the 1954 ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, when community schools reflected the community, students and teachers were African American, and students thrived within those environments (Morris, 1999). Similar to the schools that existed prior to the 1954 ruling, WAHS became the place where alumni participants felt they belonged and were a part of a community where their ancestral history was celebrated, their confidence and self-pride were nurtured, and they were accepted. Alumni participants of WAHS credited success to their ability to identify with staff members and administrators who reflected who they were as African, African American, Afro Caribbean, or Latinx. Thus, racism became one less obstacle students had to contend with; instead, they were nurtured to achieve academically. Rather than divorcing themselves from their culture and adopting the views of the dominant culture (Emdin, 2016), alumni participants were taught to navigate within the power structure of the dominant culture (Souto-Manning, Lugo Llerena, Martell, Salas Maguire, & Arce-Boardman, 2018).
Alumni participants felt that as a result of racial and cultural congruency, teachers took a vested interest and were supportive of students, not only in their classes but in completing high school and going on to college (Knight & Marciano, 2013; Kohli, 2012; Milner, 2012; Mungo, 2013). One can conjecture, in contrast to Adam (2017), that alumni participants in this study achieved academically while the implicit biases existed, though they were not indicated. Alumni participants experienced limited implicit biases or racial biases. Throughout the interviews, the alumni participants repeatedly spoke about teachers assuring, demonstrating, and believing in their ability to attain academic success as a result of their commitment to and the expectations they conveyed for achievement. Additionally, because of the overwhelmingly large African American population of students, teachers, administrators, and staff, WAHS was a place that alumni participants described and referred to people as family. To this extent, alumni participants felt they belonged to a community, and their self-esteem was strengthened by the very environment they were in, without the need to seek validation or approval from their White counterparts. Regardless of race, age, and socioeconomic status, all students need to feel they are supported by and belong to the school community (Allen & Bowles, 2012), especially when they spend the majority of their day outside of the family. Stakeholders at WAHS cultivated an environment in which, regardless of the environment alumni participants came from, their spirit was uplifted and opportunities to enhance their intellectual capacity were made possible. Subsequently, in the involuntary segregated space of WAHS, success and academic achievement are still overwhelmingly prevalent, without compromising the academic expectations of students and the rigor of instruction offered by the staff.

This study was anchored within the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory (CRT) and culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy (CRE), in which the researcher identified the social
and cultural factors that led to the academic achievement of the African American students of WAHS. Within this study, the researcher recognized and documented the overwhelming evidence, as presented by the alumni participants, of the social and cultural factors that impacted the quality of education they received at WAHS. As a result of this research, what has become apparent is that cultural and racial congruency allows the student-teacher relationship to flourish (Irvine & Irvine, 2007; Mungo, 2013; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Strong-Leek, 2008). To this extent, culture and racial congruency allowed teachers to hold students to a high academic standard and rigor, thereby impacting the academic success of the African American alumni participants. In contrast to the assumption that when there is evidence of rigor, there is an increase in failure rate (Souto-Manning et al., 2018) for marginalized students, the alumni participants of WAHS demonstrated that the support provided to the students was essential to their achievement (Butler, 2003; Casteel, 1998; Chambers, 2009; DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2011; Nebbitt et al., 2009; Vilson, 2015)—the support that was influenced by the willingness and capacity of teachers.

Moreover, the racial congruency the alumni participants indicated supported the current research, as it presents the synergy between students and teachers that effectively communicated high expectations leading to high academic achievement for African American students. However, simply communicating high expectations was not enough; CRE allowed for effective instruction where alumni participants were able to essentially be their authentic selves. Alumni participants were acknowledged by their educators and were able to bring their culture as an asset into the classrooms. Their perspectives were validated and their ability to think independently was promoted as they engaged in developing and coming to their own realization and understanding of the world around them. Based on the narratives of the alumni participants, supportive relationships between teachers and students resulted in the academic achievement
they attained. Furthermore, they attributed their success to the moral obligation (Nicol et al., 2010) teachers felt towards them as students; to a large extent, teachers were responsible for the success of students so they went above and beyond what was required of them. In their accounts of their experiences, alumni participants recognized the commitment of their teachers to provide a quality education. In this capacity, CRT was emphasized in the capacity of African American teachers taking responsibility for the academic, social, and emotional well-being of the African American students they taught. Hence, the main focus of the instructional practices of teachers was to keep students at the center and purpose of their instruction regarding what and how they taught. In doing so, teachers understood and employed culturally relevant practices as an act of love, or what Jackson et al. (2014) and Sealey-Ruiz and Lewis (2011) referred to as the pedagogy of love. Teachers’ commitment to alumni participants, coupled with the use of culturally relevant practices, allowed for the alumni participants not only to demonstrate their intellectual abilities as determined by the standards of the dominant culture, but also to eventually come to understand the barriers of the power structures of the dominant culture that exist. Thus, the students challenged the barriers’ very existence by virtue of their own academic achievement and success, following the same purpose that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) was founded.

Stakeholders are necessary for creating an environment where students feel safe and connected—a community where the quality of “community resources includes people, programs, policies, facilities, finances, and other less tangible norms, beliefs, and attitudes that can be targeted to help students succeed” (Epstein, 2011, p. 611). Epstein (2011) advises, “Schools must provide all students with talented teachers; challenging curriculum; effective instruction; up-to-date technology; equal opportunities to learn; responsive assessments; enriching educational
resources and activities; and excellent school, family, and community partnerships” (p. 612). Integration did not accomplish its goal as a result of both de jure segregation (Erickson, 2011; Hanushek, 2010; Rothstein, 2015) and de facto segregation (Erickson, 2011; Glass, 2015; Rothstein, 2015), which refers to segregation as a result of government policies and human will, respectively. Therefore, it would be appropriate to consider a viable approach to the education of African American students: creating schools that reflect the pedagogical practices to place African American students and their cultural heritage at the center of instruction, where racial congruency exists (Foster, 1998; Hilliard, 2000). According to Acosta, Foster, and Houchen (2018), classrooms where students and teachers share the same race result in the students’ sense of belonging in the classroom, a sense of “feeling cared for,” an increase in “personal effort,” and better communication that contributes to increased “motivation and academic engagement” (p. 344). Instead, school officials continue to subject African American students and students of color to spaces that compromise who they are, whereby their ability to challenge and speak up is often silenced and marginalized; thus, they remain voiceless. Minority students, whether by race, ethnicity, or sheer number, remain unheard, and their success becomes compromised as a result of their inability to adjust to oppressive environments.

**Segregated Education and the Strengths of HBCUs**

Stakeholders may want to consider something radical to change the paradigm in which education is viewed, whereby the current obscure state of education is perceived as a utopia. With the highly segregated schools that currently exist both nationally and particularly in New York City, efforts to avoid or stop integration should be explored. Educational policymakers should recognize that the intended goals for the initial cause of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) were about equal distribution of resources, facilities, capital funding, access, and
opportunities. Instead, what resulted was the busing of African American students out of their community schools that were composed of African American students, similar to the HBCUs. African American students attended schools that serviced White students with White teachers, which often rendered African American students invisible (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). Despite these adverse conditions, African American students succeeded in dispelling the propaganda that African Americans were intellectually inferior (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). Here, it should be recognized that the success of African American students in K–12 prior to integration was the result of trained educators who attended and graduated from HBCUs (Acosta et al., 2018).

HBCUs were created because African American students were excluded from predominantly White institutions, resulting in the Black Excellence movement of the 1800s with the establishment of Cheyney University in 1837, Lincoln University in 1854, Wilberforce University in 1856, Fisk University 1866, Howard University in 1867, Morehouse College in 1867, and Hampton University in 1868, to name a few (Woodyard & Renteria, 2008). From these institutions, Black intellectuals rose and resisted the impetuous nature of White supremacy, where social and political movements began. From these institutions, leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Ralph David Abernathy, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Katherine Johnson, Kwame Nkrumah, Kwame Ture, Spike Lee, Marian Wright Edelman, Ralph Ellison, and Nikki Giovanni were stimulated, nurtured, and fortified. Along with the list of some of the notable and influential people mentioned were the unsung heroes who became teachers and administrators with a great deal of influence on African American students (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). HBCUs produced a main source of African American educators. Teachers were trained effectively to have strong content and pedagogical knowledge, and demonstrated the “sheer will and wherewithal” with which they were able to “release the genius
in every child” (Lemons-Smith, 2008, p. 909). This was the purpose of HBCUs: Freedom schools and Afrocentric schools.

Education that was acquired from an HBCU allowed many African American scholars to withstand the oppression they faced and resisted as a result of the cultural knowledge of self they obtained. In turn, they were able to go back to their communities to serve as well-trained and highly qualified educators prior to integration. Their knowledge of self, cultural identity, and knowledge of history and the times in which they lived allowed them to form connections with their students (Hudson & Holmes, 1994), which is what CRE offers African American students today. The pedagogical practices of African American teachers at all levels influence the improved success of African American students by instilling self-confidence, pride, equity, and cultural continuity in relation to the context of African American community and culture (Hudson & Holmes, 1994; King, 1993; Lemons-Smith, 2008).

Teaching and using the framework of culturally relevant and responsive education honor students’ identities (Nieto, 2010; Souto-Manning et al., 2013) as “culture [represents] the total of artifacts that a group uses in its struggle for survival and autonomy and independence” (Sizemore, 1987, p. 51). While some people want to believe society exists in a post-racial society as a place where African Americans and marginalized people have access to more opportunities, much work remains to be done to avoid regressing to the days of master/slave, where White supremacy prevailed. Students of African ancestry must read and be informed and knowledgeable of their history and culture in order to engage in discourse that challenges the dominant culture prevailing along with the status quo to get to their truth, while holding educators accountable for the opportunity to access information that would empower them.
Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study was the researcher’s choice to focus on an intrinsic, qualitative, single case study design. This choice of the design of the study, the small number of alumni participants involved in the study, and the focus and context in which only students who identified as African American were selected to participate impacted how and what data were collected. The goal of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of what the African American alumni students experienced at WAHS, and what social and cultural factors contributed to their academic achievement and thus to their success.

Researcher and confirmation bias were both limitations at the forefront of the study; thus, the researcher was mindful to avoid personalizing any of the data collected. By keeping a reflective journal, the researcher was objective and surprised at some of the answers to the interview questions and artifacts that were presented to avoid confirmation bias. Additionally, the writing of Chapter 4 took more time than anticipated in an effort to distance the researcher from the data. The study was personal to the researcher as it documented the process of teaching and learning that alumni students experienced at WAHS. Additionally, the researcher was influential and an integral part of the learning process of alumni participants with respect to her role as one of the initial staff members of WAHS. To this extent, the researcher was an essential contributor to the intentions of the teaching and learning that alumni participants experienced. Yet, it is fair to say that it is not an absolute that the intentions would have the desired outcomes. For the researcher, distancing and journaling were necessary because they allowed her to offer the narrative of the alumni participants impartially and objectively. As a result of the researcher’s objectivity, the voice of alumni participants became the focus of the narrative that spoke to their
experience, and the social and cultural factors that led to their academic achievement and other successes.

Lastly, another limitation of the study was the availability and access to alumni participants. This access was dependent on their location and schedule. While many alumni wanted to participate, they were unable to do so because of work, childcare, and other prior commitments. Additionally, the short turnaround time between being informed about the study and the scheduled interviews limited those who were able to participate. Although a number of sources were used to offer evidence of the cultural and social factors that contributed to the success of African American alumni participants who attended WAHS, the study could have been further enhanced if data were collected for a cohort of students or a longitudinal approach was utilized.

**Implications of Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory**

The blueprint and foundation of the conceptual framework used in this study was critical race theory (CRT), culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and racial congruency. Although the research on culturally relevant/responsive pedagogical (CRP) practices was established more than 30 years ago and continues to evolve, not enough research presently exists at the high school level that documents the students’ perspective. In this case study, alumni student participants who experienced this approach to their education spoke to its impact on their success, thus filling in some of the gap in the research.

The researcher sought to understand the quality of education perceived and described by the alumni of WAHS, as well as the social and cultural factors that contributed to and influenced the quality of their education that led to high academic achievement and/or success. The researcher desired to gain insight into the social and cultural factors that led to the academic
achievement and success of alumni participants as a result of the educational process they lived and experienced, using CRT and CRP as the framework. The goal of this research, then, was to document and present counter-narratives of African American alumni students who attended an urban high school and received a quality education whereby their academic achievement and success were not anomalies but norms in an environment in which racial congruency, pedagogical practices of love, and culturally relevant and responsive practices existed.

The research is particularly pertinent because it considered the impact of CRP and racial congruency on the academic achievement of African American students. The findings in this study indicated that the alumni participants’ academic success was the result of the teachers’ racial congruency and their rigor and deliberate practices which incorporated culturally responsive/relevant practices; these made it possible for alumni participants to meet the expectations and standards of a rigorous academic program. Additionally, the findings suggested that the social and cultural factors leading to the success of the African American alumni participants in the study both existed in an environment that nurtured students and offered a community in which they felt loved and belonging. Culturally responsive/relevant practices were used to provide students support, access, and opportunity to engage in a rigorous academic program. However, access and opportunity without the support, expectations, and belief that African-American students can succeed will continue to produce dismal outcomes in academic achievement for African American students. Thus, based on the findings offered in Chapter 4 and the results discussed in this chapter, the research outcomes support the following recommendations to potentially improve the academic achievement of African American students.
Implications for Practice

Mental health. Significant implications arose with regard to mental health concerns and the impact of how educators and educational institutions treat mental health concerns and fundamentally the impact it has on student’s achievement. WAHS was able to support students academically; however, it could not, as a result of resources, effectively address the more in-depth mental health issues that adolescents experienced. In many school districts that reflect a large population of African American students, mental health issues are often misdiagnosed and referred to as behavioral or cognitive problems associated within the spectrum of special education; this often leads to a disproportional number of African American students overrepresented in special education. Additionally, school districts that service African American students are disproportionately underfunded to the point that it becomes almost impossible to allocate the resources necessary to address mental health. Despite this shortcoming, most of the alumni participants flourished and understood that parameters were in place to support their success.

For some students, WAHS had difficulty addressing the social and emotional concerns that impacted the mental health of those students who did not visualize a reason to take their academics seriously. One can conjecture that students could not do the work that expectations and academic rigor surpassed their intellectual capacity, or that they simply did not want to adhere to the program being offered. Instead, what emerged from the study was the reflection that students could do the work and meet the expectations; however, underlying factors hindered their success, and WAHS had a difficult time identifying these issues in order to redirect and support the students. As a result of these limitations and little to no research conducted within
this study on this topic, more research needs to be conducted to identify and further understand the mental health issues that impact the academic achievement of African American students.

**Leadership and action.** As school leaders, the first charge is to ensure that pedagogy in practice aligns with what is best for all students. Essentially, this means the implementation of instructional and cultural practices, must be highlighted in the classroom, at school-wide events, and displayed in the hallways. Moreover, celebrating the students in ceremonies helps to foster an environment that nurtures all in the community. Such an environment allows the student to feel prideful about who they are, feeling like they belong to and are a part of a community. When students are acknowledged for their academic accomplishments, whether for doing well academically, or improving academically, or performing in the extracurricular activities, positive relationships are further developed with parents and families.

High expectations are critical to leader setting the vision of the school and as such must be communicated as a central tenet of the school leader’s commitment to culturally responsive educational practices within his or her building. The impact on African American children, and in particular those who so often are subjected to a school-to-prison pipeline versus a school-to-success pipeline, is exponential. Communication of those high expectations begins with professional development of all teachers in the building on the establishment of relationships with all students and their families, based on a belief and vision of success, regardless of current socioeconomic status. High expectations are embedded in instructional delivery, evidenced by rigor and the expectation of higher-order thinking. Teachers should be trained by leaders on what such thinking and rigor look like in practice in their classrooms. This system should be sustained by a coaching model that accounts for the high turnover often occurring in underserved communities where the stakes are so high. Communication of high expectations must permeate
the building and include both formal and informal communication that is heard by students directly from school leaders and teachers, and indirectly between school leaders and teachers. Learning should also take place within the context of culture. This means that teachers should be trained in opportunities to infuse their students’ cultural experiences with every opportunity they are given. School leaders who champion for all stakeholders to have a deep understanding of the student body allow the voice of that student body and their families to guide programs, ceremonies, and curricula that are offered in the building in such a way that everyone feels a part of the school community.

School leaders who are culturally aware and true champions of culturally responsive education will facilitate professional development and courageous conversations (Singleton, 2015) related to race. They will invite parents and integrate the community at large into discussions that offer opportunities for exposure to all students, but particularly marginalized students, on a global scale. Educators, regardless of their roles in the school district, should commit to continuous learning in order to truly impact students of color, changing “the structural and ideological paradigm” (Lemons-Smith, 2008, p. 909) where African American students are able to access quality education.

Access to a quality education, as evidenced by the alumni participants in this study, demonstrates that African American students can succeed at high levels and replicate the work of cultural awareness in a world that is ever-changing and full of color. It behooves school leaders to ensure that the culture of their buildings is responsive to the students they service. To negate students’ culture as a leveraging tool used to maximize academic achievement would be a gross regression in the developmental needs of the 21st-century student and in skills that have been determined as necessary for all students to succeed at high levels. Acknowledgment and
validation of various cultural possessions with which African American students enter the classroom, paired with sharing a common culture that provides access and opportunity to all students without bias, prove to be key components to African American students achieving success.

**Implications for Policy**

**Addressing the teacher gap.** Many factors can contribute to the academic performance of the students. However, the participants noted that their academic performances were rooted in the mindset, attitude, and expectations of their teachers, especially in how the teachers viewed their role when working with African American students. Therefore, it is important that teachers set high expectations without compromising rigor. Under such circumstances, students are able to meet expectations, and if they fall short, students believe they will be supported. Just as expectations and support are important to student achievement, it is imperative that teacher preparation programs address the stages, modalities, and implementation of culturally responsive educational practices in the classroom. Critical to attending courses that emphasize culturally relevant pedagogical practices are the resources teachers must develop, including but not limited to lesson plans and unit plans that require thinking outside the norm of traditional curriculum. This allows for the inclusivity of students in diverse classes that they often teach. Teachers must be able to “deconstruct, construct, and reconstruct” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 32) the curriculum in order to engage students in their history, and in such a way that their voices become a part of the learning and a mirror to discover and see themselves; moreover, in this way, students are able to question and challenge the unjust society and power establishment of the dominant culture.

According to Knight and Marciano (2013), it is through a combination of the three tenets that one begins to understand how reflection and one’s own cultural identity influence and
impact the expectations that educators have of African American students towards both access and preparation to achieve academically. These tenets include cultural competence, culturally relevant education, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1994). To this extent, teachers must be more knowledgeable and cognizant of other cultures beyond the “holidays, religious custom, dress and food” (Trumbul et al., 2000, p. 1). As cultural integrators, teachers and administrators must consider and have an understanding of how their own values and behaviors might influence the type of instruction that is delivered before they enter the classroom. Therefore, individuals who are prepared for the teaching profession should develop cultural competence by reflecting on their own perspectives, recognizing that within the process of teaching and learning, a reciprocity must exist where a teacher is willing to learn from his or her students. Thus, providing teachers with training on culturally responsive pedagogical practices and developing their own resources can alleviate the teacher gap. Furthermore, equitable distribution of resources and effective training of qualified, passionate teachers who recognize a student’s potential and ability rather than a deficit would reduce the educational debt and increase the academic performance of African American students.

**Role and responsibility of educational leaders.** An educational leader with a true intention of addressing the learning needs of students cannot effectively do so without championing for the instructional practices that reflect the diversity of the school population. Therefore, while the national conversation continues about the most effective instructional practices related to providing students with a personalized education, educational leaders should adopt a much more inclusive definition of a personalized education that integrates culturally responsive education (Allen & Kelly, 2015).
Twenty-first century school leaders are instructional leaders first. As the “master teachers” in their buildings, it is a great disservice to all students to exclude the acknowledgment and consideration of the whole child, including race, socioeconomic status, previous instructional experiences, and ancestry. A plethora of data has spoken to the disenfranchisement of African American students when related to exposure to references of excellence in common curricula across public schools in America (Delpit, 2012; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Irvine & Irvine, 2007; Kohli, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2007, 2009; Lemons-Smith, 2008; Milner, 2012; Mungo, 2013). Educational leaders must act with intention to support instructional staff by offering professional development to build capacity.

The use of culturally relevant teaching practices as the instructional framework supports multiple perspectives, leverages students’ cultural capital as a means of actively engaging students in the learning process; and assists with developing an ability to become critical and autonomous thinkers. According to Brookfield (2009), critical thinking and its relationship to autonomous thinking are manifested when both thought processes occur, and students are able to engage in discourse by “incorporating into their own remarks some reference” of what they learn (p. 134). In addition, Brookfield redefined critical reflection not merely as “a willingness to construe knowledge and values from multiple perspectives without loss of commitment to one’s own values” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 13), but within the context of challenging and revealing the practices and power dynamics, as a result of the established power structures that exist (Brookfield, 2009). As master teachers, educational leaders must lead by example, using or making available curricula that reflect African Americans and marginalized groups in all content areas. An emphasis in inclusive curricula and culturally relevant and responsive practice can begin to dismantle or, at the very least, change the paradigm in referencing the success of the
United States and its greatness from the narrow perspective of the dominant European, White influence.

Educational leaders who are able to convey clear expectations about what culturally relevant pedagogical practices entail are able to increase staff buy-in and involvement in meeting such expectations for implementation. Additionally, in the case of WAHS, modeling and providing professional development facilitated the teachers’ ability to enhance instructional repertoire, and thus influence the academic achievement of alumni participants. Moreover, the administrators at WAHS were able to cultivate professional learning communities (PLCs) to share best practices. This aspect of leadership, where clear expectations were conveyed and modeling and professional development were provided, fostered transparency and trust among staff members. With an understanding and emphasis of a common goal, where teaching is “to help children resist and transcend oppression and learn to instantiate change” (Acosta et al., 2018, p. 342) as they develop a sense of urgency for academic success, what is often impacted is the learning experience of African American students and other marginalized groups, as suggested by the alumni participants of WAHS.

Educational leaders and administrative staff should act in accordance with facilitating professional development, which allows staff to learn what it means to teach from a culturally responsive pedagogical framework. In contrast to Chomsky and Macedo (2000) who explained how education requires a “level of indoctrination” for which students are “conditioned to obey power and structure,” CRE as an educational framework allows students to challenge and think independently. Equally important for teachers to understand is that CRE not only leverages the students’ cultural background towards academic achievement by validating who they are; CRE also cultivates the student’ ability to recognize disparities that exist as a result of societal racism.
and social inequalities. By recognizing, students are then able to demand access and opportunity to all aspects of life by questioning the status quo. Too often, we hear the words “cultural responsiveness or culturally relevant” in school buildings, but without a school leader’s true investment in staff development and the practices thereof, these words become mere “buzz.” Therefore, educational leaders should be committed to, recognize, and implement this as a viable asset in improving the academic achievement of African American students.

**Implications for Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) and culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy (CRP) were used as the conceptual framework that guided the research. Both CRT and CRP served as the foundation in which the researcher was able to ground and support the study with the belief that pre-service and in-service educators could have an impact on the academic achievement of African-American students when they are able to develop their cultural competence. The development of one’s cultural competence implies that the educator would be able to connect with students, serving as a bridge towards guiding African-American students in particular towards academic success. Moreover, if one is to have an impact on the academic achievement of marginalized students, in particular African-American students, it is critical they have an understanding of their position in relation to history and their current position as it relates to privilege and power.

**Develop cultural competence and become the bridge.** Teachers should develop cultural sensitivity and competence as they reflect and develop an understanding of how their own personal biases can influence the perception of students in their classroom. Drago-Severson (2012) advised that teachers are influenced by their background and experiences. When teachers at WAHS understood the culture of their students, they began to understand how the role of the
family becomes critical as the foundation of one’s aspiration towards academic achievement and success. As one begins to interact with students from other cultural backgrounds, experiences begin to shape thinking. As a result, teachers are better able to serve as a cultural bridge with an ability to identify the similarities and respect the differences of each person, thereby motivating students to the next level of attaining academic success. When relationships and interactions are fostered and respected, teachers are able to model for their students’ respect, while embracing differences and communicating and creating an environment where all students feel they can achieve academic success.

**Purpose of self-knowledge and its impact.** Theoretically the concept of self-knowledge requires an understanding of one’s position in relation to history and personal reflection. Self-knowledge and embracing others, despite their differences, were important to reach the level of equity that educators at WAHS wanted to offer to students and did succeed in doing. For that reason, it is highly recommended that educators engage continuously in reading and learning about history, regardless of their discipline of focus. Such a focus on history and extensive professional development on education and race issues would allow teachers who are seeking different perspectives to engage in meaningful discourse towards improving the profession of teaching and learning.

When teachers, particularly White teachers, develop an understanding of their position as it relates to power and the “dynamics of entitlement” (Lindsey et al., 2009, p. 41) and reflect on their role in the classroom, they can then begin to work on developing cultural competence in order to become better equipped to act with intention to support and encourage academic success of the marginalized students they teach. Thus, the success of WAHS and its alumni participants existed in a teacher’s conscious decision to take ownership and responsibility to provide access
and opportunities for learning to occur for students within their discipline and beyond. Teachers who adopt these behaviors are often better able to center the content and curriculum in relation to students as a means of engaging them. Moreover, teachers at WAHS also understood their position and purpose; they were able to shape the beliefs and actions of their students in order to guide them towards academic success. In the case of alumni participants, they were able to achieve academically largely in part to the racial congruency they experienced, the rigor of the course content they received as a result of the teacher’s passion, and the expectations and academic support that were offered. This created an environment where the alumni participants were able to take ownership of their own learning, where value was placed on the students to develop critical thinking skills. Additionally, the alumni participants explained academic success by giving credit to the guidance and validation they received from their teachers, which allowed them to develop their own critical consciousness to navigate within and to question and succeed, despite the dominant culture’s power structures.

Educators who develop an understanding of history—thus reflecting on their position and the disparities of education that marginalized populations endure, particularly African American students—should take ownership in developing their consciousness of their purpose for being an educator. Otherwise, many educators will continue to propagate the idea that “Students can ascend the social and economic ladders” (Souto-Manning et al., 2018, p. 44) by virtue of the idea of them picking themselves up by their own bootstraps, despite the power structures that exist. Nevertheless, this study supported the fact that teachers who engage in culturally relevant practices are able to understand and better facilitate discussions on the disparities of education as a result of the power structures that affect the allocation of resources, access, and opportunities impacting the academic performance of African American students. With this understanding of
the social disparities that exist, these teachers were able to understand the need to “validate and value” experiences, as they cultivated and sustained the cultural practices of their students (Souto-Manning et al., 2018). Moreover, the teachers at WAHS, as described by the alumni participants, were able to create or identify opportunities inside and outside the classroom for students to succeed, thus demonstrating interest in their students’ academic, social, and emotional progress. Ultimately for students, it was a sign that teachers cared about their well-being beyond the classroom.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

This study focused on a single urban high school, WAHS, with a student population that is overwhelmingly composed of African American students and staff. Recommendations for future research would look at an entire cohort or conduct a comparative analysis of two cohorts. Both recommendations would allow for more alumni participants. The possibility of the first study could offer insight into a particular cohort, while the second would allow for a comparison of experiences between cohorts. Further research could be conducted to consider a larger number of high-achieving African American students at the state or national level to document their experiences and the factors that contributed to their success.

**Teacher Perceptions and Their Impact on Academic Achievement**

While this study assessed social and cultural factors that impacted the academic achievement of African American students at WAHS from the alumni perspective, another study could focus on the teachers’ perceptions of African American students. This would allow teachers to offer and explain what approaches and strategies they employed in the classroom to facilitate students’ academic achievement. How did they perceive students and their abilities? What was done to foster success for students with special needs? Further studies focusing on the
leadership of administrators in supporting teachers to facilitate culturally responsive practices leading to student success are also needed. Such research could focus on the social and cultural factors that impact student success from the teachers’ perspective. To further elaborate on the findings of this study, a meta-analysis could be conducted on culturally relevant/responsive pedagogical practices as a fundamental tool for teacher training and preparation programs and their impact on the academic achievement of African American scholars. The success of African American students can often be defined very differently from school to school; therefore, further research could compare two different schools with similar demographics. While the percentage of White teachers at WAHS is very small (less than 10%), a study focusing on their experiences and perspectives in a predominantly African American population where students are successful can offer information on how high academic achievement can be attained by White teachers teaching African American students in a diverse population at an urban setting.

**WAHS Today in Preparation for Its Future**

The researcher’s choice to use alumni participants was deliberate in order to capture the long-term effect of social and cultural factors that contributed to the educational experiences of alumni participants. However, further investigation of current students is warranted to capture the experience as it happens as opposed to after it has occurred in order to gather the experience in real time. Conducting a study while students are enrolled at WAHS would present some challenges, as the researcher would have to consider the age group and maturity level of the students. Additionally, researchers would need to consider using students from Grades 9-12 over a short period of time (3 months) or seniors over a full school year. In addition to considering a longitudinal study, it would be interesting to consider an investigation of student success and academic achievement as related to students with mental health concerns and what factors are
implemented in the school to support student success towards academic achievement.

Nevertheless, considering a study on current students of WAHS would be important as a means of determining if current students would demonstrate the same or different understanding of the social and cultural factors that impact their academic success.

**Examining the Parent Experience at WAHS**

This study targeted and was limited to alumni participants who graduated between 2007 and 2016 to understand the social and cultural factors that contributed to their academic achievement and success, while documenting the experiences of the alumni participants. However, documenting the parent experience could be a critical factor in understanding social and cultural factors that led to the alumni participants’ academic achievement and success. Determining the relationship between teachers and staff could also provide insight into the cause of the alumni participants’ academic success. Recommendations for further research are a small fraction of what could potentially be explored, giving insight into how African American students at WAHS are able to achieve success.

**Conclusion**

This dissertation examined the quality of education received and described by African American high school alumni students of WAHS and its impact on their success. Additionally, the research associated with this dissertation focused on the social and cultural factors that contributed to and influenced the quality of education that alumni participants of WAHS received and how such factors influenced their trajectory towards high academic achievement and/or success. This chapter also summarized data results that were presented in Chapter 4. Subsequently, the researcher offered a discussion of the results in relation to the literature, the study’s limitations, implications for practice, and recommendations for further research. The
study of alumni student participants of WAHS suggests that culturally responsive practices, when employed, allow students to feel a sense of belonging to a community where they are valued and validated. In such an environment, students are held to high expectations, and are challenged and supported to meet expectations. All stakeholders, which include but are not limited to staff, parents, students, and community members, work towards the critical purpose of effectively guiding African American students to develop the necessary skills to navigate and critically question the world in which they live. In such nurturing environments, African American students are encouraged, engaged, and empowered to believe in their abilities while remaining authentic to who they are because their cultural identity is not erased (Emdin, 2016) in pursuit of enhancing and establishing intellectual greatness and their place as scholars.

For many educators, the greatest impact they have is to see the growth, maturity, and intellectual prowess of their students as they embark on careers, build families, and inspire others to work towards building a better world. While the focus of this study was only on WAHS, the alumni participants in this study demonstrated the power of the social and cultural factors that contributed to their success. They recognized WAHS’s impact on their success, which was attributed to educators who employed culturally responsive educational practices. The passion and unwavering belief of racially congruent educators who employed culturally responsive practices guided the alumni participants to make success possible. All students should have access to a quality education, as indicated by the experiences of the alumni of WAHS. To this extent, teacher preparation programs, school districts, superintendents, and schools must embrace an urgency to understand, develop, teach, and implement culturally responsive educational practices that recognize the whole child. The lives and cultural backgrounds of all children matter and need to be reflected in the curricula that are implemented and the educational
experiences they have. Therefore, to facilitate an enriched and empowering educational experience that is of quality and leads to the unleashing of the academic excellence and academic achievement of African American students, educational stakeholders should inculcate and own more accurate understanding of history. Stakeholders should be reflective of their purpose and position in relation to the diverse student populations they teach or may eventually teach. If educational stakeholders and citizens consider the idea that “Children are our most precious possession” (Hoover, 1931, p. 1) and “Children are the world’s most valuable resource and its best hope for the future” (Kennedy, 1963, n.p.), then we can no longer wait to recognize those who have been marginalized by disparities of an educational system that was not designed for their educational success or otherwise. Instead, the system should be changed or circumvented by centering teaching practices, curricula, and professionals that will restore and empower African American students to their ancestral and academic greatness. With such efforts, academic achievement will no longer be seen as an anomaly, but rather as the status quo.
References


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proquest.com.cupdx.idm.oclc.org/docview/909483874?accountid=10248


Appendix A: Introduction Letter

Dear Research Participant:

This correspondence is to request your participation in an educational research study: Understanding the Academic Achievement of African-American Scholars: An Intrinsic Case Study of an Urban High School in New York City. I, along with my committee of professors/advisors, solicit your help. The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of students who have attended Woodbine Academy High School. I believe that the academic achievement of African-American students can improve and this research can enhance and help close the achievement gap.

There is limited research on understanding the academic achievement and experiences of African-American high school students. One of the goals of this study is to provide an account of your experiences in your own words. If you are interested in participating, an initial interview will be conducted with you within the next several weeks. The interview is expected to last about an hour to an hour and a half. An additional interview may be warranted for the purpose of clarification and verifying my conclusions. Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary and there will be not compensated for participating.

I do hope that you will choose to assist me with this project. Sharing your experiences is a valuable part of this research and I look forward to talking to you. Along with your consent to participate, you can be assured that your confidentiality will be maintained. If you agree to participate, please email this letter with your completed contact information and informed consent form. Please contact me via phone or email (noted below) if you have questions or concerns regarding my request. I truly appreciate your time, and I thank you for being a part of this research.

Sincerely,

Cluny Lavache
Doctoral Candidate
Concordia University–Portland
Contact phone: [phone redacted]
E-mail: [email redacted]
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Research Study Title: Understanding the Academic Achievement of African-American Scholars: An Intrinsic Case Study of an Urban High School in New York City

Principal Investigator: Mrs. Cluny Lavache
Research Institution: Concordia University–Portland
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Brianna Parsons

Purpose and what you will be doing:
The purpose of this interview is to explore the experiences of alumni students who have attended Woodbine Academy High School. I believe that the academic achievement of African-American students can improve and this research can help provide information that may be useful to close the achievement gap as a results of the opportunity gap that exist. We expect approximately 8 to 10 volunteers. No one will be paid to be in the study. We will begin enrollment on __________ and end enrollment on __________. Interviews will be audiotaped and conducted with an Apple iRecorder. To be in the study, you as the participant will be interviewed by the principal investigator (PI) Mrs. Cluny Lavache on a day, time and location mutually acceptable to both parties. During which time I, Mrs. Lavache (PI) will present and explain the purpose of study and of the interview process. As the participant, you will be given time to:

1. Read and review the consent form.
2. Sign the consent form, giving permission to conduct the interview.
3. Participant will be asked a series of demographic questions followed by 8 to 10 open-ended questions, with the possibility of additional questions that would help clarify the participants responses or as a means to delve deeper into the participants experience.

The initial interview will take one (1) to one and a half (1.5) hours to complete. Once the interview has been transcribed the PI may request to meet again to review the transcript of the interview for any discrepancies or inaccuracy. Doing this will take less than one hour of your time. If you, the participant is unable to physically meet, we can set up a time for a phone or web meeting to conduct the follow-up meeting.

Risks:
There are no foreseen risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. However, I will protect your information. Any personal information you provide will be coded so it cannot be linked to you. Any name or identifying information you give will be confidential and a pseudonym will be used to protect your identity. Furthermore, all information will be secured using an electronic encryption or locked inside a safe file draw within my residential office. When I or any of our investigators look at the data, none of the data will have your name or identifying information. We will refer to your data with a code that only the principal investigator knows links to you. This way, your identifiable information will not be stored with the data. We will not identify you in any publication or report. Your information will be kept private at all times and all study documents and audio-recording will be destroyed immediately after we conclude this study.
Benefits:
Information you provide will help provide insight to the contributing factors that impacts the academic achievement of African-American students in order to help improve student performance and success in secondary school and post-secondary endeavors. This research can help to inform the means in which educators can close the achievement gap as a result of the opportunities and experiences shared by alumni of WAHS.

Confidentiality:
This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell us abuse or neglect that makes us seriously concerned for your immediate health and safety.

Right to Withdraw:
Your participation is greatly appreciated, but we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, we will stop asking you questions.

Contact Information:
You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Mrs. Cluny Lavache at [email redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email: obranch@cu-portland.edu or call 503-493-6390).

Your Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

_______________________________  ___________
Participant Name                  Date

_______________________________  ___________
Participant Signature             Date

_______________________________  ___________
Investigator Name                 Date

_______________________________  ___________
Investigator Signature            Date

Investigator: Mrs. Cluny Lavache; email: [email redacted]
c/o: Professor Dr. Brianna Parsons
Concordia University–Portland
2811 NE Holman Street
Portland, Oregon  97221
Appendix C: Demographic Questions

1. What is your gender?
   - Female
   - Male

2. What Is Your Ethnicity?
   - African American
   - Asian
   - Hispanic
   - Pacific Islander
   - White

3. What is your age?
   - 18 to 21 years
   - 21 to 24 years
   - 25 to 28 years
   - 28 to 32 years
   - 33 to 36 years

4. What year did you graduate from WAHS? ________________

5. What did you do after WAHS?
   - Attend college
   - Join the work force
   - Join the military

6. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
   - Less than high school
   - High school graduate (includes equivalency)
   - Some college, no degree
   - Associate’s degree
   - Bachelor’s degree
   - Master’s degree
   - Ph.D.
   - Graduate or professional degree

7. What is your marital status?
   - Single (never married)
   - Married
   - Separated
   - Widowed
   - Divorced
8. How many hours per week do you USUALLY work at your job?
   - 35 hours a week or more
   - Less than 35 hours a week
   - I am not currently employed

9. What was your income before taxes during the past 12 months?
   - Less than $25,000
   - $25,000 to $34,999
   - $35,000 to $49,999
   - $50,000 to $74,999
   - $75,000 to $99,999
   - $100,000 to $149,999
   - $150,000 to $199,999
   - $200,000 or more
Appendix D: Example Interview Questions

1. How would you describe the education you received at WAHS?

2. Without saying their name, tell me about the person(s) who impacted you and your achievements whether positively or negatively at WAHS or since you graduated from WAHS. What characteristics did the person possess that influenced you?

3. Describe an experience that you encountered at WAHS that influenced you or still has an impact on your life.

4. Did you attend any other high schools? If so, what do you think was the difference between Bedford and your other school? If not, what do you think was the difference between what you received at Bedford and what your friends received?

5. What practices at WAHS led to your success?

6. How did teacher expectations affect the way you approached your studies? Explain further.

7. Were there adequate resources to support you academically? Explain.

8. Did you have access to other learning opportunities? Please elaborate.

9. What was the racial make-up of WAHS when you attended? Did the racial make-up (peer/teacher) of WAHS impact your learning experience? If so, how?

10. How did the curriculum influence future endeavors since high school?

11. What artifact or tangible item can you refer to, to show how Woodbine Academy high school impacted your schooling or career?
# Appendix E: Table 9

Table 9

## Categories/Themes and Corresponding Attributes

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Passion</th>
<th>Belonging</th>
<th>Access</th>
<th>Opportunity</th>
<th>Expectations</th>
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<td>Open door policy</td>
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<td>Work Ethic</td>
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<td>Professional Career</td>
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<td>Personal Growth</td>
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<td>Teacher commitment</td>
<td>Rigorous academic program Tutoring</td>
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<td>Time Investment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reducitive Citizen</td>
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<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Male/Female Empowerment Classes</td>
<td>Shared governance</td>
<td>Exposure to STEM related, Law and Education as viable careers</td>
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<td>Access</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
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<td>Teachers as Role Models Inspiration</td>
<td>Racial Congruency Authentic &amp; genuine relationships</td>
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Appendix F: Table 10

Table 10

*Categorizing Attributes Based on Classification of the Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Classification of the Research Questions</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Inspirational</td>
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<td>Rigorous</td>
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<td>Feelings of love</td>
<td>Passion of Teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Spirit of excellence</td>
<td>Expectations Teacher/Student Relationships</td>
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Appendix G: Table 11

Table 11

Alumni Participants’ Scores on New York State Exams

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<th>Alvin</th>
<th>Anita</th>
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</table>

Note. The notation * indicates the exams that students needed to meet the minimum requirements for graduation with a score of 65 on each exam for a Regents diploma.
Appendix H: Statement Of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does “fraudulent” mean?

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

What is “unauthorized” assistance?

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.
Statement of Original Work (continued)

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University-Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.

2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association

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Digital Signature

Cluny Lavache

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Name

February 21, 2019

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Date