ABSTRACT

TAYLOR, ALTHEA COGDELL. Improving the Academic Achievement of African American Males: A Case Study of African American Male Perceptions of Attempted Instructional Strategies. (Under the direction of Paul Bitting.)

Numerous studies in the educational literature have reported the concern educators and community members have over the achievement gap between African American and white males. African American males currently score below white Americans on most standardized tests. Research has shown that this gap leads to serious negative consequences for African American males, such as suspensions, nonpromotions, school dropout, unemployment, crime, and incarceration. More effort is needed to improve these students’ academic performance.

Existing studies involved programs that focused in academic achievement. In this qualitative study, the researcher explored the African American male students’ perceptions of instructional strategies used in the classroom and whether those strategies influenced their academic needs. The case study focused on factors that influenced improved academic achievement in African American males by examining the students’ perceptions of instructional strategies, teachers’ instructional beliefs, and comparing the similarities and differences to those in the current literature. Data were obtained through interviews and observations of 12 African American males, 2 teachers, and school administrators in a middle school.

Findings revealed that the middle-school-aged African American males preferred lessons that were related to their real-life experiences and to their future. The more fun and stimulating the lessons, the greater their interest in learning. Family members, role models,
and teachers had the greatest influence on students’ motivation to learn. These findings support the need for staff development that includes extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Teachers need to understand the value that encouragement can bring to African American males, and, as significant, teachers must understand the males themselves—what their needs and concerns are, and how to motivate them.
IMPROVING THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES:

A Case Study of African American Male Perceptions of Attempted Instructional Strategies

by

ALTHEA COGDELL TAYLOR

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP

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APPROVED BY:

___________________________________  ___________________________________
Chair of Advisory Committee
BIOGRAPHY

Althea C. Taylor was born in Tarboro, North Carolina, to Wanda and Alton Cogdell. They moved to Greenville, North Carolina, a couple of years later where she went to school and received her high school diploma from J. H. Rose High School.

In 1988, Althea began college at East Carolina University. She received her bachelor’s degree in elementary education with a concentration in reading. In October of 1992, Althea married her husband, Willie.

Althea began her career in Lenoir County, teaching 5th grade. Later she moved to Hampton, Virginia, for a couple of years, where she taught 4th grade until moving back to North Carolina. In 1995, she returned to her former school in Lenoir County and taught 2nd and 5th grades.

During this time, Althea developed an interest in leadership. Her first opportunity to serve came when the school elected her as the School Planning Team Chairperson in 1996. Other opportunities arose, and she enjoyed performing those responsibilities and learned a great deal under the guidance of her principal, Maxine Cooper. Those early leadership experiences convinced Althea to pursue a career in school administration.

In May of 1996, Althea began attending East Carolina University part time to obtain a master’s degree in school administration. After graduating in 1998, she obtained her first administrative position with Pitt County Schools at Sam Bundy Elementary. Later, after relocating to Raleigh, Althea began working at East Wake Middle School, where she is currently serving as Assistant Principal. She is also a part-time adjunct professor in the
Education Department at North Carolina Central University. In the fall of 1998, Althea
decided to continue her education and obtain a doctorate in school administration from North
Carolina State University. Althea has seven years of educational administrative experience.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I have broadened by career through my love for education and children, several people have truly been influential to me. The first person who has been the greatest inspiration to me is my husband, Willie. Thank you for sharing your time with the books, papers, computer, and this dissertation. Throughout the endless days and nights, you have continued to encourage me not to give up. Always willing to push me whenever needed and wanting the best for me. Numerous times you would tell me to press on and remind me that the end is near. I am so grateful to you as my partner in life.

The people who inspired me to become an educator are my parents, Alton and Wanda Cogdell, and my aunts, Dorothy Pitts and Esther Parker. My parents are retired educators who have always motivated me to strive for the best. They, along with my aunts, have instilled in me the value of a quality education. This has created the desire I have to ensure that all children are given this marvelous opportunity to succeed. Other family members who have been prominent in my accomplishments are my sister Wannetta, brother Alton, Godmother Harriet, second set of parents, Willie and Faye Taylor, and second sister Michelle Edgerton.

A great array of friends have been there throughout this time. A special thank-you to Margaret, who always kept me informed and on the right track; Shirley, who had endless words of encouragement; Paulette, who always was there to celebrate the small accomplishments; and Melvina, who began calling me Doctor early to remind me to speak things into existence. Thank you for always being there when I needed you.
In addition to the family and friends, I would also like to recognize my committee members for assisting me through this process. It has truly been a learning experience in which I have grown professionally. Dr. Paul Bitting was my chair through this life-altering event. He was always supportive and helpful when called upon. He also gave words of encouragement to finish this race as a winner. So again, thank you to each committee member for all of your assistance.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

*All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of empires depends on the education of youth.* (Aristotle, as cited in Lincoln & Suid, 1986, p. 36).

On January 8, 2002, President Bush signed the No Child Behind Act, also known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The law’s goal is to have all students performing at or above grade level by 2013-2014. The law is based on four principles:

1. Stronger accountability for results;
2. Increased flexibility with federal funds;
3. Expanded options for parents; and
4. Emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)

The law encourages states to develop programs to test the performance of the whole student population and nine disaggregated groups according to race, gender, and other criteria. Schools must make adequate progress in each of these groups. Bill McNeal, superintendent of Wake County Public Schools, has emphasized moving toward high academic standards and constantly reminds the county about the need to leave no child behind.
The law also sets new standards for teachers and teacher assistants that are to be met by 2005-2006. It requires teachers to be licensed and to have the content knowledge that fits the instructional needs of their class.

This acts appears to be designed to help ensure we are educating all children and that every child develops their skills to the fullest. A common belief in education is that good educators should be committed to furnishing every student with the opportunities he or she needs to have an enjoyable and successful academic and lifelong career. It is critical to allow every student an opportunity to gain this prosperity in order to achieve. This premise is the basis of my decision to become an educator. The belief that I share with many other educators is that every child can learn. Also, good educators should believe that every child has the right to learn regardless of his or her race, gender, origin, age, socioeconomic status, or environmental circumstances.

**Background of Problem**

_The fate of the country . . . does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballet box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning._ (Henry David Thoreau, as cited in Lincoln & Suid, 1986, p. 19)

Students from poor and minority groups face a very uncertain time in U.S. education. Their economic and social conditions are deteriorating without relief in sight, and the progressive curriculum reforms, if carried out one school at a time, will almost certainly place them at an even greater disadvantage. . . . Our gravest concern is whether there is sufficient commitment in our society to significantly and directly address the problems of educational equity through any sustained and coherent
strategy. . . . [The] vision of change must be powerful enough to focus the public and all the levels of the governance system on common challenging purposes and to sustain the focus over an extended period of time. (O’Day & Smith, 1993, pp. 267, 298-299)

Numerous articles in education journals, newspapers, magazines, and books address the concern educators and community members have over the wide gap in performance between African Americans and white students. “Disturbing numbers of African American and Latino students continue to lag behind their white peers on many measures of educational performance. This disparity in performance tied to race and ethnicity is known as the achievement gap” (Westchester Institute for Human Services Research, July 2000). One of the main topics in education today is the effort to close the achievement gap between black and white students.

When analyzing the performance of all students by race and gender, more and more educators are seeing African American males falling at the bottom. According to Jencks and Phillips (2000), this gap appears before children enter kindergarten, and it persists into adulthood. Research indicates this to be a serious problem and a concern of parents, educators, and school systems. The school performance of African American youth remains a pressing issue in education. Efforts are needed to raise the success levels of these students.

The statistics on educational attainment would suggest that many black youth are at-risk in the nation’s schools (Lee, 1991). Closer examination of the data indicates that African American males are at greatest risk (Lee, 1991):
1. The overall mean achievement scores for African American male students are below those of other groups in the basic subject areas.

2. African American males are much more likely to be placed in classes for the educable mentally retarded and for students with learning disabilities than in gifted and talented classes.

3. African American males are far more likely to be placed in general education and vocational high school curricular tracks than in an academic track.

4. African American males are suspended from school more frequently and for longer periods of time than other student groups.

5. African American females complete high school at higher rates than do males.

These data show that African American male youth face formidable challenges to their educational development (Lee, 1991). African Americans currently score lower than European Americans on vocabulary, reading, and math tests, and on tests that claim to measure scholastic aptitude and intelligence (Phillips & Jencks, 1999). The overall mean achievement scores for African American male students are below those of other groups in the basic subject areas (Lee, 1991).

African Americans still score below 75% of American whites on most standardized tests. On some tests, typical African Americans score below more than 85% of whites (Phillips & Jencks, 1999). A recent study disclosed that three fourths of the African American males enrolled in secondary school systems of a large Midwestern city had earned grades that were below average and only 2% of their black male peers were able to secure a cumulative grade point average of 3.0 on a four-point scale (Leake, 1992).
Garibaldi (1990), noting that young African American males are the leaders on all negative indices (i.e., dropout rates, suspensions, and nonpromotions), declared the education of these young men to be a moral and civic imperative. Even in areas where there is progress, African American males still lag behind other groups (Duhon & Harris, 1999). For example, the dropout rate for African American males has declined from 30.4% in 1970 to 13.4% in 1990. However, it is still higher for them than it is for their white counterparts (National Urban League Fact Sheet, n.d.).

Polite and Davis (1999) found that African American males become far more alienated from academics than do other groups as they move through high school, lending further credence to concerns about the educational crisis affecting African American boys. African American male students have been classified by some as being an “endangered species” (Ascher, 1991) because they appear to be vanishing from school classrooms all over the United States (Duhon & Harris, 1999). That African American males have a very low success rate in American classrooms is no longer debatable. It is a widely accepted reality (Duhon & Harris, 1999).

Lee (1991) clarified that the consequences of this gap are major limitations on socioeconomic mobility, ultimately leading to high rates of unemployment, crime, and incarceration for massive numbers of young Black men. According to Polite (1999), the trust’s 1998 state and national data book states that many African American and Latino students are trapped at achievement levels that leave them terribly unprepared for either the next educational level or the world of work. When African American children fail academically, all other children and all Americans are negatively impacted (Tucker, 1999).
Race, minority status, socioeconomic status, and other variables are not factors that predict what students can learn. More likely than not, they predict how schools will treat children (McWhirther, McWhirther, McWhirther, & McWhirther, 1998).

**Statement of Problem**

*The pain is in the eyes. Young Black men in their late twenties or early thirties living in urban America, lost and abandoned, aimlessly walking and hawking the streets with nothing behind their eyes but anger, confusion, disappointment and pain. . . .* (Haki R. Madhubuti, as cited in Wynn, 1992, p. x)

The general research question was to investigate the most successful instructional strategies attempted within a middle school and the contribution to academic achievement those strategies had in regards to African American students, with special emphasis on African American males.

**Focus Questions**

In this study, I sought the answers to questions that are not commonly reflected in the literature. Patton (2002) explained that “studying information rich cases yield insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations” (p. 230). I gathered and formed an “in-depth understanding” of African American male student participants and their perceptions of attempted instructional strategies. To explore the general research question, this qualitative case study had the following focus questions:

1. How do African American males perceive the influence of instructional strategies regarding their academic achievement?

2. What instructional techniques that are utilized have a positive academic influence on African American male students in this study?
3. What unintended consequences have been associated with these instructional strategies?

**Purpose of the Study**

*Our people have made the mistake of confusing the methods with the objectives. As long as we agree on objectives, we should never fall out with each other just because we believe in different methods or tactics or strategy. . . We have to keep in mind at all times that we are not fighting for integration, nor are we fighting for separation. We are fighting for recognition as free humans in this society.* (Malcolm X, as cited in Wynn, 1992, p. xx)

In this study, I explored African American male student perceptions of the attempted instructional techniques utilized within the middle-school classroom and whether those techniques influenced their academic needs. I addressed issues deemed important in today’s society by researching teaching strategies that may influence the academic achievement of African American males and contribute this knowledge to the development of relevant teaching strategies. This knowledge may assist in closing the achievement gap and in increasing the academic success of African American male students.

**Significance of Study**

As noted in the research, there is a need for more information regarding instructional strategies that may assist in raising the academic achievement of African American male students.

There is a need for inquiry that reveals salient attributes of productive teaching for African American youngsters at the middle school level. Such inquiry has the potential for revealing the relations between productive instructional strategies for African American youngsters employed in different situations and further clarifying
the relationship between cultural practices and values and classroom instruction (Hollins & Oliver, 1999, p.66).

This case study focused on factors that influence increased academic achievement with African American males. The information gathered could be useful to schools faced with developing efficient and effective intervention to prevent student failure, dropout, and retention. It would also assist in the endeavor to reduce the academic achievement gap between black and white students, with an asserted effort on gaining educational equity among all students.

A review of the extant literature revealed that most studies involved programs that focused on academic achievement from the educator’s point of view. What makes this study unique is that it analyzed African American male student perspectives of instructional strategies and their success. I felt that research utilizing the uniqueness of the individuals and researchers might add an array of information for education and educators. Thus, adding verification of the significance of the case study.

Hopkins (1997) suggested that there is a great need for comprehensive analysis of African American male student academic achievement in the public schools. He also explained that African American male experiences are needed to assist those who are interested in educating African American males.

This study may aid in providing educators with information regarding African American male student perceptions of the attempted techniques and strategies used to help increase their success. The students offered suggestions and opinions of whether teaching methods were successful, enjoyable, or both. Their perceptions may help teachers create
lessons and activities that include strategies beneficial to this student population. The information from this study may benefit policy makers and educators who make administrative decisions, such as allocating resources, hiring teachers, scheduling, grouping, creating staff development, and creating methods of assessments.

An in-depth case study of this sort may present valuable information to everyone in the educational community, including parents, teachers, administrators, school systems, and school board members. Members of the educational community may benefit from learning how to broaden the skills and knowledge of every student within the learning environment, including African American males. The intent is to assist in reducing the achievement gap and increasing the academic achievement of African American male students.

The hour is here; it is imperative that parents, students, community leaders, educators, and researchers who are interested in teaching Black males take control and make a promise to the countless numbers of African American males who are continually miseducated in the public schools. The national African American community and others interested in teaching Black males should continue research and teaching in hopes of finding the most optimal conditions in which African Americans may be educated. We should, then, design, implement, and maintain community schools and programs that will teach Black males. (Hopkins, 1997, p. 113)

**Overview of Remaining Chapters**

Chapter II, the literature review, presents information on teacher instructional strategies and expectations, students’ diverse learning styles, cooperative and learning
activities, and environmental issues, such as cultural sensitivities, school and classroom environment, and communication among school, parent, and community. Chapter III describes the methodology, including the study design, research site, data collection methods, data analysis, ethical issues, limitations of the study, and the researcher’s professional background. Chapter IV presents the study’s findings, and finally Chapter V discusses the study’s implications and presents recommendations.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Sensitizing Conceptual Framework

Extant research literature continues to reflect the wide differences in academic achievement between African American and Caucasian students. To meet the challenge of providing a valuable workforce for the future, educators must do a better job of increasing the performance of this African American group, with a special emphasis on African American males who repeatedly appear in the lowest academic performing group.

Research has indicated social and cultural factors that affect African American male students and how they respond academically. This literature review begins with studies of the link between education and gainful employment for African American males. The literature helps in understanding how the workforce has changed from manual labor, blue-collar jobs to intellectual, white-collar jobs, which left a great deal of African Americans unemployed from lack of education, experience, expertise, or a combination of these factors.

As a result of an unemployment crisis, families have suffered great economic loss. The literature shows that, when these economic downfalls occur, the families experience hardships in their physical health and mental well being. Research indicates that the children’s academic development and success are affected as a result.

The low socioeconomic status of some families of African American males has been noted in the literature review as contributing to academic problems. Students from low
socioeconomic status often drop out of school, which leads to other negative results, including unemployment, poverty, and criminal activity.

I examined and present several studies of teacher attributes and how these are associated with African American male students’ academic achievement. One teacher attribute connected to student performance is the instructional strategies that teachers utilize in the classroom. Some popular strategies emphasized in the research are the reciprocal model, collaborative instruction, and differentiated instruction.

In addition to strategies that teachers exhibit, there are certain traits teachers portray that experts claim have a positive influence on African American male students. These traits are teachers having self-understanding, being child focused, obtaining content mastery, and using proficient instructional strategies. Research also points out how important it is for teachers to have high expectations for students and for teachers to use various techniques that can motivate students to learn.

Student attributes are important to consider when building academic success. Reflected in the literature review are the most common learning styles that educators report as successful with African American males. The techniques emphasized are contextual learning, cooperative learning, interactive activities, mnemonic activities, and movement-for-learning activities. Understanding these strategies is critical when attempting to compare the related research to students’ perceptions.

Just as the teacher having high expectations is critical to African American male student performance, the research supports that the student himself must possess high self-
expectations for his success. A student’s motivation and environment also affect his learning and performance.

Research has also linked African American male academic performance and African American male cultural sensitivities, which may consist of understanding the student’s family, background, circumstances, and so forth. The art of communication reflects their cultural sensitivities. I have discussed and expanded upon the nature of the communication between the student and school and between the school and parent or the community.

This literature review has provided a more detailed examination of instructional strategies utilized with African American males. Each area of the research provides links to understanding how to improve the academic achievement and workforce readiness of African American males.

As I entered Red Oak Middle School, I examined African American male student perspectives regarding instructional strategies. I analyzed the students’ and teachers’ instructional beliefs, while comparing their similarities and differences with the current literature.

While a researcher may anticipate findings based on the literature review, he or she may find the need to add, elaborate, or delete dimensions to the framework as his or her theoretical understanding expands. During the qualitative research process, a researcher may see something that has not been explained or examined and must, therefore, consider revision. In this study, as an experienced educator, I obviously had pre-existing background knowledge related to the subject I was researching that assisted me in understanding the concepts I explored.
A visual representation of the conceptual framework (see Figure 1) depicts the information presented in the literature review. This diagram assists with explaining the core concepts, their anticipated relationships, and how they may add to the African American male academic achievement.

Ford, Obiakor, and Patton (1995) argued that two interrelated conditions explain some of the problems African American children experience in schools. On the one hand, slavery, segregation, and racism are political variables that have educational components. The educational process has been used to cripple African Americans (Woodson, as cited in Ford et al., 1995). In other words, the educational opportunities that were granted were not of equal proportions.

On the other hand, independent of the political environment, cultural diversity presents its own necessities because few educators seem to understand its meaning and value in explaining the low academic performance of Africans in the schools today. As a result, educators placed emphasis on the African American’s social class (socioeconomic status), or racial identity. Therefore, educators should spend more time attempting to understand who the African American males are in an effort to educate them appropriately rather than placing blame on society.

A high school diploma no longer guarantees employment as it did in the past, and employers need larger numbers of people to work at jobs that are not challenging intellectually. Unfortunately, most of these jobs do not pay well (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Even college graduates are finding that their schooling does not ensure success in the hunt for a job (Rothstein, 1992).
Figure 1. Conceptual framework of core concepts in African American male achievement. Developed by Taylor (2005).
Although the general educational level in the United States has risen, a large number of Americans lack basic skills, and these deficits impede gainful employment (McWhirther et al., 1998). Weis (1990) explained how some of these inequities in employment began:

At the end of World War II, American corporations dominated world markets. The American steel industry, for example, was virtually the only major producer in the world. By the 1960’s, Germany, Japan, France, Italy, and Britain had rebuilt their steel industries, using the most advanced technology, and they became highly competitive with American industry. By the 1970s the American steel industry was in decline relative to that of other nations. For whatever reasons (and many have been offered), the industry continues in a decline and its effects are widely felt in the United States. (p. 6)

Without the proper training and education, African American males may be at a greater disadvantage within the workforce. As already noted, this disadvantage may result from African American males lagging behind educationally and economically in society.

Ethnic minority families have experienced a disproportionate share of income and job loss, primarily because of structural changes in the economy (McWhirther et al., 1998). The steady transition of downtown areas from production centers to administrative centers has generated some increases in white-collar employment but decreases in blue-collar jobs (McWhirther et al., 1998). In the last two decades, one in every four manufacturing jobs was eliminated. Because African Americans and other minority groups reside in inner-city areas in disproportionate numbers and are overrepresented in the blue-collar jobs that have been
disappearing, they are disproportionately affected by displacement and unemployment (McWhirther et al., 1998).

High rates of unemployment and job loss distinguished the 1980s and 1990s from the four preceding decades (McWhirther et al., 1998). Two factors contributed to these problems. First, major manufacturing industries decided to alter production in response to foreign competition. Second, back-to-back recessions in the early 1980s resulted in an unemployment rate of more than 10%, the highest unemployment rate since the Great Depression of the 1930s (McWhirther et al., 1998). The economic upswing in the latter half of the decade only partially ameliorated those problems, and the deep, 2-year recession in the early 1990s restored them. Reemployment lessoned, but did not reverse, the decline because wages were not restored to their previous level (McWhirther et al., 1998).

Economic loss influences a child’s development through the changes it produces in parental attitude, disposition, and behavior. There is solid evidence that mental health and physical well-being are affected by economic decline (McLloyd, 1989). Unemployed parents are more dissatisfied with themselves and with their lives, feel victimized, and are more anxious, depressed, and hostile than are employed parents (McWhirther et al., 1998). These changes in attitude, disposition, and behavior strain family relationships and increase family stress. The net effect is negative for children’s development and their success at school as well (McWhirther et al., 1998). The family’s attitude towards society and education may highly influence student belief in the purpose of a good education.

For many young people, minority status is associated with fragmented families, poor living conditions, and low socioeconomic status (McWhirther et al., 1998). McWhirther
asserted that the historical mistreatment of ethnic minority populations and the continuing ethos of racism have contributed to the growth of large, high risk ethnic minority groups who are considerably disadvantaged in the educational system.

Academic problems and academic failure are associated with family income (Tucker, 1999). National mathematics achievement data indicate that 30% of low-income children scored below basic achievement levels (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). Statistics also show that youth from families with the lowest incomes discontinue school without receiving a high school certificate or diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). Dropping out of school also increases the likelihood of unemployment, poverty, and crime, all of which negatively affect the lives of all Americans (Tucker, 1999). When African American children fail, drop out of school, or are suspended from school, neighborhoods are put at risk because these youth become vulnerable to engaging in crime and mischief. Tucker (1999) stated that it is true that “an idle mind is the devil’s workshop” (p. 47).

Wilson (1996) argued that the disappearance of work in America’s cities is associated with other events that tend to leave the poorest parts of these cities isolated and powerless. As poverty concentrates in particular areas of a city, citizens lose not only personal resources but also social resources, such as access to information and the ability to monitor and control activities and events within their communities. Constrained by structural conditions that support widespread unemployment, residents of poor central city areas may begin to share perceptions of low self-efficacy regarding their ability to have an impact on community institutions (Wilson, 1996). This feeling of inability to control or have a voice in your own
community may assist in isolating African Americans from others in society, therefore continuing to fall behind other groups.

Duhon and Harris (1999) agreed that, in spite of Brown v. Board of Education (1954), the sociology of the 1950s and 1960s did not support equity educational programs for all students. According to Jencks and Phillips (1998), in a country as racially polarized as the United States, no single change taken in isolation could possibly eliminate the entire legacy of slavery and Jim Crow or usher in an era of full racial equality. But if racial equality is America’s goal, reducing the black–white test score gap would probably do more to promote this goal than any other strategy that could command broad political support. In the 1998-99 school year, about 48% of black students in grades 3 through 8 scored at or above grade level in reading and math, which was 30 points below white students and 20 points below the North Carolina state average (Education Week, 2000).

Academic failure is more prevalent among African American children than among European American children (Tucker, 1999). The high school completion rate for African Americans is only 81%, whereas it is 90% for European Americans (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). The national dropout rates for European American students, Hispanic American students, and African American students were 4.48%, 9.1%, and 10.0%, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). These data show how African American students tend to drop out of school at a much higher rate than their Caucasian counterparts, preventing them from obtaining the quality education needed for academic achievement.
As cited in Tucker (1999), African American males are typically outscored by their female counterparts on National Assessment of Education Progress reading tests. This is another educational gap that needs to be addressed.

Concern over African American male students scoring below all other students on standardized tests has led researchers to focus on strategies that will increase the achievement level of black male students. According to a report from the Governor of North Carolina in 2000 regarding the persistent gap in achievement between minority and white students, state and local educational leaders must commit and take action to address the most pressing issue in public education today. According to the Executive Director of the Justice Center, “As we enter this new Century, the achievement gap is no longer acceptable or excusable. I believe one of the reasons we offer an education is to allow students an opportunity to have a meaningful and successful life” (North Carolina Justice & Community Development Center, 2000). This also includes students who fall at the bottom of the achievement ladder, African American males.

Students with at-risk characteristics have been defined in this research as students with parents who have low educational attainment, low socioeconomic status, minority culture membership, or a single-parent family (Austin, 2000). Important to note is that the identification of a student as at-risk may differ from classroom to classroom, culture to culture, teacher to teacher, even within a classroom as the climate changes within the year (Donmoyer, 1993). Often, this at-risk population includes a great number of African American males. Therefore, in this study, I have reviewed literature that focuses on suggested teaching strategies or interventions for the at-risk student.
There is a tendency to ignore the diversity among African Americans in various areas, including acculturation, characteristics, economic status, education, family structures, lifestyles, religious background and practices, and values. He (1999) explained that any intervention to prevent and modify behavior and academic failure among African American children must recognize and adjust for the foregoing specified differences in their life experiences. Diversity among African Americans must be considered in program development, policymaking, and program implementation. Therefore, this review has included an examination of techniques cited as related to African American male students.

**Teacher**

*Instructional Strategies*

Teachers need a wide array of strategies for teaching in order to respond appropriately to student needs (Anderson, 1985, Nieto, 1992). I have focused on two methods in this review, the reciprocal interaction approach and differentiated instruction, because of the diversity of techniques within these two methods.

The reciprocal interaction approach builds ethnic and language minority students’ academic success by providing a variety of teaching methods and curriculum programs (Garcia, 1991). The reciprocal model encourages collaborative learning and interaction among students and teachers. According to Cummins (1986, 1989), the reciprocal interaction teaching model empowers ethnic and language minority students and their academic success because the teachers guide and facilitate instruction rather than attempt to maintain absolute control of student learning. In other words, this approach involves greater dialogue between the students and the teachers.
Hollins, King, and Hayman (1994) observed that the instructional methods in the reciprocal interaction model appear to work most successfully with poor ethnic and language minority students because they tend to focus on making meaning out of content. Recent research attributes the failure of teacher-directed instruction of a skills-based curriculum to teachers not providing students with a larger meaning or purpose for learning. According to the research, applying the instructional content to real life adds value to learning for students.

Garcia (1991) elaborated that students tend to see academic tasks as relevant to their lives with this orientation. This approach often includes instruction in basic skills, and academic content is organized around themes that students and teachers select together (Garcia, 1991).

Differentiated instruction is a strategy that responds to the student needs. Determination of how children learn gives the teacher guidance regarding the mechanisms and strategies for instruction (Ford et al., 1995).

Reyes (1992) emphasized that the popular forms of “process instruction” are not always successful with language minority students unless the teachers make the programs culturally supportive:

Teachers must rise above the euphoria over whole language and writing process and recognize that these programs are not perfect or equally successful for all. They are successful only to the extent that teachers understand the theories, assume the role of mediators, not merely facilitators, and create culturally and linguistically sensitive learning environments for all learners. (p. 440)
According to Wynn (1992), educators must alter their teaching styles and strategies to motivate, captivate, and inspire African American male students. Wynn (1992) also listed recommended strategies for teachers regarding African American males:

1. Don’t teach from the front of the room; be mobile.
2. Don’t embarrass our young men in front of their peers.
3. If they don’t have the answer, spend as much time as you need to have them discover the answer for themselves.
4. Don’t develop your seating patterns by alphabets or based on test scores.

According to Ford et al. (1995), there are requisite teacher traits that will help African American students to do well. These characteristics are listed in Table 1. Through this study, I aimed to capture African American male student perceptions of these strategies. I compared these students’ opinions regarding instructional strategies to the information gained from the literature.

**Expectations**

“I asked a low-performing ninth grader what he would like to have his teachers know about him. His prompt reply was ‘that I do want to learn’” (Bridges, 1991). An experienced teacher in North Carolina noted that oftentimes from poor performance of students; we infer a lack of ability, and then turn about and explain that poor performance by lack of ability. Nothing has a better chance of positively influencing how the African American male will ultimately come to view himself and his destiny than solid academic skills and the confidence they can instill (Bridges, 1999).
### Table 1

**Requisite Traits of Teachers of African American Children**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Self-understanding  | • Sees self as part of each child’s community  
 • Models the behaviors expected of the child  
 • Evinces awareness of own values and belief systems  
 • Manifests awareness and control of own prejudices  
 • Exemplifies determination and commitment to teach African American children  
 • Maintains a sense of humor                                                                                                      |
| Child focus         | • Likes children  
 • Gives each child an identity base and enhances child’s self-esteem  
 • Helps each child to develop prerequisite skills and abilities  
 • Promotes equitable teacher-student relationships  
 • Encourages children to learn collaboratively  
 • Makes expectations known to the child in a friendly, firm, calm, and confident manner  
 • React appropriately to child’s display of hostility  
 • Praises that which is praiseworthy  
 • Values multiple simultaneously exchanges; neither expects nor requires silence often                                                                 |
| Content mastery     | • Knows the sequence of development stages  
 • Understands cultural indices of the child and family  
 • Understands and recognizes the intellectual, emotional, social, and cultural strengths of the child  
 • Knows subject matter and relates it to the child’s experience and life                                                                 |

*(table continues)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic proficiency</td>
<td>• Draws upon cultural experiences of the child and family to include authentic cultural perspectives in the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Uses the child’s culture to help the child to create meaning and understand the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Possesses a repertoire of varied teaching styles and adjusts them to accommodate varied learning styles among children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Maintains participatory, dynamic, and spontaneous classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Displays flexibility in the content of a structured learning environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Maintains a high rate of academically engaged time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Expands child’s capacity to appreciate and deal with differences in others and helps child to perceive self in an international or global perspective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


When attending college and receiving a degree in education, a common phrase educators heard repeated was “the belief that all children can learn,” but their own experiences may sometimes tell them otherwise. As a result, experts and minority parents say that at least some teachers exposed to low-achieving minority pupils year after year may come to expect less of them (Viadero, 2000).

Educators cannot have negative feelings about minority students and expect them to maximize their full potential (Obiakor, 1994). Teachers have to change their mental frameworks to assist minority or at-risk students in achieving their goals and objectives. “These kids have all the potential that other kids have” (Baer, 1991, p. 25). According to
Hopkins (1997), there must be a reexamination of teacher attitudes toward African American males and a reconfiguration of the teaching styles most suitable for African American males.

The findings of the Missouri Commissioner of Education Task Force, the students, and the experiences of successful educators all pointed to high expectations for all students as the single most important nontangible element to increase African American achievement in school (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [DPI], 2000). “Children will do what you ask,” said Phillip Rigdon, principal at Merrick-Moore Elementary School for 27 years. There is no need to stoop to public expectations (Simmons, 2000).

According to Dellinger (1991), many black students are taught survival skills, the fundamentals, and little else. Minimal efforts are deposited into them with no expectations for higher-order reasoning. For many of them, their mental acuity tells them they are not getting much out of school, so they become alienated from it and slide through on the bottom with as little effort as possible (Dellinger, 1991).

There are specific tips to guide teachers, according to Obiakor (1994), in helping minority students develop accurate self-concepts. Teachers should learn to identify characteristics that help students understand who they are, what they value, and how to set and reach for realistic goals (Obiakor, 1994). Obiakor also suggested teachers find and develop the students’ intrinsic motivation that makes them aspire to work hard to reach their goals and take pride in their successes. In addition, he recommends including feedback to students that show both strengths and, for the sake of making improvements, weaknesses.

Teacher and parental expectations represent the single most important building block in African American young men who seek an education that prepares them to achieve
excellence and empowers them to develop solutions to the many conflicts confronting them in their lives:

We must raise our expectations of our young men to greater levels of achievement in all areas that we have previously discussed. We must consistently communicate our expectations of excellence; that we not only believe that they are capable, but that we expect them to excel. We must establish and reinforce their personal responsibilities, character, and behavior in a manner consistent with our expectations of exceptional goal achievement. (Wynn, 1996, p. 60)

As the researcher, I asked the participants in this study about their views of teacher expectations regarding academic achievement.

Student

Diverse Learning Styles

Many educators agree that teachers must adapt their lessons to the learning modalities of the students being taught, the learning style of a typical African American male student should be inventoried (Harris & Duhon, 1999). Teachers who consider these preferences when designing lessons should successfully motivate the African American male learner (Ford & Harris, 1994).

Contextual learning is a strategy that has significant merit in the instruction of African American children (Ford et al., 1995). This model fits some African American children who perceive the world holistically.

Inasmuch as these children function from a perspective that emphasizes interrelationships and interdependence, the context becomes as important as the
content. The psychological and pedagogical milieu of the lesson is critical because African American children place great value on interpersonal dynamics (Ford et al., 1995, p. 141)

In addition to unlocking a content area, instruction should foster transfer of knowledge to other areas and provide a context of prior knowledge to which students assimilate new learning. Instruction should include strategic integration within and across subjects. This aim is to help students acquire knowledge that is rich in detail and will generate new questions and activities (Kozloff, LaNunziata, & Cowardin, 1999).

Teachers who use a variety of instructional strategies and learning activities offer students opportunities to learn in ways that are responsive to students’ own styles (Hopkins, 1997). Students have unique aptitudes, cognitive styles, and communication styles. The variety helps them develop and strengthen other approaches to learning. Hopkins (1997) also explained this variety helps them to develop and strengthen their skills in other domains.

**Cooperative Learning**

According to Harris and Duhon (1999), the African American male student thrives best in a cooperative atmosphere rather than in a competitive one where they might appear less intelligent. The researchers also reported that a varied teaching methodology is more beneficial than the traditional, repetitive methodology for these young men:

The black male student has been observed to exhibit field-dependency in learning, that is, he is unable to distinguish the different parts needed to solve a problem. The black male student is a concrete learner and abstract concepts are difficult for him to
grasp. He is a person, rather than object oriented and appears to prefer intuitive reasoning to inductive or deductive reasoning. (Harris & Duhon, 1999, p. 18)

Like Harris and Duhon (1999), Ford et al. (1995) contended that cooperative learning lends itself to African American children because this type of approach involves peer interaction. The merits of cooperative learning, including the increased acceptance of other racial and ethnic groups, have been cited in the literature (Slavin, 1992; Willis, 1992):

The children may engage in group projects, which entail sharing responsibilities to complete joint assignments. Another type of cooperative learning experience is parallel activity, in which children work in the same setting to complete individual and different tasks. Cooperative learning also may take the form of peer tutoring, in which a child aids another in review or practice concepts that have been taught by the teacher. (Ford et al., 1995, p. 141)

Learning Activities

Learning activity techniques for African Americans tended to group into three categories: interactive activities, mnemonic activities, and movement-for-learning activities (Ford et al., 1995). Some of these instructional techniques, listed in Table 2, have been found by master teachers as effective. “In summary, teachers need to understand that different students respond differently to different situations” (Obiakor 1994, p. 44).
### Table 2

*Techniques for Teaching African American Learners*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity / Technique</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>• Keyboarding: using a typewriter, word processor, or computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Enactive learning: using manipulatives to aid learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Group learning: completing joint assignments working with others, peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tutoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mnemonic</td>
<td>• Audible recall: repeating information orally to facilitate recall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Iconic learning activities: using pictures and figures of important data as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>memory aids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mediated learning: matching associated images to information to provoke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>recall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Acronym or acrostic stimulated recall: first letter cueing to recall a series of terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement-for-learning</td>
<td>• Theatrics: role playing, pantomime, theater rehearsal techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rhythmics: beating, clapping, or stepping to a pattern with recitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Locomotion: marching, dancing during instruction or recitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Creative content construction: writing content in poetry, creating and singing songs as a report, making up and performing rap as a lesson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Environment

*Cultural Sensitivities*

Developing an understanding of students’ lives also enables the teacher to increase the relevance of lessons and make examples more meaningful. Teachers should appreciate and enthusiastically and positively accommodate the similarities and differences among
students’ cultures. “We need to get to know who these kids are” (Baer, 1991, p. 25). Cultural patterns among contemporary African Americans are as diverse as the experiences of this large segment of the nation (Ford et al., 1995). Indeed, the cross-cultural fertilization that has occurred has resulted in as much intracultural variance among African Americans and other groups in this society. However, some generalizations retain validity regarding African American children (Ford et al., 1995).

Despite much individual variability, African Americans generally vary from white Americans in cognitive abilities and cognitive styles (Ford et al., 1995). The following patterns are generally evident among African Americans:

3. Greater reliance on visual rather than auditory input.
4. Positive response to music and rhythm.
5. Greater response to cooperative learning.

Gardner (1983) theorized there are multiple intelligences. Learning styles among children are, at a minimum, as varied as these intelligences (Ford et al., 1995). According to Taylor (1997), individuals from certain cultures show a preference for certain learning styles over others, and this preference may affect classroom performance. Schools must recognize, therefore, that students with diverse backgrounds have a favored learning style that may affect their academic performance (Taylor, 1997). Modifying teaching methods to accommodate these differences in learning styles may assist some African American male students.
School and Classroom Environment

Whereas European American culture emphasizes quiet for study, many African Americans prefer to study with music or conversation occurring in the room (Ford et al., 1995). Harris and Duhon (1999) disagreed and proposed that the optimal learning environment for the black male student is a classroom devoid of noise and that, therefore, the teacher should maintain strict discipline to maintain a quiet atmosphere. Harris and Duhon further contended that African American male students require a very structured environment. Determining the students’ perspectives on these issues might be beneficial to educators in creating the optimal learning environment for African American male students.

Ford et al (1995) also argued that furniture arrangement in the classroom can affect learning for each child. The typical formal organization of the classroom and seating furniture may not be conducive to learning for all children. Harris and Duhon (1999) concurred and reported that these students function best when allowed to have an informal seating arrangement in a brightly lit room.

As suggested by Obiakor (1994), educators should create a school environment where students feel accepted as part of the learning environment. He added that schools should help the students recognize when they are being productive and which behaviors best lead to their academic success.

Communication—School, Parent and Community

The Missouri Commissioner of Education Task Force listed several recommendations to increase achievement and lower the gap among African American students. One suggestion was engaging African American parents and community leaders in the life of the
school. Ongoing, two-way communication between the school and parents helps parents to understand the expectations, keeps them informed of the child’s progress, and guides them on how to help their children outside of school (NCPublicSchools.org., 2000).

Involving parents and other community members in authentic ways in the school program has substantial instructional benefits (Comer, 1988). Parents and other community members can play a significant role in determining what is an appropriate education for their children. Comer (1988) also suggested that, when adults across racial, class, and cultural lines share information and power within a school, students are more likely to cross these lines and perform well in both languages and cultures.

Ford et al. (1995) asserted that communication systems also vary from culture to culture. They reported one notable characteristic of African Americans’ discussion style is simultaneous talk instead of alternating talk, which is the European American style. Colorful language is another trait of African American verbal communication these researchers identified. Children learn early the art of verbal offense and defense that occurs in heated debates, such as “signifying” (i.e., making derogative comments about a person to the person referenced) and “playing dozens” (i.e., making denigrating statements about the person’s genealogy). Educators should capitalize on this artful use of language in the classroom (Ford et al., 1995, p. 130).

Nonverbal communication skills are also highly developed among African Americans. Forms of nonverbal communication are proxemics (referring to one’s personal space) and haptics (the proclivity and pattern of touching) (Ford et al., 1995). It is critical to understand and develop good communication with African American students if teachers are
to develop meaningful pedagogical relationships. This communication may assist students in broadening their academic skills by way of helping teachers utilize appropriate methods within their lessons.

Summary

Educators must work together in identifying, analyzing, and resolving the multitude of problems confronting African American males. The problems may be difficult and the recommended solutions may not be to our liking. Unfortunately, it is the debates over the solutions that often handcuff us into doing nothing or which cause us to implement only an abbreviated version of the solution that we proposed. (Wynn, 1992, p. xiii)

Many African American students are trapped at achievement levels that leave them terribly unprepared either for the next level of education or the world of work. In addition to the socioeconomic differences among racial and ethnic groups, experts say that parental involvement, peer culture, student motivation, teacher expectations, and other factors all have an effect on this problem (Education Week on the Web, 1999).

In the new global economy, the skills and talents of every person will be needed if North Carolina is to remain competitive. It simply makes no sense for schools to be losing or excluding thousands of minority students each year. We must reverse this trend or risk losing a generation (North Carolina Justice & Community Development Center, 2000). As Americans, we cannot correct the prejudices, biases and discrimination of the past, but we are morally obligated to help every child learn and succeed at higher levels in the future (Wynn, 1992).
Wynn (1996) challenged parents and teachers to create an environment in which African American young men are motivated to become empowered to develop the skills they need to make positive and constructive choices in their lives:

Our people have made the mistake of confusing the methods with the objectives. As long as we agree on objectives, we should never fall out with each other just because we believe in different methods or tactics or strategy…We have to keep in mind at all times that we are not fighting for integration, nor are we fighting for separation. We are fighting for recognition as free humans in this society. (Malcolm X, as cited in Wynn, 1992, p. xx)

This review of the literature summarized the teacher and student attributes related to student achievement and examined students’ learning styles in relation to instructional strategies. In the following chapter, the research methods, including the research site, data collection methods, and types of analyses, are presented. The ethical issues and study limitations are reviewed.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study explored African American male student perceptions of the attempted instructional strategies in the middle school classroom and whether those techniques influenced their academic needs. Twelve African American males participated in providing rich information through interviews, focus groups, and observations. Key stakeholders in education should find this study helpful in creating academic success in African American males.

Study Design

Applied researchers work on human and societal problems (Patton, 2002). The purpose of applied research is to contribute knowledge that will help people understand the nature of a problem in order to intervene, thereby allowing human beings to more effectively control their environment. Applied interdisciplinary fields, such as education, are especially problem oriented rather than discipline oriented.

“Qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed data about a much smaller number of people and cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 227). “Qualitative methods permit inquiry into selected issues in great depth with careful attention to detail, context, and nuance; that data collection need not be constrained by predetermined analytical categories contributes to the potential breadth of qualitative inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 227). This approach applied to this study because there were a small number of participants who
provided in-depth, detailed information that assisted me in gaining the breadth of this qualitative study.

**Research Site**

Patton (2002) proposed that researchers should “think through what cases they could learn the most from” and select those cases for the study (p. 223). I used a case analysis method to study a middle school in central North Carolina. A pseudonym of Red Oak Middle School was assigned to preserve confidentiality.

Red Oak Middle, with an enrollment of 1000 students, consisted of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. It had previously been rated as exemplary in achievement and a school of distinction on the state’s end-of-grade tests under the state’s school improvement plan. During the 2001-2002 school year, they met the expected growth standard, with 84.7% of the students achieving scores equal to or greater than grade level standards.

This research site was selected because of its background and experience with remedial and accelerated instructional teaching techniques. The school’s teaching staff had 4 years’ experience with various forms of academic intervention. These types of teaching strategies emphasized varied learning styles. The diversity of teaching styles and the number of years they had been used at the site meant the student would have more choices of strategies to assess and yield more data for the study.

**Researcher’s Professional Background**

The belief that every child can learn is what motivated me to enter and to continue in the educational field. My personal and professional background has greatly influenced my beliefs about educational issues and how students have the ability to learn. I have been an
educator for about 9 years. I have taught in the elementary setting for seven years, and I now serve in an administrative role. Both of these positions have taught me a great deal about how to put students’ best interests first in every decision I make. As an administrator, I have learned to consider every student and know I am responsible for doing everything in my power to develop every child.

Education is important in my life because of my parents, aunts, and Godparent having served as educators. Their influence led me to focus my attention on ensuring other children have wonderful educational experiences and develop a love for learning as I have.

An advantage I had while conducting this research is that I understand the language that educators use. I had a degree of knowledge required for explaining the concepts and terminology used throughout the study. Also, being African American assisted me while conducting interviews with the African American students. I understood their slang language and terminology. The students felt more comfortable sharing information knowing I had a common background. Being a female also had an advantage because the students were comfortable with and preferred female teachers and that aided in developing a relationship with me.

Growing up as a minority, with and around African American males, I had an understanding and a concern for African American males. I was concerned that African American males continuously rank at the bottom academically on standardized tests. I had a burning desire to find information that would be beneficial to all educators and would assist them in creating educational opportunities that are equitable and successful with African American males.
While this understanding and relationship with African American males provided positive influences in my work, I understood that it might lend biases if not careful in interpreting the data. Because this subject is dear to my heart, I endeavored to maintain an open mind and view things as they were and not as I hoped they would be. Therefore, I obtained a peer debriefer to review the material collected to maintain adequacy in the information presented. I also specified the biases that were presented and continuously reminded myself of them to prevent them from becoming an issue.

This study was conducted in an effort to gather information on strategies that have been successful in raising the achievement levels of African American males. If educators focus their attention on techniques that will aid in raising the academic achievement, I believe that all students, including African American males, can be more academically victorious throughout their school career and life.

**Data Collection Methods**

In conducting this research, various applied qualitative methods were utilized, including interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis. “Using applied research aids in understanding the nature and sources of human and societal problems” (Patton, 2002, p. 224). By using a combination of research methods, called triangulation, Patton (2002) explained that a researcher adds strength to the study. Triangulation assists in gathering information through a variety of sources. Each source may reveal different features of the study. “Studies that use only one method are more vulnerable to errors than studies that use multiple methods in which different types of data provide cross-data validity checks” (Patton, 2002, p. 248).
Case study techniques were vital in this research. When analyzing a case study that has much information relating to the research topic, it can assist with expanding knowledge and create great understanding of the research questions. “One may learn a great deal more by studying in depth a small number [of participants] carefully” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). I learned essential knowledge with a small number of study participants in an effort to gain intense understanding of the African American male students. I gathered rich and thick descriptions of the data throughout the study. The purpose of this technique was to help the readers “determine how closely their situations match[ed] the research situations, and hence, whether findings [could] be transferred” (Merriam, 1998, p. 211).

**Sampling Procedures**

Decisions about sample size and sampling strategies depended on prior decisions about the appropriate unit of analysis to study (Patton, 2002). The units of analysis for this study included viewpoints of administrators, teachers, and students. The primary focus of data collection in my study was on what was happening to individuals in a setting and how individuals were affected by the setting (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) explained that “individual case studies and variation across individuals would focus the analysis” (p. 228). Therefore, my analysis focused on African American male students, with regard to their perceptions of instructional techniques. The reason for and power of using purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling means that one selects from cases that yield a great deal of information about issues of central importance to the study’s
purpose. The site and participants were examples of purposeful sampling because of the rich specific data collected purposefully from them.

The participants in this study were carefully selected based on criteria presented in order to collect meaningful data to help answer the research questions. The school and administrators were selected based on recommendations from central office regarding the types of instructional strategies used. The key participants were selected by the administration based upon the criteria presented. The teachers were asked to identify 6 academically proficient and 6 academically struggling African American male students, by using the most recent results on standardized testing and grades on the report cards. The teacher made this determination. Twelve African American male students were then selected to participate.

Interviews

I interviewed 2 teachers and 1 administrator who were successful in implementing various teaching interventions and strategies in a middle school. These teachers were chosen for the study because they had previous experience with various interventions and teaching strategies, their classes were comprised of some African American males, and their classes were available to me. Each teacher revealed techniques and strategies they have utilized in their classroom with their students.

After gaining approval from the university and school system to conduct the research, an introductory letter was mailed to the informants. The letter explained how this research was voluntary and asked for their consent to participate in the research (see Appendix A). The letter also explained that the participants’ identities would be kept confidential. Each
informant was asked to sign a consent form if he or she agreed to participate in the study (see Appendix A).

Multiple sources of data were collected in several ways, including interviews of administrators, teachers, and African American male students. Patton (2002) suggested that researchers interview participants to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind and to gather their stories. The purpose of interviewing is to enter the other person’s perspective (Patton, 2002).

Administrators and teachers were interviewed to learn their opinions and feelings concerning the strategies and techniques they have used with African American male students. I sought to understand their views of the successes, strengths, and weaknesses of the various techniques according to the one administrator’s and two teachers’ perceptions.

A significant part of this case study involved gathering the views of African American male students regarding the teaching techniques and strategies used by their teachers. To collect meaningful data, good rapport must exist between the researcher and interviewees. “Empathy is the foundation of rapport” (Merriam, 1998, p. 23). A researcher has a better interview in an atmosphere of trust (Merriam, 1998). I created rapport and trust with participants by having discussions with them prior to collecting information in the interviews and focus group interviews.

An interview guide was designed specifically to gather attitudes and opinions of the students, teachers, and administrators (see Appendix B). “An interview guide, or schedule as it is sometimes called, is nothing more than a list of questions you intend to ask in an interview” (Merriam, 1998, p. 81). Most interviews in qualitative research are semi-
structured, thus the interview guide should contain several specific questions, including more open-ended questions that could be followed up with probes and perhaps a list of some areas, topics, and issues about which the researcher does not have enough information (Merriam, 1998). I created a semi-structured interview process, consisting of open-ended questions to encourage the participants to share their feelings, opinions, knowledge, and sensory information on the teaching techniques and strategies, as they related to the success of African American males and their perceptions of those strategies.

According to Patton (2002), an interviewer faces the challenge of making it possible for the person being interviewed to bring the interviewer into his or her world. The interviewer is trying to understand a person’s world and worldview and “that’s why you ask focused questions in a sensitive manner” (Patton, p. 347). As Patton suggested, the standard open-ended interview format helped me minimize variation in the questions posed to interviewees. In the spirit of emergent or open-ended interviewing, it’s important in formal interviews to provide an opportunity for the interviewee to have the final say, which was done in this study (Patton, 2002).

The 12 African American male student participants were interviewed three times. The first interview took place prior to my observing them in the classroom and another took place after the classroom observations. A third interview took place using a focus group format. The interviews were audiotaped for accuracy. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour each. Participants were told they could end their participation at any time.
Focus Group Interviews

An important part of this study was the focus group interview with the African American male students. Focus group interviews, according to Patton (2002) are interviews with “a small group of people on a specific topic” (p. 385). A copy of the interview guide that was used is in Appendix B.

Focus group interviews created a nonthreatening environment that allowed the students to support one another and respond to questions more freely (Patton, 2002). This format allowed them to listen to each other’s replies and add remarks if inspired. “Participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other” (Patton, 2002, p. 386).

I conducted two focus group interviews. Each interview consisted of 6 participants. A smaller number was critical so that each student could be heard. Students could feel confident that their opinions were relevant and that they were an important part of this process.

Recording Data

The purpose of each interview is to record fully and fairly as possible that particular interviewee’s perspective (Patton, 2002). To ensure accuracy of the interviewee’s thoughts and information, I used a tape recorder during the interviews and focus groups. Tape recorders do not “tune out” conversations, change what has been said because of interpretation (either conscious or unconscious), or record words more slowly than they are spoken (Patton, 2002, p. 380). Therefore, the recorder was used to aid me in collecting the information with minimal error in transcribing and interpreting.
I also took thorough and comprehensive notes throughout the interview process as an extra precaution in case the tape recorder malfunctioned. Patton (2002) explained that verbatim note taking can make it difficult for the interviewer to be attentive to the interviewee’s needs and cues and it interferes with listening attentively. On the other hand, notes have a variety of positive purposes. Patton (2002) described note taking as helping the interviewer formulate new questions as the interview moves along and aids in probing to gain more crucial information.

The interviews and focus groups were transcribed. Reading over the notes prior to completing the transcripts can stimulate insights in future interviews (Patton, 2002). I explained to participants the purpose of using the tape recorder and obtained their permission to use it.

As recommended by Patton (2002), I recorded details about the setting and my observations about each interview immediately after the interviews had concluded (see Appendix C). These details included where the interview occurred, the conditions, and how the interviewee reacted to questions (Patton, 2002). I scheduled interviews and observations so that sufficient time was available afterward for data clarification, elaboration, and evaluation (Patton, 2002).

**Observations**

Classroom observations were conducted to understand the structure of the intervention and remediation strategies. The focus of the observations was on how the students responded to the techniques and materials the teachers used. Observations of 2 teachers, recommended by the principal, were conducted. I asked the principal to recommend
teachers who (a) had African American male students in their classes and (b) had implemented remediation strategies and interventions. Two observations were conducted with each teacher within a period of 1 week. Each observation lasted approximately 50 minutes because of the length of the class periods.

The researcher must be sensitive to the context and all variables within it, including the physical setting, the people, the overt and covert agendas, and the nonverbal behavior (Merriam, 1998, p. 21). In addition to writing field notes (see Appendix C) during the observations, I also wrote memos to myself “about the methodological aspects of the study, emerging findings, and my own reactions and reflections” (Merriam, 1998, p. 24). These memos occurred during the observations. After each observation, I wrote down my thoughts and reflections on the observations. I wrote down feelings, ideas, and impressions and speculated about what was going on (Glesne, 1999).

Data and Document Analysis

Data interpretation and analysis involve making sense out of what people have said, looking for patterns, putting together what is said in one place with what is said in another place, and integrating what different people have said (Patton, 2002). Document analysis refers to the use of a broad range of written, visual, and physical materials (Bogden & Bicklen, 1998). I used this document analysis technique when analyzing the information gathered during the individual and focus group interviews and the observations.

A document analysis was conducted throughout the study. Goals, lesson plans, memos and letters to parents, mission and vision statements, and school improvement plans were analyzed to gain a better understanding of the goals and impact of the program
implemented. A big part of the study was examining samples of student work to assist me in determining how the interventions influenced the 12 African American male student participants.

**Ethical Issues**

It is important to clarify how the researcher deals with ethical issues presented within the study. Throughout the study certain guidelines were followed to ensure protection of the human subjects studied, to aid in validity of the data, and to minimize bias from my role as the researcher.

**Confidentiality and Participation**

All information gathered during the study in interviews, observations, and focus groups was kept confidential. Understand that only I, the researcher, had access to the consent form that links subjects’ names with the subjects’ code numbers. Their identities were disguised through this specific coding.

To get more detailed information from the subjects, which increases the strength of the study, the subjects were audiotaped in two sessions (interview and focus group). Their names were pre-coded to the recording tape that was used to record the sessions. The transcriptions were also coded to protect their confidentiality. Written reports entailed the use of quoted material from the subjects as a result of these sessions.

The subject’s confidentiality would be disregarded if there was any information regarding illegal activity, abuse or neglect reported. I was obligated to report any such information to the appropriate personnel. At the conclusion of this study, the information gathered and audiotapes, identifiable only by subject number, stored in a locked file and the
key that related their name with the assigned subject number were destroyed. The information obtained from this research was used for the publication or educational purposes of this researcher only and not for any other purpose.

The student informant and his parent were asked to sign a consent form, agreeing for the informant to participate. The consent form explained the ethical issues and study procedures. Participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could at any time during the study decide to discontinue without reservation. Informants were also told there was no potential physical or mental risk to them. They were told their role was simply to inform and their participation was limited to exchanging information through interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. There was no cost to the subjects for participating in this study. The subjects were asked to share their thoughts and feelings with me on this project. The benefits for their participation was the contribution these students would make toward improving other students’ education and helping to improve society as a whole.

**Building Rapport with Participants**

According to Glesne (1999), “rapport describes the character of effective field relationships” (p. 95). In qualitative research, rapport is a “distance reducing, anxiety-quieting, trust-building mechanism that primarily serves the interest of the researcher” (p. 95). When a researcher and interviewee have established rapport, the relationship is marked by confidence and trust (Glesne, 1999).

A researcher who is “sensitive, patient, nonjudgmental, friendly, and inoffensive” (Glesne, 1998, p. 96) is more likely to establish rapport. Glesne also recommended having “a
sense of humor, high tolerance for ambiguity, wear appropriate dress and maintain confidentiality” (p. 96). She also suggested “your appearance, speech and behavior must be acceptable to the research participants” (p. 97). By utilizing these methods to build a strong rapport and relationship with the participants, vital information and data were obtained.

**Validity**

In this study, multiple sources of data collection were utilized, including individual and focus group interviews, observations, and document analysis. Triangulation aids in the validity of the study, assists in avoiding biases that may arise through research, and leads to a better understanding of the findings. Triangulation also assists in gathering information through multiple data sources (Glesne, 1999). Each source may reveal different features of the study. “Studies that use only one method are more vulnerable to errors than studies that use multiple methods in which different types of data provide cross-data validity checks” (Patton, 2002, p. 248). In this study, the multiple sources that were used to triangulate were an administrator, 2 teachers, and 12 African American male students. These sources helped to provide a different viewpoint and understanding of instructional strategies.

Triangulation aids in the validity of the study, assists in avoiding biases that may arise through research, and leads to a better understanding of the findings. Another method that helps sustain validity is the presence of the researcher in the research. Because I am an educator, I was able to comprehend and relate to a great deal of the issues discussed, and this aided in providing a clearer concept of the information. I am an administrator and found it beneficial and necessary to fully understand and appreciate the knowledge that was shared. It could also be a bias if I approached the students as such. Merriam (1998) emphasized the
researcher being aware of any personal biases and how they may influence the investigation. As an educator, I believe all children have the ability to learn to their fullest potential. Therefore, I had a pre-existing theory that African American males can be successful in any program. I clarified my biases within the study by stating what they were and constantly reflected upon them as needed. Also, a peer debriefer was used to assist in relaying the information provided by the students.

Multiple interview sessions aided in creating an atmosphere of trust with the interviewees. The rapport built with the participants helped create trust with me and strengthened validity. Also, the informants were assured confidentiality by disguising their names through coding. The information that linked their names to the codes was locked in a file cabinet until the research was complete and was then destroyed. The students were assured that the information shared would only be used for this educational process and not for any other purpose.

*Researcher’s Role*

“In a qualitative study, the researcher is the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data and, as such, can respond to the situation by maximizing opportunities for collecting and producing meaningful information” (Merriam, 1998, p. 20). Glesne (1999) explained that the more researchers are aware of their verbal and nonverbal behavior, the more attuned they are to their behavior and its effect. Another role I had as the researcher was that of a learner. As a learner, I was expected to listen, instead of functioning as an expert, or an authority, in which I would have been expected to talk and “the differences between the two roles are enormous” (Glesne, 1999, p. 41). Merriam (1998) suggested that to
be a good communicator and researcher, suggests I had to “emphasize with the respondents, establish rapport, ask good questions, and [listen] intently” (p. 23). I believe this was accomplished by the success of the information gathered and the good communication in the sessions.

**Limitations of Study**

Constraints, such as time, money, and resources, made it unrealistic to conduct this study with a larger population. Therefore, purposeful sampling was the best type of sampling for this study. I selected one school that would assist me in gathering information related to the study based upon convenience and availability. Because I conducted the research at just one site, this was also a limitation of the study.

This study was also limited to 12 African American male students, which provided a small number of students for me to interview. Also, this study did not differentiate in any specified way on the issues of gender, thereby limiting the information that could be compared by African American females to males.

In this chapter, the methods have been explained in detail. In Chapter IV, the findings from the interviews and focus group interviews will be presented and organized according to the questions. The information is categorized by topic similarity.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Overview

This study of African American male students and their perceptions of instructional strategies took place in December 2003. Red Oak Middle School, the research site, was a traditional middle school with a population of 1100 students, of which 30% of the students received free or reduced lunch. A majority of the students (87.9%) were performing at or above grade level.

The results of this study were based on data gathered from a learning style survey, field notes of classroom observations, focus group interviews, and a follow-up interview. The questionnaire for the follow-up interview was developed from information gathered during the focus group interview with study participants.

I asked the school’s administrator for the names of teachers to be interviewed for background information on the school, teaching strategies utilized within the school, and their thoughts on how African American males learn. The school’s principal and 2 of the 5 teachers selected by the principal chose to participate in the interview. Data from the interviews were used to help understand different aspects of the school. The interview guides used for the administrator and the teachers are presented in Appendix B. The data collection methods are summarized in Table 1.
Table 1

**Data Collection Methods**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>01/12/04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>01/13/04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Style Inventory</td>
<td>African American male students</td>
<td>02/10/04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group interviews</td>
<td>African American male students</td>
<td>02/11/04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>02/12/04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up interview</td>
<td>African American male students</td>
<td>02/16/04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>02/17/04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The principal and teachers selected 20 African American male students to participate in this research. Of the 20 students selected, 15 students were given parental permission to participate. All 15 students completed the learning style survey, but only 12 subsequently participated in the focus group interviews and follow-up interview.

Prior to starting data collection, I explained to participants that the information they provided to me was important and there were no wrong answers. Additionally, they understood the information they shared was not a test or any type of evaluation but would help me develop an in-depth understanding of the perceptions African American males have of teaching strategies.

**Peer Debrief**

A peer debriefer was asked to study and critique the data to assist me in validating or rejecting the study’s findings. The students were not identified to the debriefer to ensure
objectivity and impartiality in analyzing the data. This strategy assisted in adding validity to the study.

**Student Participants**

During the focus group interview, the participants were asked to provide personal information. They were asked to include their age, grade, things they liked to do, and what they wanted to be when they grow up (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

**Student Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Likes to do</th>
<th>Wants to be</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Architect (also commented “I have a nick for sports, so I would like to play professional football”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>Play in NBA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Professional football player (further stated “if I don’t make that I want to be a vet”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Racing, street racing, or NASCAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitch</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Basketball, football, and things like that, group activities, technology</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Basketball, football, drawing</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(table continues)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Likes to do</th>
<th>Wants to be</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>- Professional football player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tre’</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>- Professional basketball player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willie</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Dashes indicate the participant did not respond to that item.*

**Findings**

The findings from the learning style inventory are presented first, followed by the findings from the focus group interviews and follow-up interview. To understand the information gathered from the interviews, the data were organized by the questions that were asked of the participants. Because the focus of this study was on the students' perspectives, the data from the administrator and teacher interviews were not highlighted in the findings, as these data were used only to help me gain insight into the background of the school and students. As the data were analyzed, certain themes began to emerge within the responses to each question. The data were categorized and given relevant titles. Therefore, the study’s findings from the focus group interview are organized first by interview question and then by theme or themes that emerged within the responses to each question. Please note that the first question in the focus group interview dealt with the students’ personal data (see Table 1).

**Learning Style Inventory**

Prior to the focus group interviews, the learning style inventory was completed by 15 participants. This survey asked specific learning style questions to assist me in understanding how the African American male students perceived these strategies (see Appendix B).
The first question asked the students when they were most ready to learn. Ten out of 15 students agreed that the afternoons were better working times rather than the mornings. The students mentioned they were primarily sleepy in the mornings because of the early hours. The students also felt as though they would be more focused later in the day rather than in the mornings.

When asked what was their favorite way to learn, they could choose from a variety of techniques. Most students preferred working in groups. Six out of 15 students chose to work in a small group, whereas 5 students selected a large group.

The next question required the participants to select how they learn best. This question was designed to determine whether students learned best through visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or other means. Only 2 students selected the hands-on strategy as the most preferred strategy. Six out of 15 students selected listening as their way to learn best, followed by 4 students who chose reading books and other printed items.

The majority of students preferred to learn the parts first in order to learn the whole idea \( (n = 11) \). Only 4 students needed to see the whole idea first. This strategy refers to a common practice teachers use when introducing a new concept, where they break down an idea into smaller components to make it easier for students to learn the whole concept.

When respondents were given a choice of four types of activities (use facts and do practical projects, gather information and write it, use facts and do group projects, or discover my own ideas and new information) and asked which would they rather do, the majority of participants \( (n = 10) \) opted to use facts and information in completing group
projects. This finding concurred with the earlier question that showed a preference for group projects over individual work.

The length of time the African American male students preferred to do an activity was the theme of the next question. The choices were either a long time or a short time. Two students did not answer the question. Eleven of the 15 agreed a long time was the preferred time to complete an assignment.

Students were asked what helped them to stick with the activity. The majority of respondents (n = 12) respondents selected the fun involved as opposed to writing, or holding something in their hand, or having something in their mouth.

The students were asked whether they needed exact directions and examples, written materials and lecture notes, or both in order to learn best. Nine of the 15 students responded that they needed both instructional strategies for them to be successful.

The final question on the learning style inventory asked students if they were able to assess their own academic performance or whether they needed someone to tell them. It is important for students to understand how they are performing in school. Twelve of the participants replied they could tell by themselves how they were performing, whereas 3 students responded they needed others to tell them. Students need to understand how they are performing because this helps them with self-motivation and encouragement. If students are unable to assess their own performance, then educators must communicate this information to students in order for them to receive motivation and encouragement.
Focus Group Interview

Question 2

Tell me the type of classroom that you enjoy being successful in. What types of things are taking place in the class that you have learned that has really helped you reach success?

The central theme that emerged in relation to this question, from observations and written reflections during the focus group interviews, was the need for teachers to relate the lessons to the real world. Most of the participants explained they would be more interested in learning the objectives if they understood why they would need the objectives later in life.

Relating learning objectives to the real world. Jason explained how he enjoyed math because he thought it could be used in the real world: “You have to go through math in a lifetime.” Isaiah agreed, sharing that he thought math was a subject that would be needed in the future: “Math, because you got to use it in everyday life.” He also explained that “the teacher needs to keep the class interesting and not boring.”

Another student, Bill, provided several examples of how it helps to relate the material to life after school. He explained why he felt all of the major subjects, such as math, language arts, science, and social studies, would be necessary:

Language arts, math, and science, and history too because they are the four important things that you really need to focus on. Math ‘cause you’ll need it in your lifetime. Language ‘cause you’re going to know how to speak to people and learn how to communicate. If you’re going to have a job that deal with communications, you’re going to have to know how to write and all that kind of stuff. And if you want to be a
doctor, you need the science to do labs, tests, and deal with beakers and chemicals, and all those things. You need to learn your history because maybe someday you might want to be a teacher, a social studies teacher, and you got to learn your history. Maybe learn ‘bout your family tree, or something like that, that happened in 1864. So you might need to obtain that information.

In my notes I recorded: “As these comments were made, most of the boys were shaking their heads in agreement,” thus demonstrating what Bill was saying was aligned with their perceptions also.

**Fun and exciting lessons.** Several of the responses indicated that the participants shared a similar interest in math. The students expressed how they felt math was fun, exciting, and held their interest. For example, Willie noted the importance of the subject in the following comments: “I like math because it’s fun and I like to multiply. It’s not boring.” Steve also commented, “Math is my favorite subject.”

Other thoughtful points of interest were brought out by the students. Robert explained how he enjoyed learning when the teacher taught everybody and not just one person. Nick shared that what mattered most was the type of teacher he had. He clarified that it helped when the teacher wanted to make sure he was learning. Charles explained that being in a peaceful environment, among other students who liked to learn and who were willing to learn, helped him to be successful.

**Question 3**

What types of things motivate you and help you really want to learn?
**Teachers.** Most of the African American male students noted the need for their teachers to be motivated. They discussed how the teachers could motivate them to do well in school and succeed. They explained that constant reminders and encouragement helped them to stay focused. The students talked about how critical it was for teachers to help students and want them to do better.

During the focus group interview, Mitch expressed how teachers were an important group in motivating him, stating that “Stuff that motivates me is my teachers, my experiences, and my classmates, ‘cause it can help you learn more stuff in class.” Tre’ concurred: “What motivates me are teachers because they give me the encouragement that I need.” According to my field notes, Tre’ gave the impression of being confident about how his motivation was supplied and appeared to already have built this positive relationship with teachers. He, therefore, seemed to be speaking from experience. Isaiah provided a good explanation regarding how and why he could obtain motivation from teachers:

> The people who encourage me are the teachers and they got to be, even if you’re not willing to learn. They got to be at least trying to help you learn even if they know you don’t want to learn. You can’t have a teacher that puts you down.

Isaiah definitely expressed strong opinions about the importance of teacher motivation. Within my notes I recorded: “Isaiah showed a great deal of emotions when answering and focused in on the researcher in an effort to gain full attention.”

**Family.** The next theme that arose regarding motivation was the need for familial encouragement. It was important to most of these African American males to get positive
reinforcement from their family. They often expressed the feeling of obligation to make their family happy about their performance in school.

Julian described how his family was the motivating factor in his life. “The things that motivate me in school are my mom, my sister, and mainly my dad, ‘cause they all put their trust and hope in me.” He shared that the reason they encouraged him was “so I can pass school and have a good life so they don’t have to worry about me.”

One student commented that if it wasn’t for his family he would not attend school at all. Steve stated: “What motivates me is my mom because she makes me go to school, and if she didn’t make me go to school, then I wouldn’t go.” This example demonstrated how family could make the only difference.

As Bill was responding, he supplied several examples of motivating factors. The first he discussed was his family. Bill stated: “What motivates me in school first is my mother, my brothers, and basically my whole family, my teachers, and the people that look up to me.”

**Role models.** According to students, being a role model was important for motivation and so was having a role model. Jason clarified how his chosen role model helped his motivation in school: “What motivates me is Michael Vick ‘cause he is one of my biggest role models.” When Jason communicated who his role model was, I then asked him why he had chosen Michael Vick. The response was justified because he felt that in addition to being in football and being a black quarterback that Michael Vick was one of the best quarterbacks in the League. Bill explained how important it was to be a role model to others:
I know there are a couple of kids that look up to me and say I want to be like him. I have to set a good example for them, as well, so they can say he’s a nice guy that does his work, he makes good grades and stuff like that, so that kind of motivates me to be the best that I can be and the girls, too.

Charles shared the same point of view regarding being a role model, explaining that “students, they motivate me to do well in the school. Students that can depend on me to get the job done and they really want me to do things right. That makes everyone happy. That’s what motivates me.”

Relate objectives to the real world. Another similarity that arose when asked what motivated them to be successful was knowing what they were learning in school would be helpful in their future. The idea of your current actions having consequences later in life meant a great deal to some students. This concept coincides with the theme of relating the material learned to the real world and the need to understand its importance.

Students’ comments supported that their actions today would affect their future. For example, Jesse responded that “what motivates me is doing good in school ‘cause one day I want to be somebody and go somewhere.” Robert’s statement supported this theory as well. He agreed that knowing the consequences would help students make better decisions: “Like everything that happens now affects me in the future. If I don’t try hard now, I can’t go back.”

Question 4

List some teaching strategies you like and that have helped you learn. Why do they help you learn?
The students in the focus group appeared to enjoy responding to this question. In my field notes, I had recorded that the students did not hesitate to answer and that they appeared confident in their responses.

**Fun and exciting lessons.** Three of the 12 participants discussed the need for teachers to create fun and exciting lessons. The students emphasized how important it was for the lessons to be fun and exciting so the lessons would maintain their attention in class.

Some students offered strategies for making the lessons fun, whereas others just stated they wanted them to be fun. Tre’ did not have any specific strategies that he wanted to share that have helped him learn, he just emphasized that whatever lessons the teachers decided to create, “just make sure it is fun.” He was straightforward in his response and had no hesitations. Isaiah made clear his feelings on this issue:

They can make the activities fun. If she [the teacher] just sits up there and says this is how you do this, you’re liable to go to sleep. So she can get up in the class, but the teachers need to make it more interesting to keep us awake, instead of just saying this is how you do this and this is how you do that.

Just as Isaiah mentioned he thought learning needed to be fun, he commented that learning should also be interesting. Several of the participants agreed this should be a requirement for learning. Bill’s response supported the idea that learning should be fun and interesting. He had some suggestions on how teachers could ensure that activities are interesting and exciting:

One of the strategies that I think teachers should use is to find out what the kids like and maybe use that in some of the problems that they have in the classroom. Like if
they like motorcycles and stuff, especially for math class, they should use like how
fast it goes. Make it fun, educational, and, at the same time, not get off base with it.

**Hands-on activities.** Three of the responses related to the enjoyment of hands-on
activities. The African American male students shared how these activities would be more
interesting and would hold their attention longer. They also clarified how completing hand-
on activities would help them understand better what they were learning because they could
demonstrate and see the objectives being taught.

Several students offered examples of the types of activities teachers should provide or
that students would find interesting. Bill stated:

> Me personally, I love discussion. I love debating on things. That’s the thing I love to
do. I think debating. I like discussions, group work, and projects. Projects give you
higher grades. So if you do your projects, you’ll definitely get a higher grade.

Mitch supported this concept of learning by doing: “Strategies my teachers show me, like
hands-on stuff, show you how to do it.” Mitch realized that he learned better when he could
actually see what he was learning by doing. Julian provided some examples of hands-on
activities that he enjoyed and that had been successful in the classroom: “Giving more
opportunities, science projects, cards for math class, doing things with your hands.” Willie
gave another example of what could be considered a hands-on lesson. His response was in
reference to teachers utilizing guest speakers in the classroom. These ideas support the
concept of relating the lesson to the real world and keeping students interested.

**Extensive explanation and review.** Another theme that surfaced related to teaching
strategies that have helped the students learn was the concept of teachers reviewing and
explaining material. Several participants remarked how helpful it was for them when teachers provided explanations and examples and reviewed the material with the students.

The participants provided some examples of strategies. Jason discussed strategies that have contributed to his academic success, such as “how you take notes, how teachers give the example, you go back over it, you get an example again and she gives you something to work out.” Jesse concurred with the notion of teachers needing to explain the material in-depth and repeating it to students because “it helps you out a lot.” Bill also focused on the importance of the teachers providing ample review of the concepts being taught: “I think that they should have the kids take plenty of notes and review them over and over, and plenty of studying time for the children.”

*Class structure and schedule.* Another student talked about class structure and schedules. Charles felt the length of classes was too long, which caused him to lose his focus and interest. He commented:

I don’t really know of any strategies that teachers will help me learn, but make classes shorter and I wouldn’t have that much to learn in one time period. Next time I could pick up where I left off and things would go slower.

*Attitudes.* Two students discussed the importance of attitude, whether their own attitude or their teacher’s attitude, as a strategy for successful learning. One student discussed how prior achievement motivated him to continue succeeding. According to Robert, the most successful technique for him was the self-motivation that came from succeeding on previous assignments: “It’s not so much as the teachers, but it’s like if they give me a good grade on something I turned in, that kind of motivates me, ‘cause I know I can do it. And I can just
keep on doing it.” Nick alluded to the importance of the teacher caring about students and their learning. He noted the significance of a teacher demonstrating patience for student learning and expressing their support for students in helping them learn:

Their kindness or way that I want to help you. Not, I want to leave you out in the cold or do it by yourself. Somebody that will just come up to me and say, “Hey I want to work with you until you get it.”

**Question 5**

List the teaching strategies you dislike that are used in class. Why do you dislike them?

*Lack of extensive explanation and review.* One theme that continued to reoccur was the issue of teachers not explaining the material to them. The students felt teachers could do a better job explaining the content and, as a result, the students would gain more understanding. Several students mentioned how teachers should recheck with them to assure their grasp of the content.

Several students expressed that teachers moved too quickly to other concepts before ensuring the students understood what had just been taught. Mitch felt that teachers provided inadequate explanations: “What I dislike about my teacher is that she talks too much. She doesn’t know when to stop. She be trying to explain stuff and you don’t understand her ‘cause she be talking so fast.” Willie shared his opinion: “My math teacher gets on my nerve. When we take notes she gives you an example, like you know it already.” I asked Willie if he felt the teacher was giving the problems without explaining them, and he said, “Yes. But she should take the time to write things down that we need to know.” Jesse stated:
Some strategies that I dislike about my teachers is I don’t like the way when some of my teachers will give you something and, if a student don’t know what they’re doing, they should make sure that everybody in the class understands. She should explain how to do this and that before she just puts something out there and tells us to do it. She should explain it first and make sure everybody gets it.

A couple of students expressed that some teachers had strategies that were distracting to the students, such as talking too fast, getting angry when students were slow in moving to the next lesson, or jumping from explanation to another. When it was Jason’s turn to answer the question, he expressed concerns over the teacher not furnishing relevant information to assist with learning objectives:

I got one teacher that talks a lot in class, and she just talks and talks. When it comes down to giving us the lesson, she wants you to do such and such. When we don’t get to another lesson, she gets mad and tries to call us out. She don’t get right to the point, but she’ll jump from this point to the next.”

Jason explained that his frustration comes from teachers not taking the time necessary for students to comprehend before they move ahead to what is next. Bill concurred and felt that teachers needed to give students both ample explanations of material and time to complete them:

“One thing that I dislike about teachers, I don’t really dislike them, but they just don’t get to the point. When they beat around the bush and try to explain something, they don’t talk clear enough so that you can understand it. They don’t give you time to take notes. There’s one teacher that blinks so much. You want to focus, but it’s like a
distraction. When she’s talking fast you want to take down the notes, you have to tell her to repeat it, then she doesn’t want to repeat it and then the student gets into trouble and that’s not right. I think the teacher needs to take that time and explain in thoroughly and then some kids will have better grades in there.”

**Lack of trust in the student–teacher relationship.** Some students discussed that their parents had instructed them to raise their hand and to ask for assistance if they had problems understanding the material. The students complained, however, that most of the time when they did this, the teachers did not believe they actually had a question, and so they did not receive help. Their comments raised the issue of the participants feeling that the teachers lacked trust in the students’ ability and desire to ask for help when they really needed it. When teachers lack trust in the students, the students begin to lose trust in their teachers’ willingness to provide them the valuable help they need, and thus begins a vicious cycle. Trust between student and teacher is essential within the classroom.

Students talked about how teachers purposefully tried to belittle or embarrass students. Charles explained: “I dislike teachers that call on the students that know they don’t know what they’re talking about, or they’re not paying attention and try to make that student not look at smart as they really are.” This opinion was shared by Tre’: “I dislike it when my teacher just tries to get you to tell them the answer and you really don’t know the answer.” Tre’ went on to explain that “they blame you for stuff.” He also suggested what he felt teachers should do to avoid this problem. “They should give examples ‘cause you might know the answer.” Isaiah talked about how students could become aggravated and shut down in a classroom to the point where it would impede their learning:
One major thing that I don’t like is when you’re listening in class, but when you get to a worksheet and it’s like one problem that you don’t know and then you ask for help. She’ll be like, “Why weren’t you listening?” When you really were. Then she just starts yelling at you. That’s when I get to the point and say, fine then I won’t do it.”

According to my field notes, as Isaiah was talking, most of the students in the group were nodding their heads in agreement and mumbling “uh-huh” under their breath.

Failure to relate objectives to the real world. Again, a common theme that surfaced was the need for students to understand the connection between the study topics and real-life situations. The participants reemphasized how they would have a better appreciation of the lessons and required objectives being taught if teachers would relate the objectives to real life.

Students talked about not understanding the point of memorizing poems, writing down questions several times, and other examples of boring instructional strategies. Julian complained that the things he disliked about teachers were that “they give you homework that has no point, make us memorize poems, and making us write down questions two times when it has nothing to do with schoolwork. It is not teaching nothing about everyday life.” Steve also spoke of why he disliked language arts and his teacher: “Where memorizing some poems like The Night Before Christmas, we have to write it and memorize it and I don’t understand what the point of that.”
Robert’s dislikes had to do with how the teacher conducted lessons that were mainly lectures: “One thing I need is for the teacher to light up with excitement. I can’t just be having us sit there and just talk. It is boring.”

**Question 6**

How do you feel about learning and how do you feel about school?

**Relate objectives to the real world.** Seven of the 12 participants discussed how information learned at school would relate to their future aspirations, or how they would use the content later in life. Most of the participants spoke of how much they enjoyed learning but not being in school.

With regard to the connection between learning and the future, Mitch stated that the reason he liked learning was “because it will help me out in the future. When I grow up and stuff, the stuff I learn will be able to help me with a job. And school is okay.” Bill felt that learning was important because it would help in getting a good job:

How I feel about learning is that, granted, it is some good things about learning. Learning is a good thing ‘cause like my friend said, we’re going to use it in our lifetime. Whatever job we have to do or have, school will teach that to us and let us have a job to support families. So I think learning is a good thing.

Several students made remarks about why homework was relevant to their learning. I asked several times for the students to explain the link between homework and why it was necessary with regards to their future. A couple of students expressed that they enjoyed learning but not doing homework. A couple of students expressed a dislike for being in school. Charles stated:
I like learning, but really I see no purpose in school if we have homework ‘cause we could do the same thing at home. By teachers putting it out there, and they don’t explain it, then we’ll be teaching it to ourselves.

This comment also reinforced the need for teachers to do a good job explaining the material to the students. Isaiah said:

I think learning is straight, but not the homework thing. If a teacher is in a class and if she teaches well enough where all the students know what she is talking about and how to do it, there would be no purpose in homework. And when you ask the teachers what’s the purpose of homework, they say for extra help. But if a teacher was to explain what she was doing real well, then there wouldn’t be no purpose of homework.

Julian made it clear why he disagreed with doing homework. When students get home, they are supposed to get extra time to spend with their families and play with their friends. Doing homework takes up that time. Julian suggested that “we should have test and if we pass the test, then we did our homework.” Steve also felt that homework interfered with his spending time with his family. He related a situation when a death in his family prevented him from having time to do his homework. Steve appeared annoyed about that incident because he felt as though the teacher did not care and was not empathetic. He stated that “the next day you end up getting a zero on your homework assignment.” His response demonstrated how teachers can influence the students’ perceptions regarding learning.
Another student, Jason, talked about how he enjoyed learning because he understood it would help him in the future, but he did not enjoy being in school. Like the other students, he felt that the things he learned at school were things he could learn at home:

I like learning ‘cause it’s going to help me out later on in life, later down the road, but I don’t like school. School is not interesting, at all. There’s no purpose in going to school. We just sit in one class and learn this and learn that, and we could sit at home and do the same thing. I just think it’s waste of our time.

*Fun and exciting lessons.* When Willie answered the question, his comment reflected a theme that was repeated several times. He explained that “I like learning, but I hate school.” Willie stated that he felt that way because he thought school was boring. He reemphasized the importance of teachers’ providing exciting activities within the classroom to hold students’ attention and interest.

*Teachers’ attitudes affect students’ learning.* Several responses from students indicated that teachers’ attitudes, behaviors, or responses affected students’ attitudes toward learning. For example, Robert described what happened when students asked questions of teachers:

The teachers will get mad and say I told you this over and over again. Then it goes back to you should have been paying attention. Probably the teacher had a bad day that’s why, but it personally get me mad though, ‘cause they get mad at me, for what reason I don’t know . . . when they’re in a bad mood, but you have to come at them in the right way.
Another student, Nick, complained of how it upset him when teachers yelled at him when he did not understand something: “You really don’t get it and she don’t want to help you. I guess she thinks you’re fine and you’re not, and she still doesn’t help.”

**Time and length of school day.** Two students discussed how they would enjoy school more if school started at a different time of day. Jesse said:

I love learning and it’s a good thing, but I hate getting up at 5:30-6:00, just to go to school. If I could wake up at my time, around 9:00 and go to school when I want to, it will be all right. But we have to wake up that early just to sit in class for an hour and a half, it’s just not working.

Tre’ concurred and described learning as okay. He went on he did not like school “‘cause you have to wake up early in the morning, just to go learn. And I don’t feel like we should sit in one class for 55 minutes, just learning stuff. It just gets kind of boring.”

**Question 7**

What kinds of things would you change that would help you do better in school?

**Clarity and manner of teachers’ speech.** The first theme that emerged from this question was the manner in which teachers speak while delivering the lesson. The participants spoke of their difficulty in understanding the instruction teachers were attempting to deliver. The students attributed their difficulty in understanding primarily to problems in clarity or the speed of teachers’ speech.

Several students talked about problems in the clarity and speed of their teachers’ speech. Willie said that he would change the way teachers teach: “They just say stuff and I don’t understand what they are saying.” When I asked Willie what teachers need to do to
help you understand better, he stated, “Teachers need to slow down and not speak fast.”

Mitch also indicated that he felt “teachers need to stop talking so much and start helping the students out more.” He thought that teachers should try to show students how to do the work by providing more demonstrations. Tre’ explained: “I think teachers should explain the assignment more ‘cause some students, they really don’t get it. They keep on asking questions to get it and they get tired.” His comment demonstrates how students can become confused and not comprehend what the teacher is conveying. Charles noted the importance of making the classroom more interesting so students could focus. He shared that sometimes teachers may cause distractions that prevent students from paying close attention.

Somewhat related to clarity was the idea of teachers providing demonstrations or more individual instruction. Jason agreed that there was a need for more demonstrations and greater clarity: “I think they need to stop talking a lot and go ahead and get to the point and show us how to do this and how to do that.” To better assist students, Jesse felt teachers should slow down in delivering instruction and provide students more one-on-one instruction. Jesse said: “They should have at least three teachers in one class if one teacher can’t handle all 30 students.”

*Fun and exciting lessons.* This theme was repeated often as students responded to the questions. Isaiah replied that teachers should make the classrooms “more fun and exciting and understandable.” A problem about which he recalled teachers complaining was students falling asleep in class. He said this problem could be avoided if students were interested in and excited about the instruction. Bill had a great deal regarding the lessons and
how teachers needed to be more active in the classroom. He suggested the following for teachers:

They don’t just need to stand up in front of the classroom. They need to be interacting with the students, one-on-one sometimes. They need to speak clear ‘cause some teachers act soft. Not such as handing out worksheets, maybe where all of them come together and just do the work as one, instead of having one over here struggling, one over here doing good work. I think everybody should come together and help each other out and then everybody gets an A.

**Question 8**

Which way would you like to learn better? Some people like to work by themselves, work in groups, big groups, and small groups, and do you like projects? What do you prefer to do in class that will help you learn?

After I asked this question, their responses indicated the majority agreed with each other about working in groups. Ten out of the 12 participants shared they would prefer working in groups above all the other strategies.

**Large-group activities.** The students offered various reasons for preferring to work in large groups. Charles commented that he liked to work in groups more than he liked to work individually, but the negative aspect of group work would be that “you have to depend on other people to do things that they might not want to do.” Willie, on the other hand, explained that he liked to work in large groups because, when he worked in a group, he did not have to do all of the work. He enjoyed the aspect of teamwork. Mitch’s opinion about group work was aligned with the others:
I like working in groups, rather than working by myself, ‘cause if you work by yourself whatever you get wrong, you get wrong. But if you work in groups, you might be good in one subject and the other person might be good in the other part and everybody comes together.

Jesse agreed with the others regarding working in groups, although he did share concern over participating in group work. Jason voiced his opinion about how the workload should be divided evenly among the members in the group. Also, he discussed why he felt there should be less work for the individual when working in a group with others as opposed to working alone. Overall, Jason liked the idea that if someone did not complete a portion of the work correctly, he or she still had a chance at getting a good grade through the total group effort.

Steve emphasized his preference for working in larger groups as opposed to smaller groups. Small-group activities. Several students discussed their preference for working in groups, but they preferred working in smaller groups as opposed to larger groups. The students felt that smaller groups allowed them the opportunity to receive more help, accomplish more, and interact more with the other group members. Tre’ said he enjoyed smaller rather than larger groups because he felt that he could receive more help when needed. Tre’ explained:

I like working in small groups ‘cause in a big group it’s too many people. If you get an answer wrong, they start getting mad at you and they don’t even know the answer. They get mad at you, but at least you tried. In groups, if you get an answer wrong, it’s another person there that can help you on the answer.

Jason agreed that smaller groups were better for him:
I think a small group you can get more done, with two or three people. You can say what you want to say, tell them how you feel about your answer, explain what’s going on. Jason felt more comfortable and confident working with a smaller number of students.

Julian liked the increased social interaction and teamwork in accomplishing projects:

I like to work in small groups cause they are social and you get to talk stuff over. If you don’t know the answer the other person might know and you can get the answers from them. It helps you out with projects.

Bill felt that smaller groups allowed teachers more opportunity to work one-on-one with students, and it “lets the teacher know where the student stands.” Isaiah stated that he liked working in groups.

**Independent assignments.** Two participants preferred working individually. Both Robert and Nick shared this theory of working by themselves because of not having to rely on anyone else to complete the assignments. The thought of someone else not completing the assignments was the leading factor in their responses. Robert stated:

I like working by myself ‘cause I don’t like having to rely on a person to do something in a group. But then they don’t do it, and they play around in class, so that’s why I like to do it myself ‘cause I’m not going to any work done.

Nick described himself as “an outgoing person” and discussed why his personality was ideal for group activities: “I can do group projects, but I like to do it by myself. I like doing group activities ‘cause you get to know people and you get to have fun.” Nick noted how it was
easier to pay attention while learning. For example, “an open discussion helps the class because you will be able to hear everything.”

**Question 9**

If you had your choice in every classroom of where to sit, tell me where you prefer to sit and why that will help you learn better?

**Preferred seat in the back of class.** The focus group’s most preferred seat in a classroom was in the back of the class. Seven out of 12 participants chose this location with ample rationalization. Most students attributed their preference of sitting in the back of the class to comfort and said their location in the classroom affected their performance. Comfort apparently referred to any number of concepts, from feeling nervous to attracting too much attention from either the teacher or other students.

Generally, the students felt they focused better on their schoolwork when they sat in the back of the class. Charles preferred to sit in the back, even though he felt a lot of people are forced to sit in the front. He explained: “Some people want to sit in the back because all eyes are on me when I’m at the front. I get nervous and break out in hives.” Willie stated: “I would rather sit in the back, than the front ‘cause it will be easier.” He also said that “the teacher won’t get you off track, you are able to pay better attention, and it’s just easier.” Julian felt more comfortable sitting in the back in the corner because he did not “like being in the front, all out in the open.” He felt that “everybody is looking at you and stuff, and everybody be bothering you up front.” Julian went on to describe how “in the back you don’t bother nobody and they don’t bother you. You can worry about schoolwork instead of other people.”
Some students thought they would be separated from distractions by sitting in the back of the class. Jason said: “I like to sit in the back ‘cause in the back you don’t have anybody to bother you, call your name. You know what’s going on and basically you’re paying more attention, than sitting in the front.” Tre’ conveyed how he just liked sitting in the back and that “you should sit where you feel most comfortable.” He clarified that “it is easier to learn than if you sit in the front . . . because the teacher just keep on bothering you and just calling you for every answer.” Isaiah stated he was more relaxed sitting in the back because “when you sit in the front teachers be all down your throat about stuff. . . . If you’re in the back she [the teacher] can’t necessarily say you’re distracting her ‘cause your taping on your desk with your pencil.”

Finally, one participant said he preferred to sit in the back of the class so he could see the material and be successful. Steve replied: “I like to sit in the back ‘cause I’m far-sighted.”

**Preferred seat in the middle of class.** Two participants chose the middle of the class as their favored location. Mitch and Nick both rationalized their preference. Mitch explained: “I would rather sit in the middle ‘cause some people that sit in the front can’t see.” He explained that he felt that visually impaired students should be allowed to sit in the front. Nick stated that “in the middle, so you can see everything that’s going on in class.” When asked to clarify if he could hear better and see better in the middle, his reply was, “yes.”

**Preferred seat in front of class.** Only one participant expressed interest in sitting in the front of the class. Jesse stated several reasons why this was the best location for him: “I
would rather sit in the front ‘cause I can understand the teacher, focus on her, and what she’s saying.”

**Preferred seat in close proximity of teacher.** One student preferred to sit in close proximity to the teacher rather than in a specific location in the classroom. Bill explained that sitting closer to the teacher decreased his chances of getting into trouble:

You’re able to focus on your work and not talk with your friends around you. It’s not such a thing that a teacher is going to pick on me all of the times, just pay attention as always. Wherever you sit in class, back, front, side, outside the classroom, just pay attention. I think that you should sit close to the teacher so that she’ll know that you’re having problems and you can ask her, without letting everybody know. ‘Cause if you sit in the back, she has to walk way back there and then people know he’s not as smart, as everybody was thinking he was.

**Preferred seat is individually.** One student did not designate a preference for any particular location in the classroom. Robert discussed why he preferred to sit by himself. I asked him if liked sitting in a group, and he responded, “no.” Robert explained that it did not matter to him if he sat in the front, back, or middle of the classroom, as long as he sat by himself. He stated that he liked to sit alone because if he sat near other students, they “try to distract you, like talking and getting you off task.”

**Question 10**

Tell me about your favorite teacher and why that person was your favorite teacher. What types of things did she do to make her or him your favorite?
**Teacher provided inspiration for success.** Most of the participants in the group spoke of their favorite teacher as someone who helped them improve a great deal in school. Five out of the 12 mentioned how that teacher brought out the best in their performance and inspired them to reach higher goals.

The students felt the teachers they selected as favorites had provided more than just teaching. The teachers encouraged the students and expected them to do well. Willie’s choice was his language arts teacher, whom he described as a person who did more than just help him improve in language arts class. “She made me think about what to do and what not to do. She also taught me how to think about what I say and what I don’t say.” Steve shared the same opinion regarding what made his choice his favorite teacher. He stated: “I had one math teacher that helped to understand math the way that I understand it now.” Steve explained that now math is his best subject and this is because of the time and effort this teacher invested in his learning. Robert said his fifth-grade teacher was someone who “opened the light” for him. “It was certain things she did. At the beginning of the year, she knew I had something in me, but she brought it out. And that’s when I started making good grades.” When asked what types of things she did to motivate him to perform, he explained, “sometimes she would give me a good grade and say if you keep on doing this, you will keep this A and get straight A’s.” Robert told how he then was encouraged by the grades and “then I started getting top student in her class.”

The students said their favorite teachers went above and beyond. Nick said two teachers came to mind when asked to describe his favorite teacher. He talked about the two teachers he had in fifth grade who were “real nice. . . . The one that was my main teacher
really helped me out a lot. Actually she got me to go to sixth grade. The reading teacher really helped me with my reading, so I got better on my reading.” Nick was asked what was special about them and what kind of things they did to help him learn. “She sat down with us. If we had ALP (Alternative Learning Program, the after school program), she really helped me out then.” He reflected upon the things the teachers did that were not required of them, therefore going above and beyond to ensure that he learned. Charles told us his favorite teacher was someone who, when teaching, took everything really slow and this strategy helped him in understanding the material. Charles felt when his teacher taught things at a slower pace, he was able to “learn everything in his class.” Bill told the group about his math teacher and why she was his favorite. “For one she was beautiful and she was real. She held no grudges through all the punches. And I really liked her and respected her because she took her time.”

**Created fun and exciting lessons.** In addition to helping the participants become better students, a theme that was discussed was how the teachers made students interested in learning while in class. Several students talked about how their favorite teacher explained things thoroughly and made class fun. For example, Tre’ explained that his favorite teacher did not blame the students for everything. In other words, if the students did not understand the material, the teacher did not assume it was because of lack of effort by the students. “He actually asks questions to try to get to the point.” Another reason Tre’ selected this teacher was because “he explains stuff and he knows how to have fun with his activities.” Isaiah shared this opinion of this fourth-grade language art teacher. He stated:
I like her because her class wasn’t boring at all. She made her class fun. It wasn’t all about worksheets, like get out your pencil and copy some words and definitions. It wasn’t always about that, as like it is in some classes now.

**Teachers who care about students.** The final theme that emerged through this discussion was the concept of their favorite teacher caring for them. As this theory was discussed, I recorded in my field notes that all the participants appeared to agree as evidenced through their body language and comments. Mitch talked about his favorite teacher being his fifth grade health teacher who was his football coach and who was like a mentor to him. Mitch talked about how he felt this teacher took the time to make sure he did everything right. This teacher demonstrated how much he really cared about Mitch by taking time to work with him. Jesse discussed his fourth and fifth grade teacher. “I had her for 2 years in a row and me and her got along and were real close.” Because of the things the teacher did to ensure his learning, Jesse said he felt she cared about him. Julian said all his elementary teachers were his favorites, stating he felt that way “because they were loving and just about every one of them met my mom.” He also explained that “they all talked to my mom, all of them memorized my name.” In his perspective, their actions demonstrated their concern and “so that meant they cared about me.”

Another interesting commonality about their favorite teacher was that all the teachers they mentioned were females, except for one. Most of the participants talked about a female teacher with whom they felt a strong connection with and about whom they grew to care. Mitch was the only student who talked about a male football coach who he admired.
Question 11

What other information would you like to share for this interview that will be helpful with teaching others about how to better teach you?

The students talked about a number of issues. Prejudice and racism seemed to predominate, but one student talked about how struggling students were treated in the classroom.

Bill: You didn’t ask us why do you think teachers like teaching? They tell us but then again they fuss and fight with students, why is that?

What would make a difference is if they could focus on the students that are quiet in the classroom. The ones with their heads down because those ones that are basically struggling, or need help and don’t ask for it because maybe they are afraid or maybe they don’t want to look crazy or stupid in the classroom. Those are the ones that really need to be pay attention to because those are the ones that are really failing. Those ones are the future of today, so we basically need those people involved because they always feel like an outcast. We shouldn’t, as teachers let them feel that way so that should acknowledge if they’re doing their work, if they’re not doing their work, if they’re making As or making Fs, things like that. They should be acknowledged. The teacher should ask everyone questions about whatever they need to ask. Like answer questions, come up to do book work, on the chalkboard, participate. [Researcher: Try to bring them out.] Yeah, bring them out. Expand their horizons. Because it’s hurting them real bad on grades level and friendship-wise with their classmates. I think they should be interacting with them, as well. [Researcher:
Do you have some friends that, that’s happening to? Yes, and some days I’m one of them. But I try not to let things bother me.

Charles: Some of the other students touch on the point of racism and I don’t think its racism. I think it’s just prejudice ‘cause it’s not just the color of your skin that makes teachers treat you the way they do. Sometimes it’s just word of mouth that gets around to teachers and reputation grows and things get spread about through the students and you get treated unfairly.

Nick: Lockers, the time and everything. I think they should add another minute, like 6 minutes. Not to say it’s alright, but my locker is upstairs and I have to come from all the way downstairs and it’s kind of difficult. You out in the cold now, you got to have your jacket and all that other stuff.

Robert: To have everybody accepted.

Steve: You didn’t ask why you pick us out of the whole county? [Researcher: One because of the location and convenience to me. Two I had to have permission from the principal and I knew him, so that’s why I knew it would be okay. And I also knew a teacher at this school, so my connections and what I needed to do a little bit easier cause people have to be willing to help you in order to get the job done.]

Tre’: I don’t think you asked what don’t you like about teachers and what they don’t like about you? What I don’t like about teachers is some of them are racist because white teachers they try . . . one girl thought I threw a pen at her, but it was this white boy and she don’t ask questions. I have anther teacher that doesn’t believe black people.
Willie: You didn’t ask us what do we think about our teachers? I don’t like one of my teachers because he accuses us and like Tre’ said some of them are racist. And I don’t want to be judged by the color of my skin.

*Follow-up Interview*

After gathering the information from the focus group interviews, I developed certain theories based upon the students’ responses. In an effort to verify these African American male students’ beliefs, I created a follow-up questionnaire (see Appendix B). The questions for this follow-up interview evolved from the themes that arose during the focus group discussion. The broad themes that described the African American male students’ perspectives of teaching revolved around the following: how the teaching objectives related to their future use (#1, #5, and #7), the student–teacher relationship (#2, #9, and #10), the types of learning activities (#3 and #4), and the school schedule (#6 and #8). Only 11 of the 12 students participated in the follow-up interview because 1 student had gotten ill.

Using a Likert-type scale, I asked the respondents to rank their responses to 10 questions. The possible responses ranged from *strongly agree, agree, not sure,* and *disagree* to *strongly disagree.* The responses were grouped by collapsing positive (*strongly agree/agree*) and negative (*disagree/strongly disagree*) responses. This method was used to assess the students in consideration of their age and attention span. Because the students had willingly participated in the study for several hours already, the following part of the study was conducted with the thought of sparing their time but also to gather pertinent information while still holding their attention and interest.
The first theme was the belief the African American male students had regarding teachers needing to relate the teaching objectives to their future. The three questions that related to this topic had positive results. On Question 1, 10 out of 11 students agreed “it is important to relate the material to the real world so I can understand how I will use the information later.” On Question 5, most participants \((n = 9)\) agreed with the statement, “I can learn better when teachers give me homework that relates to what we are learning.” On Question 7, most participants \((n = 9)\) again agreed that “I understand the purpose of school and learning and see how it will help me in the future.” These results from the focus group and the survey demonstrated that the majority of the students felt the need to understand why they must learn the concepts the teachers are teaching.

Three questions asked about the relationship between the students and the teachers. The African American male participants believed it was critical to their success for them to have a positive relationship with their teachers. Regarding teacher encouragement, the majority \((n = 9)\) of the respondents when answering Question 2 agreed that “One of the main reasons that I would be doing well in school is the encouragement I get from my teachers.” On Question 9, most students \((n = 9)\) agreed with the statement, “Most of the time I feel good about how I am learning in school.” Students also wanted teachers to care about them. When responding to Question 10, the majority \((n = 9)\) of students agreed that “If I think the teacher cares about me, I will work harder to be successful.”

The third topic that was addressed in the follow-up interview was the types of activities the students felt could help them improve in their class. Only a couple of techniques were covered in the follow-up because specific activities were addressed in the
learning style inventory and discussed during the focus group interview. Question 3 addressed the topic of hands-on activities, and all 11 participants agreed with “I enjoy working on lessons in class that have a lot of activities done with my hands.” The majority of students \( n = 10 \) agreed with the importance of class participation, responding positively to Question 4 that “I help the teachers know if I understand the lesson by participating in class and asking questions.”

The participants brought up a concern regarding the length and time of the school day. Several students had also expressed their thoughts about this during the focus group discussion. The students believed that school should begin later in the day, rather than earlier. Another concern students expressed was that class length should be shorter rather than real lengthy. I asked these questions to get students to clarify their beliefs on the school schedule. On Question 6, “School should start later in the morning so I can concentrate better on my work,” slightly less than half \( n = 5 \) the students agreed, and 3 students were not sure. On Question 8, “I think I could learn better if the classes were a 2-hour block, rather than 50 or 55 minutes,” 4 participants disagreed, 3 agreed, and 3 were not sure. This result indicates the respondents lacked agreement regarding an appropriate length of class that would work better for them.

In general, the survey data produced similar results among the themes as did the focus group interview and the learning style inventory. These data assisted me in validating the participants’ responses to ensure the meaning collected was as they intended.
Summary

Common themes emerged from the learning style inventory, observations, focus group interview, and follow-up questionnaire. Major findings concerning African American male students’ perceptions of teaching styles can be summarized. Students

1. need teachers who care about them;
2. need fun and exciting lessons to hold their interest;
3. prefer to sit in the back of the class in order to learn effectively;
4. prefer group activities to increase their participation and learning;
5. require clarity in the manner in which teachers speak;
6. think the teachers’ attitudes affect students’ learning;
7. believe the teaching objectives should be related to the real world;
8. believe a good teacher–student relationship, built with trust, is required for students to be successful;
9. need teachers to provide extensive explanation and review of teaching objectives;
10. believe they can learn a great deal and enjoy hands-on activities; and
11. need role models, family members, and teachers to provide motivation for them to succeed in school.

A number of other important findings also emerged. The learning style inventory showed that students preferred to learn in the afternoon, and this result verified the information gathered in the focus group and the follow-up questionnaire. As stated earlier, African American male students preferred working in groups, whether small or large, as a better learning strategy. Another interesting finding emerged from the learning style
inventory regarding the preferred way to learn. The participants could select their preference to learn by reading books and other printed items, by listening, by looking at visuals like pictures, and by doing things with their hands like making things. According to the focus group discussion, the most preferred type of activity would be hands-on, yet only 2 students selected this. Most students selected listening, followed by reading books and other printed items. This finding implies that the African American male student needs to listen and read about the information as well as conduct some type of hands-on activity to ensure they grasp the concept. Because the majority of students preferred to learn the parts first, then the whole idea, teachers should break down the objectives into smaller parts when teaching so that teaching is more effective. Regarding the notion of teachers needing to provide extensive explanation and review of teaching objectives, the results from the learning style inventory, focus group interview, and follow-up questionnaire were consistent. The learning style inventory asked whether students needed exact directions and examples, written materials and lecture notes, or both in order to learn best, and the majority of students selected both strategies. This finding concurred with the data from the interview and follow-up questionnaire. Students felt strongly about the need for more explanation and review.

Chapter V discusses the information gathered in the interviews and focus group interviews. The discussion is organized so as to relate back to the research questions. Recommendations are also presented based on the findings and implications for future research are discussed.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, I explored African American male student perceptions of the attempted instructional techniques utilized within the middle-school classroom and whether those techniques influenced their academic needs. Each of the 12 participants provided rich information through focus group discussions and questionnaires. Educators and other stakeholders who are interested in the welfare and future of our nation should find critical and valuable information for future planning. This information may also assist educators and policymakers in closing the achievement gap and in improving academic success for African American male students.

This study’s findings add to the body of knowledge about educating African American male students, in that it focused on middle-school-age African American male student perceptions of instructional strategies rather than those of educators. Prior research primarily gathered data from experts, such as teachers or administrators. This study adds the importance of understanding the children and listening to their concerns regarding their education.

Discussion

To determine African American male student perceptions of attempted instructional strategies, I explored three research questions. During the focus group interview, I asked open-ended questions to address those key areas. The discussion is organized and presented by focus group question. The research questions were as follows:
1. How do African American males perceive the influence of instructional strategies regarding their academic achievement? (Focus Group Interview Questions 2, 3, 10)

2. What instructional techniques that are utilized have a positive academic influence on African American male students in this study? (Focus Group Interview Questions 4, 5, 8, 9)

3. What unintended consequences have been associated with these instructional strategies? (Focus Group Interview Questions 6, 7)

**Focus Group Interview**

Question 1: Tell me about yourself by explaining your grade, age, things you like to do, what you want to be when you grow up?

The information they provided was presented in Table 2 of Chapter IV. The students ranged in age from 13 to 15 years old, and they were all in the eighth grade. Their career aspirations varied from wanting to become professional athletes to lawyers and doctors.

Question 2: Describe the type of classroom you enjoy and have been successful in learning.

The majority of the students expressed a desire for teachers to link the significance of the curriculum to real life because the students would be more focused on the content and have a reason for paying attention. This finding is similar to that found in Hollins (1994), where the instructional methods that appeared to work most successfully with poor ethnic and language minority students were those that tended to focus on making meaning out of content. Recent research attributes the failure of teacher-directed instruction of a skills-based
curriculum to teachers not providing students with a larger meaning or purpose for learning. According to researchers, applying the content of the material to real life adds value to student learning. This finding in conjunction with findings from prior research suggests that teachers should attach real life meaning to curricular content as one criterion when developing lessons for African American students.

The students had a common interest in math, with most of the students expressing a belief that math was a subject they would need in their future. The participants also talked about how it held their interest and that it was their preferred subject in school. These African American males stressed their academic performance would improve as their interest in the subject matter increased. Wynn (1992) suggested that teachers must alter their teaching styles and strategies to motivate, captivate, and inspire African-American male students. Ford and Harris (1994) noted that teachers who considered the interests of the students when creating the lessons should successfully motivate and inspire the African American male learner. The students in the present study supported this idea throughout the focus group discussion.

Question 3: Describe the types of things that have motivated and helped you learn.

Motivation to succeed and increase academic performance was something all the participants felt they needed. The respondents discussed several sources of motivation, including teachers, family members, and other students, and how those sources encouraged them.

Several students talked about how their teachers were their source of motivation. For example, when teachers constantly reminded the students they could succeed, this
encouragement helped their performance in class and helped them stay focused. Teachers cannot have negative feelings about minority students and expect them to maximize their full potential (Obiakor, 1994). For minority or at-risk students to achieve their goals and objectives, teachers have to change their mental frameworks (Obiakor, 1994). “These kids have all the potential that other kids have” (Baer, 1991, p. 25). This attitude exemplifies the type of attitude the students in the present study felt teachers should have to increase their learning potential. Ford et al. (1995) contended there are requisite teacher traits that will help African American students perform well academically. For example, teachers make their expectations known to the child in a friendly, firm, calm, and confident manner, and they praise that which is praiseworthy to encourage students to perform well. The students’ comments in this study supported the importance of teacher attitudes to student performance and motivation.

Another critical factor important to student motivation was the influence of family members. The students explained how when family members had high expectations of them, their family members would encourage them to succeed. The students also mentioned their feeling of obligation to their family members. This finding on African American male students’ sense of responsibility and need to make their family happy about their performance as motivation is supported in the literature. Wynn (1992) explained that teacher and parental expectations represent the single most important building blocks in African American young men seeking an education. According to Wynn, high expectations from teachers and parents prepare African American males to achieve excellence and empower them to develop solutions to the many conflicts confronting them in their lives.
Another motivation this study identified was that of role models, either being a role model to other students or having a role model outside of the immediate circle of adults around them. This finding supported that of Bandura and Walter (1963), who found that students who observe other classmates working hard and being praised by their teachers learn to try that behavior to receive the same reward. A couple of the participants reported that they felt motivated when they realized they were role models for their peers. When other students looked up to them and depended upon them to get the job done, the students reported they made better decisions. The respondents explained that they felt encouraged to do things right when they knew someone else was watching what they did. One student reported that an incentive for him was having a role model who was a famous athlete. He shared how this athlete’s story of success inspired him to attempt to fulfill his dreams as well.

The students also reported the importance of lessons being connected to real life in order to motivate or inspire them. According to Ford et al. (1995), teachers should use the child’s culture to help him or her create meaning and understand the world. The researchers also suggested that teachers must know the subject matter and relate it to the child’s experience and life. All the participants in the present study emphasized in some fashion throughout the focus group sessions the cruciality of teachers connecting learning objectives to real life. Two African American males spoke specifically about this issue when discussing what inspired them. They both emphasized the significance of linking the curriculum to life after they graduate. One student commented: “What motivates me is doing good in school
‘cause one day I want to be somebody and go somewhere.” The students need to understand that what they are learning will improve their future.

Question 4: List some teaching strategies you like and that have helped you learn. Why do those things help you learn?

One problem that prevents students from achieving success in school is boredom. The students talked about how if lessons were fun and exciting, they would be more interested in learning. A statement one participant made summed up why instruction should be stimulating, so students can learn effectively: “If she [the teacher] just sits up there and says this is how you do this, you are liable to go to sleep.” As it is widely agreed that teachers must adapt their lessons to the learning modalities of the students being taught, the learning style of a typical African American male student should be inventoried (Harris & Duhon, 1999). Teachers who consider these preferences when designing lessons should successfully motivate the African American male learner (Ford & Harris, 1994). According to Harris and Duhon (1999), the African American male student thrives best in a cooperative atmosphere rather than a competitive one where they might be shown as less intelligent. They also found that a varied teaching methodology is more beneficial than the traditional, repetitive methodology with these young men.

Another strategy the African American males discussed as a technique teachers should use to enhance their learning is that of hands-on activities. Students felt they could better comprehend the content if they could complete hands-on activities that demonstrate the learning objectives. One student suggested teachers give students more opportunities for “science projects, cards for math class, and do things with your hands.” Another student
shared that he could learn better when he saw what he was doing. This finding seems to contradict that reported earlier on the Learning Style Inventory, where only 2 participants selected hands-on assignments and the majority selected listening as the primary technique. Throughout the study, the students supported that overwhelming that wanted both hands-on activities and to hear lots of explanation before having to engage in an activity. The wording of choices for this item on the Learning Style Inventory likely contributed to this seemingly contradictory result. Interactive activities is a lesson type discussed in the literature. Ford et al. (1995) argued that teachers should use manipulatives, keyboarding, or the computer to enhance student learning. The results of the present study support Ford et al.’s finding that African American learners are responsive to more kinesthetic and tactile learning activities.

The participants in this study agreed they would better grasp the concepts if the teacher provided numerous examples and offered ample explanation. They also believed teachers should review the material several times with them. A participant explained that by doing this, “it helps you out a lot.” This finding is supported by Ford et al. (1995), who found that master teachers use a variety of techniques involving recall and review to provide effective instruction for African American learners. For example, mnemonic activities, an audible recall strategy, have students repeat information orally to facilitate recall. Iconic learning activities involve the use of pictures and figures of important data as memory aids. Mediated learning matches associated images to information to provoke recall.

A number of students were concerned about teacher attitudes. The students were particularly interested in teachers showing patience with their learning and demonstrating concern and care for the students by letting them know the teachers support their academics.
Obiakor (1994) suggested that teachers help students find and develop their intrinsic motivation that makes them aspire to work hard to reach their goals and take pride in their successes. Additionally, he recommended that teachers include feedback to students that shows both strengths and, for the sake of making improvements, weaknesses. Ford et al. (1995) enumerated requisite teacher traits that help African American students do well academically (see Chapter II, Table 1 for full list). The responses of the students in the present study aligned to several teacher traits identified under strategic proficiency:

1. draws upon cultural experiences of the child and family to include authentic cultural perspectives in the curriculum;
2. uses the child’s culture to help the child to create meaning and understand the world;
3. possesses a repertoire of varied teaching styles and adjusts them to accommodate varied learning styles among children;
4. maintains participatory, dynamic, and spontaneous classrooms;
5. displays flexibility in the content of a structured learning environment;
6. maintains a high rate of academically engaged time; and
7. Expands child’s capacity to appreciate and deal with differences in others and helps child to perceive self in an international or global perspective.

Question 5: List the teaching strategies you dislike that are used in class. Why do you dislike them?

Most students attributed problems in learning to teachers not clarifying or reviewing content, teachers speaking too fast or not clearly enough to be understood, or teachers giving
insufficient time for students to comprehend the material. The African American male students spoke of teachers needing to provide more explanation in order for them to gain greater understanding of the content. They also recommended that teachers re-check with students to see if they have grasped the learning objectives. Other respondents offered that teachers should allow more time for learning. They were concerned over how teachers get frustrated because the students do not comprehend the material. The students attributed this learning gap to teachers not taking the time necessary for students to become familiar with the lesson before moving to the next objective. Students felt that teachers should take their time to explain and review at a moderate pace so students could reach comprehension. The clarity and speed of the teacher’s dialect affect how African American males learn. One participant commented that the teacher “be trying to explain stuff and you don’t understand her ‘cause she be talking so fast.” Another student explained that when teachers “beat around the bush and try to explain something, they don’t talk clear enough so that you can understand.” Students mentioned when teachers speak fast, there is insufficient time to take effective notes with knowledge built in the process. Ford et al. (1995) suggested that teachers utilize mnemonic activities, such as recall activities, to increase student memory.

The students also identified teachers lacking trust in students as a barrier to their learning. Several students spoke about needing additional assistance and requesting help, but teachers disbelieving the students did not understand. The participants felt as though teachers lacked faith in them to ask for help when they really needed it. Instead, students believed teachers thought the participants were asking questions to avoid doing their work. The African American students cited the teacher–student relationship as important to their
academic success. The literature supports the finding that teachers need to spend more time
to explore student comprehension. If students do not have the answer, teachers should spend
as much time as they need to have students discover the answer for themselves (Wynn,
1992). Baer (1991) explained that teachers need to “get to know who the kids are” (p. 25).

Having meaningful lessons was also found essential to student learning. The students
discussed why the lessons taught needed to connect with their future for them to value the
learning. Some students thought that homework generally did not have any meaning or
relevance. One student’s comment summed up what many participants thought about
learning, that homework was not “teaching nothing about everyday life.” If students can
understand how they will need the information they are learning, they are more interested in
learning about it. As emphasized previously, the literature promotes relating the objectives to
the students’ culture to help them create meaning and understand the world (Ford et al.,
1995).

Question 6: How do you feel about learning and school?

The majority of the participants enjoyed learning and felt that learning was necessary
for their future. However, many also expressed that school was boring, and they did not see
the purpose in attending school because, in their opinion, school was a waste of time and
energy. Most of them felt that school was unnecessary for learning meaningful lifelong
essentials. Although the students definitely enjoyed learning, the actual school environment
did not provide them the stimulation or sense of urgency for it to be considered an essential
part of their lives. These findings demonstrate the need for teachers to create a supportive,
stimulating learning environment in which the students feel important. As Obiakor (1994) suggested, educators should foster a school environment where students feel like an accepted part of the learning environment. Moreover, he added that schools should help students recognize when they are being productive and which behaviors best lead to school success. The participants in the present study expressed how critical it is to their academic success for them to develop the desire to attend school.

Another interesting finding dealt with homework assignments. The students wanted the teachers to provide ample explanation and to spend more time helping them while they were at school to eliminate the need for homework assignments. The students expressed a desire to practice and receive assistance during the school day, so that they could spend time with their families in the evenings instead of doing homework. They also talked about not understanding the purpose of homework because they did not see how that could help them with future aspirations and goals. Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) recommended that teachers clarify to students the purpose of homework (i.e., practice and preparation or elaboration) so that students will understand why they are completing the assignments and added that the minutes students should spend “on homework should equal approximately 10 times his or her grade level” (p. 65).

Teachers’ attitudes and behaviors also influenced the African American males’ feelings regarding school. This topic surfaced numerous times in response to other questions. Some students felt teachers lacked trust in them as students, citing instances when they really needed assistance and asked for it, the teachers did not believe them. The students expressed how this lack of trust caused frustration and inhibited the student–teacher relationship.
The students talked about how the school schedule affected their feelings about school and learning, discussing openly about what they would like to see changed in school. Some students expressed a desire to start the school day at a later hour in the morning and to have shorter class periods. Having to start early meant that some students arrived at school feeling tired and sleepy. Many students also complained about boring lessons that they felt led to their not advancing academically in school.

Question 7: What things would you change about class activities that would help you learn better?

Several students complained about problems in teachers’ speech, both in pace and clarity, that caused students difficulty in understanding what teachers were trying to relay to them. Also, the students complained about not understanding the lessons because the teachers talked too much rather than providing demonstrations of the objectives taught. Students felt that teachers should slow down and not speak so fast, so that students could comprehend the learning objectives.

Another important factor the students perceived would help expand their learning was participating in interesting lessons. The students spoke of the need for fascinating lessons on topics that would motivate them. An interesting finding is that the students felt the number of distractions and off-task behaviors would decrease as the students’ interest increased. This finding suggests that, to maximize student learning, teachers should develop creative, fun, and exciting lessons to hold the students’ interest.

A common theme was the need for clearer explanations of learning objectives. Again, the participants spoke of how teachers are not doing a good job of teaching them the
concepts. When students do not understand something and ask questions, the teachers are not taking the time to explain further to ensure that the concepts are being understood. In some instances, the students reported that teachers believed the students asked questions to get out of doing work rather than asking questions because of a failure to comprehend information.

Ford et al. (1995) reported several effective strategies that master teachers use to increase student comprehension and memory of concepts taught. For example, to stimulate recall, master teachers use pictures and figures of critical information as aids, relate matching images to similar concepts, and repeat information orally to students.

Question 8. How do you feel about completing assignments as an individual, working in groups, creating projects, and open discussions?

The overwhelming majority of African American male students in this study preferred group activities. For many students, not having to complete the requirements on their own was a positive incentive for working in a group. Other reasons the students cited for preferring group activities were enjoying working with each other, having the full responsibility of obtaining a good grade, and working together with people with a variety of talent. According to students, everyone has strengths and weaknesses. By working in a group, everyone is able to do something well and that helps to complete tasks.

Some students preferred working in smaller groups over larger groups. Those who expressed a preference for smaller groups of two or three people felt that being in a smaller group would raise their academic performance significantly compared to being in the larger groups. They wanted to be able to express themselves freely, and they felt that being in a smaller group would give them a greater chance to do that. They also felt confident in
smaller groups and agreed they could accomplish more. With fewer members in a group, these students felt they would establish a relationship among the students in the group more easily. Marzano et al. (2001) explained that cooperative groups should be kept small because “students may not have the skills to work competently in a large group” (p. 91).

Those who preferred larger groups stated a number of advantages. For example, they could divide the workload among the members, leaving less responsibility on the individual. Another advantage was obtaining more assistance when needed. They talked about how the teachers would be able to provide more individual help when the groups were smaller. They perceived that the students and teachers are willing to help each other more.

A few respondents thought working individually was better. Those students complained about working in a group and elected to work independently. One participant felt that the advantage of working individually was not having to rely on others.

Question 9. How and where do you prefer sitting in a classroom, and why?

The majority of participants preferred sitting in the back of the class. Most students said they felt more relaxed sitting in the rear of the class because they did not feel as though all the other students were staring at them. Also, by sitting in the back, they had less chance of being disturbed by the other students and fewer distractions would mean they could stay focused and on task. The students felt they participated and learned more in class by sitting in the rear of the class. One student selected the rear because he was farsighted and said he could see better.
Fewer participants chose the middle of the class, the front of the class, or no particular location. The two students who selected the middle of the class or front of the class felt they could be more aware of everything and see the instructional material better.

The students’ perceptions about seating location and its influence on learning are supported by the literature. The arrangement of furniture in the room can determine the student’s success level, and the arrangement preference can be different for every student (Ford et al., 1995). Teachers, therefore, should not assume that every student reacts the same to seating arrangement.

Question 10. Tell me about your favorite teacher, and why they are your favorite.

According to several participants, their favorite teacher was someone who demonstrated care for them and their learning. The students felt that certain actions by their teachers portrayed this concern. To promote and develop successful teacher–student relationships, Ford et al. (1995) argued that teachers should exemplify determination and commitment in teaching African American children. This act of caring demonstrated by the teacher to the student is essential in creating this profound relationship.

Teachers should learn to identify characteristics that help students understand who they are, what they value, and how to set and reach for realistic goals (Obiakor, 1994). As teachers provide instruction, the lessons should be connected to the students’ future to assist the students in understanding the importance of learning. The participants in the present study discussed how their favorite teachers mentored them, furnished guidance and set a frame of mind for their aspirations, and linked these things to school. Teachers have to get to know who the students are in order to accomplish this goal.
Another key concept that the students talked about was the extra time teachers took to explain, relay, and provide information to them. The students felt this demonstrated kindness and proved that the teachers wanted them to succeed. As a result, the students responded positively to the instruction and gained greater knowledge.

The types of activities in which the African American male students were involved also swayed how they perceived their teachers. The teachers who provided fun, exciting, and involved lessons were viewed as the better teachers. The participants said these types of lessons held their attention and excited them. As a result, the students learned and were more successful in these types of classrooms.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The participants in this study provided significant insight regarding different teaching techniques utilized in the classroom. Some perceptions the students presented are excellent as a backdrop for future studies. The qualitative data yielded more information on what middle-school-age African American males think about their learning abilities, educational experiences, and their futures.

A similar study that focuses on African American females at the secondary level would provide a basis for comparing and validating current data on gender differences. Recent research suggests that African American female students have more academic success than do males. A study to discuss the females’ frame of mind, beliefs, theories, and preferences in learning styles would assist in understanding this phenomenon. More information in the literature that discusses the uniqueness of African American males would
be beneficial. As research is applied in this area, it would add to the array of knowledge for African American learners.

The careers the participants in this study selected in this study could not be definitively correlated with their academic ability. A study to determine whether a student’s academic ability correlates with his career choice would help to identify specific areas of need in the educational field.

Additional studies of African American males who are quiet pupils in the class is needed. The students pointed out how students who keep their heads down and who are less responsive and quiet should be a signal to the teacher that they are having difficulty in learning. It would be interesting to learn whether these African American students differ from those who are outspoken and responsive in class. A study could compare the academic issues that arise between the two groups, how they differ and compare, including their preferred learning styles. This study could be done with males only and with females only.

This study provided many informative perspectives about African American males regarding their preferences in instructional strategies. Theoretically, many existing theories were highlighted. However, this investigation included and expanded our understanding of middle-school-age African American male perceptions and reflections of how they learn and the different techniques used in the classroom. Their individual differences and characteristics played an important role in the way they perceived these strategies.

**Implications for Practice**

School boards, administrators, teachers, parents, and businesses continue to hold each student accountable for high academic performance. The expectations for performance and
the pressures continue to rise. By the time students enter secondary school, students may be suffering from years of academic struggle and discouragement. The students may be exhibiting low self-esteem and negative attitudes toward school.

School districts have a small window of opportunity to change the outer circle, that is, community, homes, parents, and so forth. Oftentimes, these issues can influence how a student performs at school. However, opportunities to facilitate learning differently through flexible curricula and culturally relevant approaches to learning are within the inner circle of opportunity and possibility. Attempting to provide this type of variety may assist in broadening their learning ability.

An important factor the African American males emphasized throughout the study is the influence other people have on their view of learning. Many students discussed how critical it is for their teacher to encourage and offer words of support to them throughout the day. Oftentimes, teachers may not realize the magnitude of their words and how their words may alter a child’s perception regarding school. These males talked about how motivation and high expectations from people who care about them aid in developing a positive attitude toward their academics.

I contend that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation should be factored into staff development for schools. Teachers need to understand the value this encouragement can bring to African American males. Additionally, just as significant, teachers must understand the males—what their needs and concerns are, and how to motivate them. School administrators should require their teachers to attend professional development activities that focus on motivation and understanding the African American male. This development should
be a continuous learning cycle that is broadened each school year. The students in this study noted that if the teachers demonstrated care and concern for their well-being, they responded positively to their instruction.

The male students in this study continuously talked about how important it was to them for lessons to be fun and engaging. Developing an understanding of students’ lives also enables the teacher to increase the relevance of lessons and make examples more meaningful. Teachers should enthusiastically and positively appreciate and accommodate the similarities and differences among the students’ cultures. Baer (1991) noted the cruciality of getting to know who these kids are. The students can assist the teachers in determining the types of lessons that increase their learning potential by answering questions regarding their preferred learning styles at the beginning of each school year. Teachers must know what students enjoy and deem important. Educators should attempt to include students’ interests in the planning stage to provide an array of joyous learning opportunities for students. Teachers may need additional training so they understand how to approach and gather this type of information and how to apply it to their lessons.

One student recommended that teachers try to show students how to do the work by providing more demonstrations. Most of the students emphasized how their comprehension of the material increased when numerous examples and thorough explanations were provided. There is also a need for teachers to furnish more one-on-one instruction to help build knowledge and clarification of concepts when objectives are explained.

Students also stressed how much they wanted lessons to relate to their everyday life and future lives. Learning by example has long been supported as a successful teaching
strategy. Teachers might consider building school–to–business partnerships to bring in individuals to serve as role models or tutors. These individuals could help students learn more about different fields and help them make the connection between what they are learning in the classroom and the real world. Some businesses even offer virtual projects for students or other hands-on learning opportunities to spark students’ interest in different vocations.

A best-practice strategy that many are recognizing in the educational arena is the use of learning style inventories. By using this tool at the beginning of the school year, lessons can be created that revolve around the students’ preferred learning style. Also, groups can be created to utilize all of the students’ strengths by arranging students to complement each other. In addition, the teacher can learn about the students’ choice for seating arrangement in the classroom. This strategy, according to the participants, should assist them in building their academic abilities.

The final recommendation to assist African American males in becoming more productive learners is for teachers to clarify the purpose of the lessons prior to conducting them. Most of the students talked about how they require a purpose for learning the material presented. Understanding why these concepts are necessary in their future and how they would be utilized is important to them. Teachers need to connect the material with everyday life and lay the foundation for learning.
REFERENCES


Bridges, R. E. (1999). *Improving academic achievement for the black male child: An outline of key points to be considered.* Education Initiatives, Inc.


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Recruitment Forms
Dear Name,

I am a graduate student in the Educational Leadership Department at North Carolina State University in the process of collecting data for my research study. My study aims to investigate the African American male students’ perceptions of instructional techniques utilized within the classroom and how they may influence the African American males’ academic achievement.

Your thoughts and feelings are valued because they represent the feelings of many students like you. It is anticipated that the information you share will assist in providing successful teaching techniques for educators in the effort to increase the academic achievement of African American males and help close the achievement gap.

Your name and school will be given to me as someone who might be interested and willing to be interviewed and observed for such a study. These interviews and observation notes will be confidential and only I would know all of the identities. The interview should take between 30 and 60 minutes. The interview questions will cover your experiences and knowledge pertaining to teaching strategies used that have an impact on students, especially the African American male group. In order to talk with you more freely, I would like to tape record our interview if you agree.

Ideally, I would like to complete most of my interviews and observations between now and the end of April. I will call your school in the next few days to talk with you about your willingness to participate and, hopefully, to discuss a convenient interview and observation time with you. I know you are very busy and do truly appreciate your consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

Althea Taylor
A STUDY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES’ PERCEPTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUES AND ITS’ INFLUENCE ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

CONSENT FORM

Description of Study
I sincerely appreciate your agreeing to share your thoughts and feelings with me on this project. As you may know, the purpose of this study is to find out, from you your perception as an African American male, middle school student, of teaching strategies that have been attempted within the classroom. Your thoughts and opinions are valued because they represent the feeling of many students like you. It is anticipated that the information you share as an African American male student will help provide new information to support the usefulness of instructional strategies and assist African American males succeed academically.

I will interview you and it will be one of ten to twelve that are being conducted with other African American male students. This interview is one of three interactions we will have during this project. I will conduct a second interview after I observe you in one of your classes. Finally, the entire group of participants (others like yourself) will meet together as a focus group to have a dialogue about attempted teaching strategies.

Confidentiality
All information gathered during the study in interviews, observations, and focus groups will be confidential. Understand that only I, Althea Taylor, will have access to this consent form, which links your name with the subject number. Your identity will be disguised through this specific coding. In order to get exact information from you, which increases the strength of the study, you will be audio taped in two sessions (interview and focus group). Your name will be pre-coded to the recording tape that will be used to record these sessions. The transcriptions (writing down from the tape what you said) will also be coded in order to further protect your confidentiality. Written reports may entail the use of quoted material. If there is any information regarding illegal activity, abuse or neglect, I am obligated to report it to the appropriate personnel. At the conclusion of this study, the information gathered and audiotapes, identifiable only by subject number, will be stored in a locked file and the key that relates your name with the assigned subject number will be destroyed. The information obtained from this research will be used for the publication or educational purposes of this researcher only and not for any other purpose.

Risk and Discomforts
There is no potential physical or mental risk to you, since your participation is limited to exchanging information through interviews, observations and focus group discussions. Your role is to inform.
Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide to not participate in this study. If you decide you don’t want to participate, feel free to withdraw from this study at any time.

Costs
There will not be any cost to you for participation in this study.

Questions
You have been given a description of the study through an initial introductory letter. Understand that if there have any problems or questions in connection with your participation of this study, contact Althea Taylor at ACTAYLOR@wcpss.net or Bill Johnston, the faculty advisor for this project, at North Carolina State University of Educational Leadership, phone: 513-4231. If at any time during this study, you feel your rights have been violated, contact the Educational Leadership Department.

Consent
I agree to be interviewed, observed in the classroom, participate in a focus group and allow review of documents for a study regarding strategies and teaching techniques teachers have attempted to increase my academic achievement.

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this consent form. I (subject and parent) agree to participate in the research study.

By signing this consent form, I have not waived any of the legal rights of my son, which he otherwise would have as subject in a research study.

________________________________________________________________________________________
(Assent of Participant Signature) (Print Name)

________________________________________________________________________________________
(Signature of Parent) (Print Name)

________________________________________________________________________________________
(Signature of Investigator) (Date)
APPENDIX B

Interview Guides
INTERVIEW GUIDE (Administrator/Teacher)

INFORMANT NAME:  
POSITION: 

LOCATION:  
DATE: 

1. Describe the type of school you are/were working in, including the demographics, population and ability level of the students.

2. Explain the types of instructional strategies you have utilized and administered within the school that have impacted African American student achievement levels.

3. What influenced your decision to implement those teaching strategies?

4. What type of resources or information did you use in helping with deciding what remediation instructional strategies to include?

5. What instructional strategy has had the greatest impact on African American males student achievement?

6. Describe how the African American male students have benefited from these instructional strategy the most, least and why.

7. Tell me what type of documents you analyzed to determine if the teaching strategies are successful and are achieving its goals.

8. What time span do you think is appropriate to administer these techniques before seeing results?
9. List the pros and cons you feel are a result of these interventions.

10. If you could design or implement an instructional strategy that would influence the academic achievement of African American males, what would it be?

11. What other information do you feel should be included in this interview?
INTERVIEW GUIDE (Students)

INFORMANT NAME: ___________________________ GRADE ___________________________
LOCATION: ___________________________ DATE: ___________________________

1. Tell me about yourself by explaining your grade, age, things you like to do, what do you want to be when you grow up?

2. Describe the type of classroom you enjoy and have been successful in learning.

3. Describe the types of things that have motivated and helped you learn.

4. List some teaching strategies you like and have helped you learn. Why do those things help you learn?

5. List the teaching strategies you dislike that are used in class. Why do you dislike them?

6. How do you feel about learning and school?

7. What things would you change about class activities that would help you learn better?

8. How do you feel about completing assignments as an individual, working in groups, creating projects, and open discussions?

9. How and where do you prefer sitting in a classroom and why?

10. Tell me about your favorite teacher, and why they are your favorite.

11. What other information would you like to share for this interview that will be helpful with teaching others about how to better teach you?
What Is My Learning Style?

Name ____________________________ Date ________________________________

**Directions:** Check the boxes that most describe how you learn best.

When are you most ready to learn?
___ mornings
___ long time

When you are doing an activity, can you stick with it for a
___ afternoon
___ short time

What is your favorite way to learn?
___ by myself
___ in a small group
___ one-to-one with an adult
___ one-to-one with classmate
___ in a large group

What helps you stick with an activity?
___ holding something in my hand
___ writing
___ having something in my mouth
___ the fun involved

How do you learn best?
___ by reading books and other printed items
___ by listening
___ by looking at visuals like pictures
___ by doing things with my hands like making pictures

Which do you need to learn?
___ exact directions and examples
___ written materials and lecture notes
___ both of the above

When you are learning, do you
___ learn the parts first to understand the whole idea?
___ need to see the whole idea completed first?

Can you tell by yourself
___ how well you are doing or
___ do you need someone to tell you

Which would you rather do?
___ use facts and information to do practical projects
___ gather information and write it
___ use facts and information to do group projects
___ discover my own new information and ideas

"Learning is fun."

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Appelbaum Training Institute (2002)
Follow-Up Questionnaire

Name ________________________________    Date __________________

Directions: Please rank the following statements by checking one option given.

1. It is important for teachers to relate the material to the real world so I can understand how I will use the information later.
   ___ Strongly agree   ___ Agree   ___ Not sure   ___ Disagree
   ___ Strongly disagree

2. One of the main reasons that I would be doing well in school is the encouragement I get from my teachers.
   ___ Strongly agree   ___ Agree   ___ Not sure   ___ Disagree
   ___ Strongly disagree

3. I enjoy working on lessons in class that have a lot of activities done with my hands.
   ___ Strongly agree   ___ Agree   ___ Not sure   ___ Disagree
   ___ Strongly disagree

4. I help teachers know if I understand the lesson by participating in class and asking questions.
   ___ Strongly agree   ___ Agree   ___ Not sure   ___ Disagree
   ___ Strongly disagree

5. I learn better when teachers give homework that relates to what we are learning.
   ___ Strongly agree   ___ Agree   ___ Not sure   ___ Disagree
   ___ Strongly disagree

6. School should start later in the morning so I can concentrate better on my work.
   ___ Strongly agree   ___ Agree   ___ Not sure   ___ Disagree
   ___ Strongly disagree

7. I understand the purpose of school and learning and see how it will help me in the future.
   ___ Strongly agree   ___ Agree   ___ Not sure   ___ Disagree
   ___ Strongly disagree

8. I think I could learn better if the classes were a two-hour block, rather than 50 or 55 minutes.
   ___ Strongly agree   ___ Agree   ___ Not sure   ___ Disagree
   ___ Strongly disagree

9. Most of the time I feel good about how I am learning in school.
   ___ Strongly agree   ___ Agree   ___ Not sure   ___ Disagree
   ___ Strongly disagree

10. If I think the teacher cares about me, I will work harder to be successful.
    ___ Strongly agree   ___ Agree   ___ Not sure   ___ Disagree
    ___ Strongly disagree
APPENDIX C

Field Note Form
Field Note Form

Participant Code # __________

Purpose: Interview____ Observation____ Focus Group ____ Other____

Date: _______________ Location ________________________________

Time Contact Began ________________ Time Contact Ended ______________

Surroundings:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Participant Reactions:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Researcher’s Reactions:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Observation and Researcher Comments:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________