

## **ABSTRACT**

BROWN, JOSEPHUS C. Play Ball: African American Male Athletes' Perceptions of their Participation in Interscholastic Athletics and their Academic Performance. (Under the direction of Dr. Paul F. Bitting.)

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of five African American student-athletes who have not only participated in football and basketball at a high level – earning a varsity letter and accolades in their particular sport – but have performed at a high level in the classroom – attaining a B average or higher. Participation in various sports at the high school level creates demands on the student-athletes as the expenditure of time and energy has the potential to adversely affect the student-athletes' academic progress. However, this study focused on the perceptions of five student-athletes who met and exceeded those demands. The five African American male student-athletes in the study also expounded upon other factors which contributed to their success.

Play Ball: African American Male Athletes' Perceptions of their Participation in Interscholastic Athletics and their Academic Performance.

by  
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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Josephus C. Brown, son of Allen and Annie Mae Brown, is a native North Carolinian. After completing high school in Wake County, North Carolina, he enlisted in the United States Air Force and served four years. He later continued his military career by serving 20 years in the North Carolina Air National Guard – retiring in November 1999. He attended North Carolina Central University and earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Physical Education (K-12) in 1980. He continued his education at North Carolina State University and graduated with a Master’s in School Administration. He is currently enrolled in the doctoral program at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina where he is completing an Ed.D in Education Administration.

Mr. Brown has worked in North Carolina schools for his entire career and has worked in the Wake County Public System in Raleigh, North Carolina for 32 years. He is married and has two daughters.

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the body of knowledge pertaining to African American male student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between athletic participation and academic success.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter 1</b> .....	1
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Statement of the Problem</b> .....	4
<b>Purpose of the Study</b> .....	7
<b>Definition of Terms</b> .....	8
<b>Significance of the Study</b> .....	8
<b>Limitations of the Study</b> .....	11
 <b>Chapter 2</b> .....	 13
<b>Review of the Literature</b> .....	13
<b>African American Males' Perspectives</b> .....	13
<b>Academic Achievement versus Athletic Participation</b> .....	17
<b>African American Youth</b> .....	23
<b>Influential Teachers</b> .....	28
<b>Significance of Perceptions</b> .....	29
<b>Perceptions of Student-Athletes</b> .....	33
<b>Summary</b> .....	36
 <b>Chapter 3</b> .....	 38
<b>Methodology</b> .....	38
<b>Research Design</b> .....	42
<b>Phenomenological Study</b> .....	44
<b>Conducting the Study</b> .....	45
<b>Research Questions</b> .....	48
<b>Sample</b> .....	49
<b>Data Collection</b> .....	51
<b>Data Analysis</b> .....	53
<b>Research Validity and Reliability</b> .....	54
<b>Subjectivity Statement</b> .....	56
<b>Personal Background</b> .....	57
<b>Ethical Issues (IRB)</b> .....	59
<b>Participants in the Study</b> .....	60
<b>Summary</b> .....	62
 <b>Chapter 4</b> .....	 63
<b>Research Findings</b> .....	63
<b>Setting of the Study</b> .....	63
<b>Setting of the High School</b> .....	65
<b>Student-Athletes in the Study</b> .....	68
<b>Denny Hladik</b> .....	68
<b>Arthur Fischer</b> .....	77

<b>Kevin Cross</b> .....	82
<b>John Dove</b> .....	89
<b>Nathan King</b> .....	98
<b>Summary</b> .....	105
<b>Chapter 5</b> .....	106
<b>Conclusions and Implications</b> .....	106
<b>Perceptions of Academics and Athletic Performance</b> .....	108
<b>Athletic and Academic Performance Influenced by Perceptions</b> .....	114
<b>Hard Work</b> .....	115
<b>Balance</b> .....	116
<b>Support</b> .....	117
<b>Administrative Implications</b> .....	120
<b>Summary</b> .....	126
<b>References</b> .....	129
<b>Appendices</b> .....	142
<b>Appendix A</b> .....	143
<b>Appendix B</b> .....	144
<b>Appendix C</b> .....	145
<b>Appendix D</b> .....	146
<b>Appendix E</b> .....	147
<b>Appendix F</b> .....	149
<b>Appendix G</b> .....	150

## **Chapter 1**

*High school sports: where lessons of life are still being learned, and where athletes still compete for the love of the game and their teammates* - Michael Powers 2001

### **Introduction**

This study has focused on the perceptions of African American male athletes who competed in football and basketball at a selected high school. These African American male athletes were among the more than 130,000 athletes who participated on high school sports teams in a Southeastern state and who demonstrated academic prowess in the classrooms (History of the NCHSAA, 2007). A significant number of athletes have been able to participate in athletics while continuing to make more than adequate progress in the classroom in spite of such participation requiring hours of practice, travel, and actual game time. The five African American student-athletes in this study performed at a high level in the classroom as evidenced by their high Grade Point Averages (GPAs) – 3.0 or higher, and they contributed significantly to their teams as evidenced by the fact that they earned athletic letters from their respective school. African American males, the target of this study, have been among the group of athletes who competed in these sports while continuing to make academic progress toward graduation and who endeavored to receive their diplomas.

One researcher proffered a view claiming that participation in athletics, which had been shown to require an enormous amount of energy, was time-consuming and actually interferes with the athletes' ability to perform academically. In 1961, Coleman argued that

high school students face a zero-sum situation which means that the time and energy devoted to sports comes at the cost of other activities, including academic performance. He believed the athletes paid a price for participating in sports at the high school level and academics was one of the elements which bore the brunt of the cost (Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Farrell, & Sabo, 2005).

Contrary to Coleman's argument, a three-year longitudinal study conducted by Whitley (1996) compared the academic performance of high school athletes and non-athletes in North Carolina schools who were members of the North Carolina High School Athletic Association (NCHSAA). His study focused on five criteria he considered germane to illustrating success at the high school level. Whitney's criteria included grade point average (GPA), attendance, discipline referrals, dropout rates, and graduation rates. Whitley's analysis concluded that athletes performed significantly better than non-athletes based upon the five criteria measured in his study. Consequently, Whitley supported the notion that participation in athletics served as a positive motivational factor for students and there was a direct relationship between participation in athletics and positive academic performance. Although Whitley's research and data supported the notion that a positive relationship existed between athletic participation and academic performance, his final conclusions did not offer a view expounded upon by the athletes themselves – their perceptions of the relationship.

What factors inspire these athletes to endure the rigors of preseason training, off-season training, practice sessions, and games while they fulfill the roles associated with being student-athletes? Are there individuals responsible for guiding and nurturing these

athletes? What are the athletes' perceptions of their roles as student-athletes? What are the athletes' perceptions of the relationship between athletics and academics? While Whitley (1996) agreed that high school athletics, student life, and academics share a positive relationship, Coleman (1961) believed there is a negative relationship and athletes do not perform as well socially and academically as non-athletes.

How the African American athletes viewed themselves in the high school environment had an impact on the way they performed. Some researchers have noted a difference in the athletes' perceptions of their status and have categorized themselves as "jocks" and "athletes". While the former expression has been more closely related to positive psychological characterization, the latter has been associated with academic achievement. The differences suggested measures that, based upon the athletes' perceptions of their own status, tap into distinctive, overlapping constructs. In other words, "jocks" view participating in athletics as a self-aggrandizing experience and as a status symbol. "Athletes", on the other hand, think of themselves as students first and are generally committed to academic excellence (Eccles & Barber, 1999). While the previous study relied on surveys as an aspect of qualitative methods, in-depth interviews with the respective athletes would have provided a richer understanding of the athletes' perceptions of their situation in the academic environment.

While some studies have offered a dichotomy of views concerning athletic participation in high schools and the relationship between academic performance and other aspects of life in high schools, adolescents' enthusiasm for sports has remained surprisingly constant. In fact, athletic participation has been the single most popular school-sponsored

activity regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eide & Ronan, 2001). Ascertaining the student-athletes' perceptions of the links between their academic performance and their athletic participation has provided information for those individuals who have endeavored to serve in the educational environment, as they strive to make athletic participation a positive, rewarding experience.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Professional sports leagues in the United States have a significant impact in society and exert a great deal of influence. As early as high school, a significant number of African American athletes envision playing professional sports while seeking exorbitant salaries and the accompanying notoriety. Moreover, these athletes viewed participation in athletics as the gateway to college via athletic scholarships, and ultimately for the opportunity to play professionally. According to 2002 statistics disseminated by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), there were 21,173 African American students enrolled in higher education who received a full or partial athletic scholarship from their respective colleges or universities. African American scholarship athletes made up 21.3 percent of all students receiving athletic scholarships, even though African Americans comprised slightly more than 10 percent of the total enrollments in higher education (JBHE Foundation, 2002).

Eitzen (2006) asserted that sports is a way out of poverty. He stated that sports could be viewed as an avenue for upward mobility for racial minorities, and it appeared to be a means to escape from poverty particularly for African Americans. Some African American athletes believed that sports is an avenue for attaining a degree of affluence. In other words,

athletic participation and the monetary rewards it might bring will provide a way out of the impoverished conditions they heretofore were forced to endure. However, since the focus for this researcher is on perceptions, Eitzen's research did not point to any data pertaining to his investigation of the African American athletes' perceptions of the connection between sports and the possibility that athletics could be the ticket for the journey out of poverty. Also, African Americans were more likely than Caucasians to envision a career in professional sports (Rudman, 1986). Rudman suggested that the difference between African Americans and Caucasians in sports orientation was possibly a consequence of social structures. To elucidate, he cited racism as a cause of this disparity because it limited the opportunities for African Americans in other professional occupations. Again, Rudman's research did not reveal actual interviews with subjects which would have delineated the perceptions of the African American athletes about which he hypothesized. The African American student-athletes in the study commented on aspirations for a professional career, even though they mentioned obtaining an education because they realized that a professional career is a short one.

Furthermore, within the African American community in today's society, African American male athletes have faced an elevated level of sports socialization in their families, neighborhoods, and media. Unfortunately, African American males have been forced to contend with lower expectations for academic achievement, lower levels of career maturity, but higher expectations for professional sports careers as an avenue to attain an elevated level in their social status. The goal of obtaining a professional sports career eschews other roles, other talents, and the development of other skills. In other words, the African

American males' environment emphasized athletics above everything else (Beamon, 2009). Beamon's research, perhaps, could have been strengthened with an investigation into the African American athletes' perceptions of the aforementioned claims pertaining to the relationship between athletics and social mobility. To accentuate Beamon's supposition, African American male athletes comprised approximately 76% of the National Basketball Association (NBA) rosters, 69% of the National Football League (NFL) rosters, and 9% of the Major League Baseball (MLB) rosters (Gage, 2005). Many high school athletes have envisioned playing for a professional sports team after attending colleges and universities, if they attend the latter at all.

Though the primary goal of athletics should be the act of participation in sports and the competition associated with being on teams, another worthwhile goal should be preparing the athletes for a life after sports because the career of athletes is usually short-lived – whether on a college team or in the professional ranks. The foundation for participating in sports, although it can begin with youth programs and continue in middle school, begins to reach a zenith in high school when the athletes' dreams begin to manifest themselves on the playing fields and courts. Research into the athletes' perceptions of athletics and their matriculation in high school will reveal more about the relationship between athletics and the educational environment found in high school, especially for African American male student-athletes. Participating in athletics may be one of the reasons the African American student-athletes will continue to perform at a high level in the classroom in a high school environment. Their academic performance should be a matter of utmost interest to all, especially those in the education community. Moreover, research

involving the African American student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between athletic participation and academic performance will answer some of the questions that previous researchers have, heretofore, left unanswered.

Does participation in athletics provide the impetus for African American high school athletes to excel on their teams and in the classrooms? Do their perceptions of the significance of athletics in their daily lives create an atmosphere that is conducive for them to attain their academic and athletic goals? Data garnered in this study may provide answers to these questions and may provide a blueprint for assisting other high school African American student-athletes who desire to perform at a high level on the courts, on the fields, and in the classrooms.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study has investigated the perspectives of African American male student-athletes who participated in high school athletics and performed academically at a high level while they have been making progress toward graduation. Specifically, this study has delved into African Americans male athletes' perceptions concerning their participation in sports and its relationship to their academic achievement. It has given a voice to African American males as they relate their experiences as student-athletes to their academic performance. To ameliorate the difficult circumstances for some African American male athletes, the information gained as a result of the study may be utilized by administrators, parents, teachers, and others who work closely with high school student-athletes.

At the core of this study lay these research questions:

1. What are the African American male student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between their participation in athletics and their academic performance?
2. How have these perceptions influenced their academic performance?
3. How have these perceptions influenced their athletic performance?

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used.

**African American:** For the purpose of this study, a person of African descent who was born and reared in the United States.

**Athletic Letter:** A cloth letter representing the school which indicates the athlete has met a specified level of participation or performance on a varsity athletic team.

**Athletic Participation:** African American male juniors and/or seniors who participated and earned a letter in football or basketball.

**School Success:** Students who have maintained a high school grade point average (GPA) of B or higher. In general, these students perform well academically and are well behaved. Presumably being college bound, these students have good reputations in their school and have good reputations with respect to their extracurricular and social activities.

### **Significance of the Study**

African American males appeared to be a marginalized segment of the American population and have been under close scrutiny. More failures than successes appeared to characterize this group. The researcher has studied African American males who

participated in athletics and performed at a high level academically in their high school. The information gleaned from the study could be utilized to guide and influence parents or guardians, administrators, educators, and other African American male athletes as they formulate strategies to enable marginally performing students to improve their academic standing and to enable these students to maintain that ameliorated status.

Even though Coleman (1961) wrote about the negative effects of adolescents' sports participation at the high school level more than four decades ago, adolescents' participation in sports has remained constant and their enthusiasm for it has not waned. However, despite substantial empirical research and ongoing theoretical debate, some aspects of the relationship between adolescent sports participation and academic performance have remained unclear. Though the adolescents' sports participation level has increased since Coleman's promulgation in 1961, researchers have not delved into the athletes' perceptions of the relationship between athletics and academic performance. Moreover, relatively little attention has been paid to how the varying levels of participation affect the adolescents' academic performance. At least two studies (Marsh, 1993; Whitley, 1996) have noted the relationship between adolescent athletic participation and academic outcomes across racial and gender lines. Notwithstanding their research which supported a positive relationship between athletic participation and academic performance, Marsh and Whitley did not illustrate the perceptions of the student-athletes as they performed their research into the aforementioned relationship between athletics and academics. Does the athlete who performs more often on the field or court have a different perspective of his role as a

student-athlete? What are the athletes' perceptions of the relationship between being a student-athlete and performing on the court and on the field?

Marsh (1993) and Whitley (1996) offered examples of literature supporting a positive relationship between high school students' participation in athletics and their success in academics. However, Coleman (1961) argued that participation in sports comes at a cost and the cost is poor academic performance because of the lack of time required to adequately prepare for the coursework. His assertion was referred to as a zero-sum situation because the gain in one area – athletic participation at a high level – was offset by poor academic performance. Coleman's assertions were primarily based upon the result of questionnaires administered to the students in 1957 and 1958. In-depth interviews, albeit time-consuming, would have allowed him to delve into the perceptions of the students he researched.

Additionally, students – student-athletes included – are susceptible to the influence of others in the education environment. There are factors which influence educational decisions. While some of these factors may be subtle and difficult to detect, other factors are more recognizable and overt. It is sometimes difficult to determine if a decision was the result of an overt or covert factor. Individuals who can influence students' decision-making include teachers, counselors, coaches, and parents. Factors may include subtly guiding students in a particular direction or demanding that the students proceed in a certain direction, especially in the case of parents who wield a great deal of influence in a family setting (Watley, 1996).

While the challenge has been to analyze the literature from both of these perspectives as the researcher performed a critical review of the literature and conducted subsequent research, the most prominent aspect has been to investigate the perceptions of the high school student-athletes who performed at a high level as athletes and as students in the classroom.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations placed upon the study were reflected in the access to the African American male student-athletes, their parents/guardians, and their willingness to be participants. In other words, the researcher was able to interview, observe, and garner information on the individuals who consented to participate and those who received permission from their parents/guardians to participate. Fortunately, only one student-athlete declined the request to participate, even though his parents consented to allow him to participate. Albeit the study was centered on five student-athletes and they agreed to participate, this amount limited the scope and number of participants. Another limitation was the pool of African American male football and basketball athletes who met the researcher's criteria – athletes who have earned an athletic letter and athletes who have a grade point average (GPA) of B or higher [3.0 or higher]. To elucidate, other limitations are listed below.

Limitations include:

1. Five African American male athletes from a high school
2. Five African American male athletes with a GPA of B average or higher

3. Local high school
4. African American athletes from two sports – football and basketball – who had earned an athletic letter
5. Athletes who were juniors and seniors at the time of the study

Chapter two will provide a critical review of the literature related to the researcher's study. Furthermore, the literature primarily pertained to the relationship between African American male athletes' academic performance and their participation in high school athletics. Also, the researcher attempted to ascertain whether or not there was any literature which examined the perceptions of student-athletes who performed at a high level academically and as athletes.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

*Sports remain a great metaphor for life's more difficult lessons. It was through athletics that many of us first came to understand that fear can be tamed; that on a team the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; and that the ability to be heroic lies, to a surprising degree, within – Susan Casey 2002.*

The purpose of this chapter was to critically examine the relevant literature which pertained to the association between athletic participation and academics for high school athletes, illustrate how this study added to the existing body of knowledge on this subject, and also delve into the athletes' perceptions of the aforementioned relationship. Specifically, this study examined the perceptions of the African American male athletes who performed at a high level in their respective sports while performing at a high level in the classroom. Examining these perspectives has revealed the reasons why the African American male participants strived to endure the dubious aspects associated with being student-athletes – the enormous consumption of time and the expenditures of energy – which are inherent in sports participation, while maintaining an elevated level of excellence in the classroom.

### African American Males' Perspectives

One goal of this study was to glean from the research strategies and information beneficial to African American males and others associated with the educational milieu.

However, the primary target of the research was African American males who aspire to participate in high school athletics. African American male athletes represent a population which has been much maligned and have been considered underrepresented and have been marginalized in American society even though it appeared on the surface that athletics has been a panacea for being accepted in American society. Grundy (2001) reported that from a broader perspective the aspects of African-American athletic success which allowed African American athletes to garner broad acceptance in society also limited the value of athletics as a model for other kinds of civil rights efforts. Unfortunately, he suggested, that this level of athletic success also encouraged African American athletes to concentrate on pursuing professional careers while eschewing academics (Grundy, 2001).

While the limelight of athletics has appealed to many African American male athletes, the reality is that if they concentrated solely on their exploits on the field and court instead of performing in the classroom there can be dire consequences. Robinson (2005) reported that major universities and colleges with respectable academic programs have recruited fewer and fewer of the top African American athletes because these athletes have earned low Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores and grade point averages (GPAs) during their junior and senior years. In addition to the high schools which have raised their participation requirements, universities and colleges have planned to raise them as well because of mounting external pressure. The societal pressure stems from the latter's failed attempts to ensure that student-athletes graduate after competing in their respective sports at the college and university level.

It is interesting to note that some of the pressure to ensure that the student-athletes attain an education while competing in athletics comes from a governing organization called the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). It is a nonprofit organization which governs a combined total of 1200 colleges, universities, conferences, and other organizations. One of its functions is to oversee 23 championship sports. Also, one primary goal is to endeavor to create policies that promote opportunities for the student-athletes to receive a degree while participating in athletics. Because of the pressure to ensure that the student-athletes will graduate with a degree, the NCAA has emphasized raising the admission standards and insisted that colleges and universities have programs in place to assist the student-athletes once they arrive at their institutions of higher learning. In today's society, a college or university can lose athletic scholarships or be prohibited from participating in NCAA-sponsored events if their academic goals are not met in a timely manner (NCAA Eligibility Center).

Furthermore, the NCAA plans to raise the GPA required for incoming freshmen, in all sports, to be able to compete at the intercollegiate level. While the NCAA currently requires freshmen to post a 2.0 GPA coming out of high school, the new policy will require athletes to have a 2.3 GPA – beginning with the 2016 school year (News and Observer). It will be incumbent upon the student-athletes, counselors, teachers, coaches, and parents to be cognizant of these changes in the academic requirements in order for the athletes to be eligible to compete for their colleges and universities. Unfortunately, African American male student-athletes may be affected by these stringent academic requirements.

And African American male athletes who do not make the necessary academic adjustments while in high school have had limited opportunities to earn athletic scholarships. As a consequence, African American male athletes should be made aware of this changing climate and realize that being a high performing student is as important as being a high-profile athlete.

A quantitative study conducted by Snyder and Spreitzer (1990) confirmed some earlier findings which illustrated a positive relationship between high school athletic achievement and academic achievement. Their research involved an analysis of a national longitudinal study which provided data on two periods of the subjects' lives, namely their junior and senior high years. The study explained the findings for Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic students. Snyder and Spreitzer (1990) believed the athletic role enhanced the academic role. However, they caution that athletes who have exhibited an inflated image of their athletic prowess, those who anticipated attending college solely for athletic purposes, are not fully prepared for the academic rigors of college and may ultimately fail.

However, another quantitative study conducted by Melnick, Sabo, and Vanfossen (1992) examined the educational effects of interscholastic athletic participation on a national, stratified sample of African American and Hispanic boys and girls and found that sports participation was generally unrelated to grades and standardized test scores. They suggested that high school athletic participation was more of a social resource for many of the African American and Hispanic youth and only a modest academic resource for others. In spite of their findings concerning athletics and academics, the researchers discovered that

athletic participation was significantly linked to lower dropout rates for some of the African American and Hispanic youths. However, this link was dependent upon the schools' geographic locations – rural, urban, or suburban areas. The researchers suggested that further research should be done on the effects of athletics on Hispanic and African American high school students (Melnick, Sabo, & Vanfossen, 1992).

### **Academic Achievement versus Athletic Participation**

Although empirical research has been conducted pertaining to this ongoing theoretical debate on academic achievement versus athletic participation, some aspects of the relationship between adolescent sports participation and academic performance still remain unclear. Participation in athletics, research has been determined, is time-consuming and those demands for time from the athletic programs make it difficult for the athletes to devote necessary study time (Cantor & Prentice, 1996; Meyer, 1990; Parham, 1993).

Still, another aspect to explore included the potential for social mobility within sports and the possibility of the positive impact sports has on educational outcomes in a high school environment. Sports could also be an avenue for enabling student-athletes to gain entrance into college (Riess 1980). Additionally, decades of studies have linked high school participation in sports to lower drop out rates, improved grades in the classrooms, ameliorated social and psychological development, higher aspirations, and increased educational attainment (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eder & Parker 1987; Guest & Schneider 2003; Hoffman 2006, Long & Caudill 1991; McNeal 1999; Sabo, Melnick, & Vanfossen, 1993; Spady 1970; Videon 2002).

In line with previous research, O'Donnell (2006) studied the Dayton, Ohio Chaminade-Julienne High School football team to ascertain the relationship between participation in high school athletics and academic achievement. Her study of the data collected from the student-athletes' responses revealed some pertinent information. First, a majority of the student-athletes (58.3%) reported worrying about their academic performance in order to remain on their respective teams. Second, O'Donnell (2006) discovered that 66.7% of the student-athletes reported relying on additional study time to maintain their grade point average during football season. Last, when the student-athletes were asked about programs which would assist them with their academic achievement, 50% reported that they could benefit from a school-sponsored tutoring program or weekly progress reports.

After interpreting the results, O'Donnell discovered that overall grade point averages increased from a C average to a B average, additional/structured study time could assist student-athletes, and a highly volatile time during football season was between the first quarter interim and the first quarter grade report date. She concluded that a period of adjustment, a lack of a structured schedule, and an unexpectedly high athletic-related demand accounted for this particular finding. Moreover, her conclusions revealed that during the time of the study negative reinforcement was the only motivation for the football players to perform academically. Also, the student-athletes needed to balance their time between academics and athletics as the coaching staff and teachers provided strategies and additional assistance. Furthermore, the student-athletes could benefit from a mandatory, structured study time set forth by the football coaching staff. Although African American

student-athletes were on the team and were included in her study, she did not disaggregate the data to reflect the race of the football players, which would have been germane to this particular study pertaining to African American male athletes. Since detailed information is lacking on the African American male population, this study has been devoted primarily to researching the perspectives of African American high school male student-athletes.

In addition to research conducted by O'Donnell, Hunt (2005) conducted a longitudinal study on the effect of extracurricular activities in the educational process and the influence on academic outcomes. Athletic participation was included in the list of extracurricular activities and was deemed pertinent for his study. Using a full longitudinal model design which included selection control variables and appropriate time ordering, he found that there was a reverse causal association between participation in extracurricular activities and academic outcomes. In other words, participation in extracurricular activities had an effect on academic outcomes and academic outcomes had an effect on participation in extracurricular activities. Hunt's research, a quantitative study, indicated a positive association between athletic participation and academic performance.

Similarly, Marsh (1988) concluded that there was clear evidence to support the notion that there were benefits associated with participation in extracurricular activities. However, he provided several exceptions to his arguments. First, students who participated in too many activities may not benefit from them. Second, some activities such as sports, honor societies, service organizations, and church organizations were linked positively to some of the outcomes while other organizations displayed little effects or negative effects.

Last, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, for some of the outcomes, apparently received more benefits from participation (Marsh, 1988).

Marsh (1993) reported on the effects of participation in sports during the last two years of high school. Specifically, his study revealed that participation in sports positively affected 14 of 22 senior variables he included in the study, and there were also postsecondary outcomes that reflected positive associations. Those outcomes included social and academic self-concept, educational aspirations, courses selected, attitude and experience with homework, reduction in absenteeism, and college attendance. Additionally, there were no negative effects with the remaining 8 variables in the study. Although other studies may not make such claims, he argued that his data and conclusions generalized across individual characteristics such as race, socioeconomic status, gender, and the ability level of the participants. Thus, his research supported the notion that sports participation has a positive effect on students' academic self-concept and educational aspirations.

An equally important study and subsequent analysis of data suggested there were positive effects of sports participation on student-athletes' grades, self-concept locus of control, and educational aspirations, but there were negative effects on discipline problems. The same study purported to show that athletic participation was unequally distributed across gender and socioeconomic groups. Males, students from higher socioeconomic levels, students attending smaller and private schools, students with prior athletic experience in schools, and those on private sport teams would more than likely participate in high school competitive sports (Fejgin, 1994).

Neal (1995) investigated the association between extracurricular activities and dropouts. His quantitative study suggested that participation in athletics significantly reduced the likelihood that students would dropout of high school. His study examined other areas – fine-arts, vocational and academic clubs – but found that athletic participation maintained its significance even when they were studied jointly. Throughout the data collection and analysis phase of the study, external variables were controlled by the researcher. He concluded that participation in athletics had the largest impact on reducing the dropout rate.

While some studies have concentrated primarily on the academic effects of athletic participation, Barron, Ewing, and Waddell (2000) researched the effects of high school athletic participation on education and labor market outcomes. The researchers argued that their study supports the notion that athletic participation enhances human capital. In particular, former athletes were found to fare better in the labor market than those who were not athletes because athletic involvement involved productivity and teamwork. According to their study, educational attainment and salaries remained directly tied to athletic participation, even when they controlled for ability. They also argued that athletic participation contributed to productivity beyond that of other extracurricular activities.

In a similar quantitative study, Ewing (2007) examined the labor market effects of high school participation as evidenced from the salary and benefits differentials comparing athletes to non-athletes. While other researchers have argued that former athletes earned a higher wage and enjoyed a better labor market position, Ewing specifically studied the relationship between athletic participation and fringe benefits and asserted that former high

school athletes would more than likely be offered additional fringe benefits. Though these findings pertain to private employees, they appeared to be significant in scope and added to the literature concerning athletic participation versus non-participation.

On the other hand, Hauser and Lueptow (1978) refuted the notion that there is an association between athletics and academic achievement. Their research study “does not support a causal interpretation of the relationship between athletic involvement and academic achievement” (Hauser & Lueptow, p. 308). They reported findings demonstrating that participation in high school athletics did not have a causal effect on academic achievement. Instead, they argued that athletic experiences in earlier years created characteristics conducive for academic achievement in a high school setting and high school athletics merely maintained the established characteristics rather than created new ones. They believed research should be directed toward those early athletic experiences, which produce the most observable differences between athletes and non-athletes.

Thus far, the literature addressing a relationship between academic achievement and athletics has been mixed. Although the research studies from the early 1960s beginning with Coleman (1961) and leading up to the mid-70s with the work of Hauser and Lueptow reflect a non-existent or negative association, researchers since that time have discovered causal relationships between academic achievement and athletic participation. Nothing in the literature review has accounted for this dichotomy, but future researchers should be cognizant of its existence as this phenomenon continues to be studied.

## **African American Youth**

A review of the literature pertaining to African American youth described this population as one which has self-discipline, a strong belief in themselves, a penchant for participation in extra-curricular activities, possession of good coping skills, strong family values, and often were actively engaged in religious activities (Ford, 1994). Furthermore, Geary (1988) discovered that African-American youth who were successful in high school often expended a lot of effort in their academic endeavors, displayed a strong belief in themselves, participated in class and extracurricular activities, had good coping skills, motivation, and determination. O'Connor (1997) argued that these students had strong evidence of personal competence, concrete experiences which demonstrated that they could overcome racial barriers and social interactions which would allow them to navigate through financial situations as they aspired to move beyond their level of poverty. This perception, echoed by O'Connor, might be the reason some African American male athletes believe sports is a ticket to greater riches and a way to escape from poverty.

Equally important was the supposition that several aspects of athletic participation may facilitate the processes of academic prowess for African American male students. Because participation in interscholastic and intramural sports required a particular academic achievement level, African American male students viewed this stipulation as an incentive added to other intrinsic incentives already associated with being involved in sports. Moreover, some behaviors have been generalized from sports into academics. First, athletic training required conditioning and practice. Second, athletes were expected to adhere to

rules for fair competition. Third, athletes exhibited a willingness to work with other students in order to attain common goals. Last, athletes persevered through losses as they analyzed those losses and compensated for competitive weaknesses. It would behoove educators to incorporate the students' athletic prowess into the academic arena by creating sport-related opportunities which apply skills developed via athletic competition (Braddock, Royster, Winfield, & Hawkins, 1991).

Shifrer, Muller, Pearson, and Wilkinson (2008), however, questioned whether or not the academic benefits of sports applied to African-American males to the same extent as academics applied to Caucasian males. They believed sports may possibly detract from the social mobility of African American males. Also, these researchers argued that sports became attractive to African American males because participation in sports has been one of the few areas in a majority culture which has considered being African American and being a participant in sports as an asset.

Research in the 1980s illustrated the strongest association between minorities and sports and one aspect of that association appeared to be an increase in social status for African American male high school students, however any positive academic effect that sports might have had on the high school students in the study appeared to be less for African American males than for Caucasian males (Braddock 1981; Sabo, Melnick, & Vanfossen, 1993). Riess (1980) was concerned with the possibility of these African American males focusing on sports rather than focusing on academics as well. Shifrer et al. (2008) believed more research should be conducted on the African American male subgroup.

Shifrer et al. (2008) also suggested that African American males may not be motivated to participate in high school sports for the same reasons as Caucasian males. Shifrer's research team argued that Caucasians were not motivated to participate in sports because of the potential for upward mobility as might be the case with African American male student-athletes. This research study added credence to the notion that African American student-athletes do not necessarily participate in high school athletics because of the potential for a professional career, although the student-athletes in the study entertained the idea of playing professionally. Instead, African American student-athletes may participate in athletics because of the love of their sports and the camaraderie manifested by belonging to a team.

McNeal (1999) suggested that high school student-athletes overall appeared to hail from high social economic status (SES) and make good grades, but these characteristics may not provide an accurate picture of each subgroup. Even though the aforementioned researchers had made the assertions pertaining to high school student-athletes, being high SES and making good grades had not been attributed to the African American male population. In spite of the lack of social status and the academic reputation mentioned above, Synder and Spreitzer (1990) purported that African American males participated in high school sports at a higher rate than other groups.

Notwithstanding the information available for high school student-athletes in general, the availability of data on African American high school students is lacking (McPherson, 1980; Melnick, Vanfossen, & Sabo 1988). These researchers concluded that a majority of the studies pertaining to the effects of sports participation centered on Caucasian

males and to some degree on Caucasian females. Melnick, Sabo, and Vanfossen (1992) suggested that only a handful of studies have explored the effects of high school sports participation on African-American students, and the majority of these studies were conducted with African American males as the participants.

While there have been general studies related to high school athletics and academics, there have been a limited number of studies which examined the effects of high school athletic participation on African American student-athletes. In spite of the limited number, these studies appeared to offer a variety of different conclusions pertaining to educational aspirations and grades, and African American adolescent males' educational aspirations appeared to be positively affected by their participation in high school athletics (Braddock, 1980, 1981; Hanks, 1979; Picou, 1978; Picou & Hwang, 1982; Wells & Picou, 1980). Also, a review of the literature has revealed that athletic participation has mixed effects on grades (Braddock, 1981; Picou, 1978; Wells & Picou, 1980). Collins (1984) argued that little is known concerning the social and educational consequences of African American youth who participate in athletics in spite of the fact that thousands of African American students participate daily in interscholastic sports programs.

Jordan (1999) proffered that previous research literature afforded very little guidance on the specific relationship between the participation in high school athletics and school-related outcomes for students in that age range. He argued that less is known and understood about the specific benefits of athletic participation for African American high school students, which would include African American males. Although methodological problems have distorted the results of many studies, past research on sports and the high

school environment has found minute, positive effects for participation in athletics on different student outcome measures including grade point averages (Trent & Braddock, 1992).

Citing results, Jordan (1999) argued that empirical evidence ascertained from his study suggested that participation in athletics offered some benefits to high school students regardless of the students' backgrounds. Moreover, his study specifically suggested that participation in high school sports was not only linked to higher grades, better self-concept, and greater academic self-confidence but also associated with higher academic achievement. Even though the apparent benefits of athletic participation were manifested in his study, only 18% of the overall number of African-American students participated in team sports while only 10% participated in individual sports. These percentages suggested that African American students did not appear to take advantage of the benefits of sports participation in spite of the evidence extolling the virtues of high school athletics. Therefore, educational policymakers and other stakeholders, after considering the findings in the study, should consider ameliorating the quality and scope of high school athletic programs and make a concerted effort to increase the number of boys and girls who participate in high school athletic programs (Jordan, 1999). Jordan's study did not take into account the perceptions of the African American student-athletes. This researcher addressed one of the concerns raised by Jordan – studying African American male high school student-athletes. While studying that population may be significant, studying their perceptions allowed the participants to provide the reasons for their demonstration of athletic and academic prowess.

This researcher has studied five African American male student-athletes who have demonstrated a propensity for making good grades and have performed at a high level on the football field and basketball court. These African American student-athletes have maintained a B average or higher [3.0 or higher] and have earned a varsity letter in their particular sport. The student-athletes were successful in the classroom, with athletics, and were influenced by the teachers with whom they had contact. Teachers, according to the researchers listed below, can be influential in students' lives.

### **Influential Teachers**

The teachers at Church Valley High School could be viewed as influential teachers based upon the characteristics reported by researchers. McCord (2010) conducted a study on the characteristics of influential teachers. She reported that teachers who can positively impact their student's lives exhibited the following characteristics:

1. Possess a sense of humor
2. Enthusiastic demeanor
3. Culturally responsive to the students
4. Can admit to making mistakes
5. Creates a non-threatening learning environment
6. Thinks creatively (McCord)

She believed that these teachers can establish a relationship with students and can provide an environment which is conducive to their academic success.

Also, Allington and Johnston (2000) argued that teacher effectiveness could be characterized with certain traits:

1. Have high expectations for all students
2. Concern for students as persons and be attentive to their academic and personal problems
3. Exhibit enthusiasm
4. Be warm, caring, and flexible
5. Be cognizant of students' needs and motivations
6. Provide explicit instruction
7. Use regular classroom routines
8. Challenge students and involve students in the instruction (Allington and Johnston)

Also important, the study has focused on the perceptions of the participants as they shared their experiences pertaining to their participation in athletics and their performance in the classroom.

### **Significance of Perceptions**

Social scientists such as Markus and Zajonc (1985) often referred to the writings of philosopher W. I. Thomas and his Thomas Theorem. Thomas believed that an individual's beliefs can cause the individual to act in certain ways. In other words, Thomas argued that the perception or interpretation of a particular situation can evoke certain behaviors. This perception was not necessarily perceived as an objective phenomenon. Instead, he asserted

that the behaviors were affected by the subjective perceptions of the situations. An individual, for example, who believes in ghosts and believes they exist will demonstrate behaviors commensurate with that level of belief. If leaving a light on at night would ward off ghosts, the individual would view this behavior as absolutely necessary. The subject of perceptions has even been the object of philosophical inquiry.

Further, philosophers have believed that the notion of perceptions and its ramifications was worthy of debate. Antoine Arnauld argued that thoughts and perceptions are self-reflective. He believed that he is cognizant of perceptions and can analyze one perception by another. When he scrutinized a perception, Arnauld definitely scrutinized a perception or idea of something. David Hume argued that there is nothing really present to an individual except for his own perceptions. George Berkeley and Immanuel Kant argued that perceptions can be the very things themselves or the representations of those things. (Yolton, 1996).

Also, perception has been referred to as the process by which individuals interpret and organize sensations in order to create a meaningful experience in the environment in which they operate. To be more concise, they have suggested that an individual's perception describes the process whereby thoughts and ideas could be transformed into organized, observable experiences. These experiences, perhaps, bring together two phenomena which may appear to be incongruent – ideas or perceptions which may be viewed as metaphysical and behaviors which may be measured empirically (Lindsay & Norman, 1977). These perceptions may translate into behaviors which promote and encourage academic performance.

Elliott & Bempechat (2002) asserted that it was possible that students who performed at a high level in the classroom and did well came to believe that they possessed high ability. Perhaps, in other words, the students believed that the perceptions of their high ability fostered higher achievement in the classrooms. However, he has been cautious about interpreting his data and making such assumptions about the relationship between students' perceptions and their ability. His cautiousness has been linked to the utilization of questionnaires rather than interviews, and his belief that the questionnaires typically used to assess the relationship between students' beliefs about the causes of their success or failure and academic achievement did not adequately address such a relationship. "This shortcoming speaks directly to our belief that surveys must be complemented by individual interviews, so that such intuitive relationships can be explored" (Elliott & Bempechat, 2002, p.9). In-depth interviews to ascertain the students' perceptions might have eliminated the cautiousness associated with the interpretation of the data which was collected for the study.

Likewise, Elliott, Hufton, Anderman, and Illushin (2000) argued that a research study could benefit from interviews in addition to surveys and questionnaires. They contend that when researchers allow students, teachers, parents and other stakeholders to provide their own voice, the resulting data would illustrate insights that heretofore had not been expressed from research predicated upon prior theory and other findings. Furthermore, this data would be garnered utilizing meticulously crafted interviews which would allow the participants to lead the discussions into the directions of their choosing. Therefore, the participants would be able to provide insight and in-depth meaning to their perceptions and reveal what those perceptions truly mean. This section has delved into philosophical

manifestations of perceptions and a possible relationship with the education milieu. The ensuing paragraphs will provide a brief foray in the relationship between perceptions and the athletic environment.

Ryska (2002) conducted a quantitative study on the effects of high school athletes' perceptions of their competence and the transfer of that competence to non-sport domains – scholastic, social, vocational, and behavioral. In other words, he believed that his study demonstrated the fact that the athletes' perceptions of their success via sports participation provided the impetus for success in other non-sports endeavors. He believed that his results could have significant implications for educators who attempt to provide personal growth for students through participation in competitive high school sports athletics. Also, related to sports participation, Markus and Zajonc (1985) believed that the development of self-perceptions is greatly influenced by the particular dimension which is prominent in a given situation. Even though there is the potential impact of sports participation on student-athletes' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, there is a lack of empirical data pertaining to the manner in which the high school sports experience influences the competence perceptions among its participants (Griffin, 1998).

Moreover, the perception of competence is closely linked to motivational indicators which could be seen as choosing to participate and continuing to express an interest in activities. Since perceptions of athletic competence appeared to strongly affect students' decisions to participate in physical activities, it would be beneficial for educators to understand how students perceive themselves within this context. Also, educators would be able to use the information in order to develop plans which would meet the goals associated

with athletic participation and the curricula in the schools (Weiss & Horn, 1990). Similarly, Harter (1982) asserted that the construct of perceived competence referred to students' beliefs concerning their ability in an achievement domain, which includes physical activities and sports participation. Although students appeared to hold the key to their perceptions and the subsequent ramifications, educators could influence students' perceptions of competence via the feedback they provide to the students (Ridgers, Fazey, & Fairclough, 2007). Information gleaned from this study of students' perceptions could be utilized by educators to influence students' behavior in the high school environment.

### **Perceptions of Student-Athletes**

The crux of this research study has been an examination of students' perceptions of the relationship between their athletic participation and their academic performance. While some researchers (Coleman, 1961; Hauser and Lueptow, 1978) disputed the notion of a positive relationship between academics and athletics, some researchers (Marsh, 1993; O'Donnell, 2006; Whitney, 1996) suggested that there has been a positive relationship between athletic participation and student-athletes performing at a high level in the classroom, while simultaneously performing at a high level in their respective sports. Although student-athletes expend an exorbitant amount of time and energy while competing in athletics, many of them continue to demonstrate academic excellence. Specifically, this study has been an investigation of five African-American male high school student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between their academic achievement and their athletic performance – both experienced at a high level.

Absent from the literature has been research pertaining to the perceptions of the relationship between participation in sports and academic performance as expressed by adolescent high school African-American males. Shifrer, Muller, Pearson, and Wilkinson (2008) recommended that more research should be conducted on the high school African American male subgroup. Unfortunately and equally significant, there is a lack of current research pertaining to the perceptions of the relationship between academics and sports participation for all genders and races – particularly for African American males. While a majority of the research was conducted in the 1980s and 1990s and data have been available for high school student-athletes in general, the availability of data on African American high school students is lacking (McPherson, 1980; Melnick, Vanfossen, & Sabo 1988). This study will add current data to research which has been conducted previously but has not been updated.

Heretofore, researchers have not conducted in-depth interviews with African American student-athletes to ascertain their perceptions of the relationship between athletic participation and academic performance. Also, the most glaring absence of literature pertains to the perceptions of these African American male student-athletes and how they perceive the relationship between their participation in athletics at a high level while performing at a high level in the classroom. Therefore, none of the literature has delved into the aspect of the student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between academics and athletics. Additionally, African American male student-athletes have not been allowed to provide a voice for their perceptions. This research study would not only allow them to 'speak' for themselves but the information would be added to a current body of knowledge

for African American male high school student-athletes which could aid their peers as they matriculate through high schools – peers who desire to perform at a high level in athletics and in the classroom.

The information gleaned from the study of the African American male students' perceptions of the relationship between academics and athletics might be utilized by educators, parents or guardians, or other stakeholders to develop strategies which would benefit a higher percentage of African American male student-athletes. Since some of the literature (Marsh, 1993; O'Donnell, 2006; Whitney, 1996) has demonstrated that participation in high school sports has been a positive endeavor for African American males and a positive influence on academics, the ultimate overall goal would be to utilize the information from the study in order to alter the perceptions of other African American male student-athletes, which could enhance the athletic and academic experiences for a greater number of African American male high school students. Changing those perceptions could make a significant difference for the African American male student-athletes because their beliefs could be manifested through altered behaviors which could enable them to perform at a high level in athletics and in the classrooms. This researcher believes that an in-depth investigation of African American student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between their participation in athletics and their academic performance will be imperative for understanding why they have been able to perform at a high level in athletics and academics.

Furthermore, this study described meaning as it pertained to the perceptions of five African American student-athletes and other aspects of their participation in athletics and

their experiences in the classroom – taking into account “their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 57). They were presented with an opportunity to tell why they were successful in their athletic endeavors and in the classroom. It was their “voice” which shed light on the reasons for their success in both environments. Attending to the people of interest provides them with a sense of empowerment. Also, “giving voice” has been utilized as a metaphor which connects qualitative research to social change (Mishler, 1986; Rappaport 1995). Too, the metaphor is synonymous with power, privilege, reflects who is allowed to speak on selected topics, and to what extent (Mulvey, et al., 2000). The five African American student-athletes consented to give voice to their perceptions.

### **Summary**

This study has addressed several concerns pertaining to adolescent African American male student-athletes. First, previously there has been a paucity of literature chronicling African American student-athletes who have performed at a high level in the classroom while competing at a high level in high school athletics – on the football field and on the basketball court. Second, there has been a lack of current literature that addressed the issues relating academic performance to athletic performance. A majority of the research literature pertaining to African American males was documented and published in the 1980s and 1990s. Last, the most striking absence of literature pertained to the perceptions of African American male high school athletes and how they viewed the relationship between their athletic participation and academic performance.

The next major section was devoted to the methodology chapter. The methodology chapter delineated the research method, investigative procedure(s), the tools utilized in the data collection, and the analysis of the data pertaining to African American student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between athletic participation and academics. Additionally, the research questions have been a significant aspect of the methodology chapter, and the methodology chapter was the foundation for the two ensuing chapters.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

*The difference between a successful person and others is not a lack of strength, not a lack of knowledge, but rather a lack of will – Vince Lombardi (1967)*

My primary goal was to study a selected number of African American male student-athletes in order to ascertain their perceptions of the relationship between their participation in athletics and their academic performance – both entities accomplished at a high level.

The research participants were African American student-athletes who maintained a grade point average (GPA) of B or higher and earned a varsity letter in their particular sport.

While Coleman (1961) has maintained that athletics has caused a negative impact on academics, Whitley (1996) argued that there exists a positive relationship between athletic participation and academic performance. By focusing on the student-athletes' perceptions, this study contributed to the ongoing debate concerned with whether or not there is a positive or negative relationship between academics and athletics. I delved into the African American male student-athletes' perceptions of the aforementioned relationship between athletics and academic performance. This chapter also delineated the process by which this study was conducted.

African American male student-athletes, who were the target of this study, belong to a group of athletes who have competed in sports – football and basketball – while continuing to make academic progress toward graduation and who endeavored to receive their high school diplomas, which could provide the gateway to attending a college or university. To elucidate, this study focused on five African American student-athletes who

attend Church Valley High School – located in a Southeastern state. The participants included three football student-athletes and two basketball student-athletes; one of the participants played football and basketball during the season in which the interviews were conducted.

Data for this research study were collected during the fall of 2011 utilizing a qualitative research method. The interviews took place in the homes of the participants, who lived in the same city as the high school or in the surrounding community. While open-ended questions were utilized to guide the interviews, field notes were compiled to record the participants' responses to the questions. The data collected were audio-taped and transcribed. This compiled research data gave these five African American student-athletes an opportunity to expound upon their perceptions on the relationship between their participation in athletics and their success in the classroom. Furthermore, the interviews provided an avenue through which the participants could give voice, in a one-on-one setting, to their perceptions of their experiences and their perspectives on the relationship between athletic participation and academic success. The student-athletes who were selected and who consented to participate in this study were deemed successful because they earned a varsity letter in their respective sports – varsity football and basketball – and they attained a B average (3.0) or higher in their core subjects.

Indeed, the African American student-athletes were allowed to share their own perceptions in the interviews – using descriptive language and displaying emotions associated with the questions. The focal point of this research study was the perceptions of five African American student-athletes. Moreover, it has been said that one's perception is

one's reality. Also, there is an adage which states that perception is nine-tenths of reality. In other words, these student-athletes' perceptions of the reasons for their academic and athletic success had become the basis for their reality. Their perceptions formed their "real world" as they navigated through the academic and athletic milieus.

Also, this study could be potentially strengthened because the data collected from the five African American student-athletes was derived from face-to-face interviews pertaining to their perceptions – perceptions of their participation in sports and its relationship to their academic achievement. Moreover, ascertaining the student-athletes' perceptions would be significant because they are the individuals who have been experiencing the relationship that they perceive to exist – a positive relationship between their participation in athletics and their academic success. The student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between academics and athletics were manifested via their performing at a high level in the classroom and in their particular sport, and their perceptions of this positive relationship is the reason for their success. As a result of this perception of high performance, these student-athletes were able to demonstrate and sustain a can do attitude. Too, the five African American student-athletes in this study have demonstrated an overall high level of success in their high school endeavors because of their perceptions.

As it was discovered, the perceptions of these African American student-athletes in this study are dissimilar yet similar – as will be subsequently illustrated in the ensuing research results. On one hand, the student-athletes have been linked by certain common factors – athletic participation and academic success – that bind them together. On the other hand, they are different because of their unique experiences which include family situations

and their individual perceptions related to the relationship between their participation in athletics and their success in academics. Although the subject of the relationship between the participation in athletics and academics has been studied by researchers – specifically Coleman (1961) and Whitley (1996) – these researchers did not delve into the perceptions of the student-athletes, which was a focus of this study.

This research study endeavored to present the perceptions of five African American student-athletes who shared their stories via one-on-one interviews, utilizing a primary interview guide (See Appendix A) and a secondary interview guide (See Appendix B). Furthermore, an interview guide for the in-depth interviewing process during the narrative analysis phase allows the research study to flow in certain directions (Seidman, 2006). Via the questions in the interview guides, the student-athletes were able to express, in their own words, their lived experiences. These experiences were linked to their perceptions and their view of reality. Also, linked to these perceptions were studies conducted by social scientists such as Markus and Zajonc (1985) who often referred to the writings of philosopher W. I. Thomas and his Thomas Theorem, which surmised that if a person defines or believes that a situation is real then they are real in their consequences. According to Thomas, the person would behave in a manner commensurate with his perceptions.

Discovering what these five student-athletes' perceptions happen to be via the interview process allowed the researcher to gain a valuable understanding of their experiences in the classroom and in their athletic endeavors. Even though the study included only five participants, Patton (1990) argued that credibility depended less on sample size than the richness of the data being collected and analyzed. The plan was to spend an ample

amount of time with the participants in an attempt to understand the perceptions of the participants with the goal of gathering rich, thick data. And direct quotes were selected to exhibit the moods, attitudes, and beliefs of the student-athletes (Leak, 2003). The participants and the high school have been assigned pseudonyms and a fictitious name, respectively, in order to provide a measure of confidentiality and privacy.

Further, it included detailed information pertaining to the main components of the study – the interviews, the observations, and an analysis of the data which I collected. Some ancillary components of my study included the safeguards against researcher bias, ethical issues (Institutional Review Board approval), limitations of the study, and the summary.

### **Research Design**

I chose a qualitative method for this study because it has come to be valued as a research method of inquiry for exploring studies to “identify variables and generate hypotheses germane to populations and groups that have been previously overlooked” (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996, p.539). Moreover, Marshall & Rossman (1989) reported that qualitative research endeavors to describe and explain the particular phenomenon under scrutiny. The phenomenon under scrutiny was the perceptions of five African American student-athletes who participated in athletics while performing at a high level in the classroom. Furthermore, I attempted to ascertain the reasons why these student-athletes have been able to commit to performing at a high level in athletics, which can be a time-consuming endeavor, while performing at an equally high academic level.

Forming an aspect of qualitative research, the questions and problems derive from real world observations, dilemmas, and take the form of wide-ranging inquiries (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Bogdan & Taylor (1975) described qualitative research as a method which produces data from people's own written or spoken words. These student-athletes were given the opportunity to express their views and to share their perceptions which will in turn elucidate the reasons for their athletic and academic prowess. Also, these five student-athletes were able to offer, via the research questions which lead to additional discussions, rich descriptions of their perceptions of the relationship between their athletic participation and their academic performance. Ascertaining their perceptions of the reasons for their academic and athletic success was accomplished via in-depth interviews with the subjects who chose to participate in the research. The purpose of in-depth interviews is not to ascertain answers to questions, nor is it to test hypotheses, and the reason is not to evaluate in the general sense of the term; instead, the rationale for in-depth interviewing is to illustrate "the interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Furthermore, Bogdan & Biklen (2003) reported that some individuals use methods and methodology interchangeably, but they believe this is an incorrect usage of the terms. While the term methods might refer to the specific strategies a researcher could utilize in a study (i.e., surveys, observations, and interviews) and involves the technical aspects of the study, methodology refers to a more generic term that pertains to the general logic and theoretical perspective associated with the research study.

Cresswell (2007) offered a perspective on qualitative research with the following comments:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes (p.37).

### **Phenomenological Study**

Specifically, I utilized a phenomenological approach for conducting this study. “A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 57). For my study, I targeted five selected African American male student-athletes from a high school in a Southeastern state. Using the phenomenological approach, I focused on the perceptions of the research participants as they experienced the phenomenon of performing at a high level in high school athletics and academic performance. To elucidate, the student-athletes provided their perceptions of the reasons for their academic and athletic prowess.

Also, hermeneutic and transcendental phenomenology are two approaches I utilized under the phenomenological method. While hermeneutic phenomenology refers to a reflection of themes and the nature of lived experiences, transcendental phenomenology focuses less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of the participants (Cresswell, 2007). I incorporated both aspects of phenomenology in this study – a study which focused on the perceptions of the five African

American student-athletes. During the process of gathering data on the perceptions of the five African American student athletes, there were occasions when I strictly described events which may have occurred and there were occasions when I attempted to interpret the data being described – characteristics of transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology, respectively.

Van Manen (1990) described the phenomenological research approach as being oriented toward lived experiences and refers to hermeneutics as interpreting the texts of life. He further asserted that this approach should be viewed as an interpretative process because the researchers make an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences. On the other hand, researchers using the transcendental phenomenological method set aside their own experiences in order to view the phenomenon being studied from a fresh perspective (Moustakas, 1994). Because researchers bring their own experiences to a study, the transcendental approach is difficult to achieve but one worth the effort since it allows the researcher to collect statements or quotes which are turned into themes. These themes develop into the rich, thick descriptions prevalent in creditable qualitative research.

### **Conducting the Study**

I began the research process by utilizing a general concept which was based upon the initial research questions, while detailed procedures were not finalized prior to the data collection. Unlike traditional researchers who may think of the design of a particular study as an actual aspect of the initial planning stages, the stages for this qualitative study were

not as distinct. Design decisions were made throughout the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Consequently, I made pertinent decisions regarding the study during the initial phases, in the middle, and in the end. Although the goal of the study was to closely scrutinize the data during the latter stages of the study, data analysis was a continuous part of the research. I made decisions about its design and the analysis during the appropriate stages of the study. I began the study without a hypothesis to test, which was consistent with characteristics of the qualitative process, although research questions provided a guide for the initial foray into the research. My goal was to proffer research questions as these questions generated more detailed questions. And the research questions lead to other questions as the study progressed. Janesick (1994) asserted that qualitative researchers begin their studies with mental tools of their trades, with their plans generated as hunches, only to have those plans modified and remolded as the study proceeds.

My qualitative approach to the study was predicated upon my own orientation as an African American male student-athlete who participated in sports in high school, playing baseball during my senior year and graduating as an honor student. Even though I have had prior experiences as a student-athlete and am an African American male, I was considered an outsider primarily because I was not, before the study, cognizant of the participants' perceptions, points of view, and experiences. Because of the nature of the research which was conducted, I chose the qualitative approach for the study. Moreover, qualitative research allows researchers to acquire knowledge of the external world and this external world included the investigation of the perceptions of the five African American student-

athletes in the study. Knowledge of the external world constitutes a small part of what our total knowledge can be. Further, understanding others requires us to project a great deal of ourselves onto them and we should project it onto the world at large (Krieger, 1991). Even though I had similar high school experiences as a student-athlete, a greater significance was the fact that the research participants were given the opportunity to expound upon their perceptions of the relationship between their achievements at a high level in athletics and academics.

While using a qualitative approach, I utilized narrative analysis as a research tool while conducting my study (Denzin, 1989; Riesman, 1993). To elucidate, narrative analysis refers to a technique employed by a qualitative researcher who listens to the experiences and stories told by the participants in order to understand the relationship between the participants' experiences and their social framework. Additionally, an interview guide for the in-depth interviewing process during the narrative analysis phase allowed the study to flow in certain directions (Seidman, 2006). The five participants in this study were interviewed while being tape-recorded and the interviews were subsequently transcribed in order for the collected data to be analyzed as text. Transcripts are the main data sources for many interview studies (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Furthermore, the five African American student-athletes who agreed to participate in this study were assigned pseudonyms which were employed to assure confidentiality – for the purpose of protecting their identities. The participants' confidentiality was further protected because I alone knew the real names, the data was stored on a password protected computer, the transcripts and tapes were kept in a locked file cabinet, and I maintained possession of the key.

And in the process of analyzing the language used by the participants – the interpretations of their daily routines associated with athletics, academics, and their actual behaviors – I focused on two points. The first was the perspective through which the participants make sense of their world. Grbich (2007) argues that language can be viewed as a key process in the creation and communication of meaning. Also, the participants' meaning lay within the context and is a coherent and unified structure derived from pattern and order. A second focus was ascertaining whether or not the language used by the participants coincided with and matched the accompanying behaviors. The in-depth interviews and observations coupled with an analysis of the data collected provided clues to the participants' perspectives on the research topic (Grbich).

### **Research Questions**

This research study probed the African Americans male student-athletes' perspectives concerning their participation in sports in their high school. It gave them voice as they related their experiences as student-athletes. To reiterate, narrative analysis allows a researcher to listen to the experiences and stories which are told by the participants in a study. The experiences here relate to the perceptions that the five African American student-athletes have regarding their participation in athletics and how their participation affects their academics. Since the study hinged on ascertaining the student-athletes' perceptions of the association between athletics and academics, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) What are the African-American male student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between their participation in athletics and their academic performance?
- 2) How have these perceptions influenced their academic performance?
- 3) How have these perceptions influenced their athletic performance?

### **Sample**

This study was conducted in a school district in a Southeastern state. I chose this district because the “gate keepers” in the district were receptive to the nature of the study and granted approval, the participants were accessible, the academic requirements for its athletes were stringent, and there was an excellent reputation for its athletic teams. Since I was not employed by this school district, I believe that there was less resistance to gaining access to the respondents and to the data necessary for the study. The gatekeepers did not offer any resistance to my research, especially since the research proposal did not appear to be a source of controversy for the school system, and it did not pose a psychological or physical danger to the participants. However, I was prepared to navigate through the necessary and appropriate channels to conduct the study while investigating the demographics and dynamics of the potential high schools. Ultimately, however, I chose Church Valley High School based upon the willingness of the students and their parents/guardians to participate in the study, as well as the administrative support and the support of the lead guidance counselor.

I interviewed five African-American male student-athletes who participated and competed for their basketball and football teams. Specifically, the interviews were

conducted with two members of the basketball team and three members of the football team. Albeit the total number of athletes which were requested to participate in the study was an arbitrary one, three football players were asked to participate because the pool of players was larger. I utilized purposeful sampling to choose the African American student-athletes for this study. Bogdan & Biklen (2003) stated, “You choose particular subjects to include because they are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory” (p. 65). Because the study focused specifically on high school African American male student-athletes, one could argue that it was criterion sampling since the participants were chosen based upon their gender, race, participation in sports, and academic records.

Incidentally, African American males have been stereotyped with such negative connotations as being lazy, exhibiting violent behavior, and eschewing formal education. Also, there appeared to be a disproportionate number of African American males who reside in prisons and jails as compared to those who attend trade schools, colleges, and universities. This sample was chosen because the study’s primary focus was aimed at African American male student-athletes who have demonstrated a penchant for performing at a high level in the classroom while participating at a high level on their football and basketball teams. Secondary school athletes were chosen because of the researcher’s access to high school student-athletes and the rigors associated with athletics and academics, which placed demands on their time at this particular age level. I believe that the results of the in-depth interviews with the participants provided some insight into the athletes’ perceptions of the reasons that they were able to perform at a high level academically while they endured the demands associated with high school athletics.

## Data Collection

Bogdan & Biklen (2003) referred to data as the natural materials researchers gather from the milieu they are studying and these natural materials form the basis for the analysis that will subsequently take place. This data include information a researcher records via in-depth interview transcripts and participant observation fieldnotes. Additionally, the data can also include “what others have created and what the researcher finds (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 109). These investigated sources of data may include newspaper articles, official documents, diaries, and photographs.

Also, a researcher should expend the energy to understand in some detail how his participants think about a particular subject and how they managed to develop their perspectives. In order to attain this aforementioned goal, a researcher should spend a considerable amount of time with the participants in their environments, acquire information via open-ended questions, and meticulously record their responses. The utilization of open-ended questions allows the participants to answer these questions from their own frame of reference instead of those framed solely from a pre-determined set of questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Schutz (1967) believed a researcher has a limited understanding of participants, but a researcher can attempt to comprehend them by understanding their actions or behaviors. Albeit an observational understanding can be useful, it does not provide the reasons behind the participants’ actions or behaviors. Only the participants can provide the meaning and explain the reasons for those actions and behaviors. Investigating the student-athletes’ perceptions elucidated these meanings for the

researcher during this study. Furthermore, “Interviewing provides access to the context of people’s behavior” and it provides a method by which a researcher can delve into the true meaning of that particular behavior (Seidman, 2006, p. 10).

Therefore, qualitative interviews were utilized as the primary source of data collection in the study. Supplemental methods of data collection included observations, fieldnotes, and document analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). An interview guide directed the interviews and it included open-ended questions based upon the research questions. However, a researcher should be cautious when using an interview guide since it is not designed to test hypotheses, collect answers to questions, or establish opinions. Instead, an interview guide should be formulated to “ask participants to reconstruct their experience and to explore their meaning” (Seidman, 2006, p. 92). Consequently, the questions most often used in an in-depth interview come as the result of a participant’s previous comments. Qualitative research allows for this type of flexibility during the interview process, and it is not a haphazard process but one with some direction and strategy.

Initially, I contacted several prospective high school administrators by email to request their cooperation and support in this study. One administrator agreed to allow the study to be conducted on his high school campus and the administrator responded with an email while forwarding my original email to the chairperson of the guidance department. Because the student-athletes were minors, obtaining written parental/guardian consent was necessary prior to contacting the students. Also, the required consent forms and assent forms were filed with the researcher’s university and the school district prior to contacting the students and their parents/guardians.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis began at the outset of the research study although the methods and protocols for such analysis changed during the course of the study. Coffey & Atkinson (1996) recommended that researchers analyze data as it is being collected. This ongoing data analysis included reviewing the information gathered, which was used to describe, clarify, interpret, and record the data. To get an overall view of the data, I perused the notes taken during the data collection process, namely the interviews. This approach allowed the researcher to recognize patterns which emerged. Also, another data analysis strategy the researcher employed was open coding. This entails dissecting the information paragraph by paragraph and line by line in order to generate categories and sub-categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Direct quotes were used to exhibit the moods, attitudes, and beliefs of the participants (Leak, 2003).

Using the open coding and discourse analysis, the researcher was able to transcribe and discern the data collected via the tape-recorded interviews with the five African American student-athletes. Moreover, the researcher utilized the data in order to ascertain the answers to the primary and secondary research questions (See Appendix A & Appendix B). Observing the student-athletes during the course of the interviews enabled the researcher to check for actions and behaviors which were commensurate with the words being spoken at the time. Also, the researcher was able to use the data collected to develop themes common to the perceptions expressed by five student-athletes in the study – a process which added credence to the study.

Discourse analysis was also used to assist with the analysis of the written data which was collected. While it is simply the analysis beyond the sentence, it pertains to the analysis of interaction consistent with a sequence of verbal moves, phrases and metaphors. Useful in face-to-face settings, this approach to data analysis was utilized to discern large chunks of language and the interpretation of recorded text (Leak, 2003).

### **Research Validity and Reliability**

Quantitative methods have been utilized to explain the correlation between phenomenon in the world and quantitative research has been the preferred method for conducting studies which were intended to explain social concerns. On the other hand, qualitative research methods have gained prominence in the social science realm in the recent past. However, qualitative research was not initially viewed as a recognized method for conducting studies and its practitioners fought to prove its worthiness as a method for studying phenomenon. Furthermore, while quantitative research might hypothesize and answer the how questions, qualitative research might answer the why questions and seek meaning from the participants being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Qualitative researchers may need to eschew the terms associated with quantitative research and follow a different path to inquiry, and there is a need for qualitative researchers to unlearn the social make-up of research. In other words, the researchers must be prepared to explore the possibility “of employing a different vocabulary and way of structuring the research process” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 4).

Patton (2002) asserted that validity and reliability are linked to each other. Moreover, he reported that with regards to a researcher's skills and abilities in conducting a study the reliability is a consequence of the validity in that study. Furthermore, validation is viewed as the attempt to assess the accuracy of the findings in a study as jointly described by the participants and the researchers. Also, validation is described as a distinct strength of qualitative research because of the value or accuracy that is added to the study via the data derived from extensive time spent in the participants' environment, the detailed thick description, and the close relationship the researchers may share with the participants (Cresswell, 2007).

One method of testing the data for validity is member checks. Member checks is a process which refers to the participants reviewing the data collected in order to assess its accuracy and validity. This researcher employed member checks to ensure the validity of the data being analyzed and that aspect lent credence to the credibility of the study – even though there was a small sample size of five student-athletes. Albeit a small sample size, Patton (1990) argued that credibility depended less on sample size but rather on the richness of the data being collected and analyzed. I spent an ample amount of time with the participants in an attempt to understand the perceptions of the participants in order to gather and record rich, thick data. Adding to the rich collection of data, I observed the participants in their home environments and during their athletic contests.

Also, I triangulated the data which was gathered from multiple sources, although this procedure has been challenged by Barbour (1998). She argued that triangulation mixes methods in one paradigm and problems can arise because each method brings its own

assumptions. However, Patton (2002) advocated the use of triangulation in research because he contends that it strengthens a study by combining methods, including quantitative and qualitative approaches to collecting and analyzing data. Methodological triangulated sources of data – academic records, attendance records, discipline records, and observations – assisted the researcher in the development of certain themes and added credence to the data that was collected and the arguments which were proffered. I allowed the participants an opportunity to view the information and offer their perspectives. According to Patton, adding these elements strengthens a study's findings.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

The primary goal of this study was to ascertain the perceptions of five African-American male student-athletes who performed at a high level during their athletic contests and in the classroom while attending a high school in the Southeastern region of the United States. I endeavored to investigate the perceptions of the relationship between their participation in athletics and their performance in the classroom. Also, this research study's ultimate goal was to obtain information which adds to the limited body of knowledge pertaining to athletes' perceptions of the relationship between academic achievement and athletic participation. The information is intended to ameliorate African American student-athletes' performances in the educational environment.

As an educator, I have a personal stake in ascertaining as much information as possible in order to effect positive changes in the educational milieu. But the assumption might be made that I will only report information that is auspicious since only reporting

positive information will show the school district in a favorable manner. Objectively gathering and reporting information may be viewed as a limitation since I am employed as an educator. In accordance with strict ethical standards, however, I reported the data collected in a factual manner – whatever the data suggested.

### **Personal Background**

I am a 60 year-old African American male. My career in education began in 1980 as a physical education teacher at a local elementary school in a large school district. My career direction changed somewhat in 2002 when I began the Master of School Administration Program (MSA) at North Carolina State University, culminating when I graduated in May 2005. My career also includes being a member of the inaugural North Carolina State University/Wake County School Public System Doctoral Cohort Program.

In addition to being an educator, I was a member of the North Carolina Air National Guard based in Badin, North Carolina from November 1979 until November 1999. Before serving with this National Guard unit, I served four years active duty in the United States Air Force from 1970-1974, serving in Minot, North Dakota (two stints) and at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Viet Nam (June 1971-June 1972).

As a direct result of my career in physical education, my interests include participating in sporting events and attending sporting events. And I consider attending North Carolina State University sporting events, especially football and basketball, as more than a hobby – a passion. Although People of Color are not usually associated with hockey,

I have also developed a passion for professional hockey and attend Carolina Hurricanes hockey games.

My wife of eight years is also employed by the same school system. She has worked with the Wake County Public School System since 1990. Her career path has included being a musical educator and a reading specialist, the latter after she graduated from the University of North Carolina in December 1994. She is currently an Instructional Resource Teacher (IRT) and reading specialist. We have a 14 year-old daughter who is a 9th grader at local high school.

My family and I have had strong ties and allegiances to the field of education. Therefore, uncovering and only reporting favorable data would appear to reveal an educational bias on my part. But, I have suppressed any urge to report only favorable data and have reported factually and objectively all data which was gathered in this research study. Moreover, I made sure that the data was reported in an unbiased manner by following several procedures. First, I had my findings reviewed by my committee chair. Second, I triangulated the data by using other sources that displayed similar information. Denzin (1978) identified methodological triangulation as a type of triangulation which potentially provides credibility to a study. To elucidate, this type of triangulation involves employing more than one method of gathering data – interviews, observations, and documents. My study included the aforementioned aspects of data collection and review. Last, I used member checks – participants checking the information collected during the research study. Cresswell (2007) researched and provided some pertinent information regarding member checks. He suggested that member checks allows the participants the opportunity to

challenge the data, correct the data, and summarize the preliminary findings. These procedures have been utilized because my ultimate goal has been to accurately report data on the perceptions of the selected African American male student-athletes who have performed at a high level in their respective sports and in the classroom.

Also, another pertinent rationale for conducting the study was the fact that one of my former elementary students is currently a professional football player with a National Football League (NFL) team – the Pittsburgh Steelers. He was a high school player who performed at a high level and subsequently performed at a high enough level to play on a university team. Then he was selected by an NFL team on which he continued to perform at a high level – a level of performance which aided his team as it won Super Bowl XLIII in 2009. He performed at a high academic level in elementary school. Although at the time of this writing I do not know my former student's high school GPA, he performed at a high level as an athlete during his years in high school and college. Apparently he maintained a GPA and academic record which allowed him to remain eligible which allowed him to continue playing in high school and college. What was his perception of the relationship between his academic performance and athletics? I hope to answer that question in the future.

### **Ethical Issues (IRB)**

This study did not officially begin until I applied for and received an approved IRB (Institutional Review Board) Form from North Carolina State University, approval which provides human rights protection for the participants involved in the study. Also, I did not

proceed without permission from the participants' school system via approval from the Research and Development Department of the participants' school system. Subsequently, I sought and was granted approval from the school's administrator to conduct research on his campus. And an equally important legal aspect of the process was receiving permission from the parents and guardians of the students who were minors at the time of the study. Seidman (2006) refers to the parents and legal guardians of these minors – individuals under the age of 18 in most states – as formal or legitimate gatekeepers.

The students and their parents or legal guardians were asked to sign an agreement before their sons participated in the study. Even though there were no physical or emotional risks to the participants involved in the study, they were informed that they could discontinue the study at any point during the research process. The confidentiality of the participants and the high school was addressed during the study as I assigned pseudonyms to the high school and to the five student-athletes who consented to participate. The participants' and high school's confidentiality and anonymity were further protected because the data were stored on a password protected computer and the transcripts and tapes were kept in a locked file cabinet with only one key, which I maintained in my possession.

### **Participants in the Study**

The five African American student-athletes who consented to participate in this study included two varsity basketball players, three varsity football players, and one player who played football and basketball. The guidance counselor at the high school provided the names of the five student-athletes since he had knowledge of their athletic success and had

access to their school records, which included their grade point averages (GPA's). The counselor also recommended the most reliable and convenient means for contacting the parents/guardians and the students – recommendations which proved to be invaluable. The data collected via the interviews were included in subsequent sections.

The primary criterion for the participants in this study was a GPA of 3.0 or higher. In accordance with that stipulation, these five student-athletes have earned GPA's between 3.0 and 3.6 on a 4.0 grading scale. While two of the student-athletes hail from families with a mother and a father living in the home, three of the student-athletes live in families in which the head of the household is a single mother. Three of the participants are classified as seniors and are scheduled to graduate at the end of the 2011-2012 school year, and the two student-athletes who are juniors are on target to graduate following the 2012-2013 school year.

Juniors and seniors were chosen for the study because there is research to support the notion that participating in sports during the latter years of high school has positive effects on the student-athletes. Marsh (1993) reported on the effects of participating in sports during the last two years of high school. Specifically, his study revealed that participation in sports positively affected 14 of 22 senior variables he included in the study, and there were post secondary outcomes that reflected positive associations. Those outcomes included social and academic self-concept, educational aspirations, courses selected, attitude and experience with homework, reduction in absenteeism, and college attendance. Additionally, there were no negative effects with the remaining 8 variables in the study. Although other studies may not make such claims, he argued that his data and

conclusions generalized across individual characteristics such as race, socioeconomic status, gender, and the ability level of the participants. Thus, his research supported the notion that sports participation has a positive effect on students' self-concept and educational aspirations. This study endeavored to add credence to his suppositions by choosing juniors and seniors for the study.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter in the proposed study was to establish the foundation for the research which ensued. While the preceding first two chapters answered the what, why, and who aspects of the study, the methodology chapter focused on the how – answering the questions pertaining to the manner in which the study was done. Simply stated, it guided me as I attempted to ascertain the data necessary to provide answers to the proposed research questions and other related questions.

Furthermore, this chapter has delineated methods for studying the five African American male student-athletes who consented to be participants in the study and the study's limitations. Notwithstanding the limitations, I endeavored to produce a valid and reliable research study. Seidman (2006) asserted that one goal of the research process should be for the researcher to understand how the participants make meaning of their experiences. Referring to the interview process, he argued that validity may be attained if the experiences make sense to the participants and to the researcher. After collecting, analyzing, and validating the data, I used Chapter 4 to describe the results of the study.

## Chapter 4

### Research Findings

*No man has the right to dictate what other men should perceive, create, or produce, but all should be encouraged to reveal themselves, their perceptions and emotions, and to build confidence in the creative spirit – Ansel Adams (Brainy Quote)*

The purpose of this study was to focus on the perceptions of a specific number of African American male student-athletes who competed in football and basketball at a selected high school. These high school athletes were able to participate in athletics while being successful in the classroom in spite of such participation requiring hours of practice, travel, and actual game time. They have performed at a high level in their classrooms as evidenced by their posted Grade Point Averages (GPA's), and they contributed significantly to their teams as evidenced by earning athletic letters from their respective school and garnering additional recognition. At the time of the interviews, the five African American student-athletes attended Church Valley High School.

### Setting of the Study

The Church Valley School System is a public school system located in the southeastern part of Delta County in a Southeastern state. It serves over 12,000 students in grades that span kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. These students attend schools in the traditional educational levels – elementary, middle, and high school. Under these three

levels, there are 10 elementary schools, four middle schools, and three high schools. A majority of the students who attend Church Valley High School hail from Delta County.

Data pertaining to the population and income levels of Delta County are listed below: Delta County continued to grow according to the US Census albeit it grew at a slower rate between 1990 and 2009; its annual growth rate is 1.66%. Currently it has approximately 55,000 residents. Also, one of the county's unique characteristics is that a major university is located within its borders. And while the students who attend the university account for 29,000 members of the population, they also make up the majority of the non-family segment of this population. It is important to note that the overall median household income from 2010 data was \$47,051.00, but the median non-family income was estimated to be over \$23,000.00 per year. In contrast, the median family income was over \$96,000.00 per year.

Moreover, it appeared that the proximity of this major university to Delta County has a definite impact on the educational levels of the residents since the university's students reside in the county and a large percentage of the professors and educators also reside in the county. The educational levels reflected in the data are for individuals 25 years old and older, and Delta County has a very impressive rate of education. It is significant to note that it is the most highly educated community in the region, a region which is already a highly educated one. To illustrate this point, almost 96% of Delta County's population has a high school degree and 77% of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher. Also, nearly half of Delta County's population – 44.5% – has attained a graduate or professional

degree. Many of the students at Church Valley High School come from the Delta County community.

### **Setting of the High School**

The African American student-athletes in this study attend Church Valley High School. At the time of the interviews, it had a population of 1360 students in grades 9-12. Beginning with the four classifications, the high school has 403 freshmen, 367 sophomores, 302 juniors, and 288 seniors – a relatively low number of seniors because some students had been assigned to a different high school which had recently opened. The diversity of the school's students is reflected in the following demographics: 64 Multi-Racial (4.7%), 145 Asian/Pacific Islander (11%), 115 Hispanic (8.5%), 200 Black (14.7%), and White 835 (61.1%). The demographics also includes a gender profile: 693 females (51%) and 667 males (49%) – 1360 total students.

The aforementioned demographics do not tell the whole story about Church Valley High School, especially since the study focuses on the academic success and the athletic success of the five student-athletes. Noting the academic and athletic history of Church Valley high school should add a measure of significance to the study. The chairperson of the guidance department who is also the guidance counselor for juniors and seniors provided the information pertaining to the athletic and academic culture of the school.

For the most part, he contends, the academic culture of Church Valley High School can be characterized as highly competitive. Also, a majority of the students are enrolled in honors courses in a selected curriculum for each year that they are in school and a

substantial number of students take Advancement Placement (AP) courses – which are essentially college-level courses that a student can take while in high school. Typically, a high school offers these AP courses to their students who are in the school’s honors program or to students who have completed all of the courses in a particular subject area. Although most of the AP courses are in English and math, the courses can be in virtually any subject. Since these are college-level courses, they tend to be more rigorous and more academically demanding. And because the AP courses are college level ones, many of the students who successfully complete the AP courses can potentially graduate with a GPA higher than 4.0; these students aspire to parlay these grades into admission to colleges and universities with high academic standards. In other words, their goal is to be accepted into colleges and universities which have prestigious academic reputations.

Specifically, about 38% of the Church Valley High School students are enrolled in at least one AP class, but there are many students who are enrolled in multiple AP courses. It appears, according to the guidance counselor, that the drive to be admitted to a “good” college or university entices the students to take more rigorous course loads. While about 15% of the Church Valley students plan to attend a 2-year college, roughly 80% of the students plan to attend a 4-year college or university after graduation. Consequently, approximately 95% of the students at the school plan to pursue an education beyond high school. It is interesting to note that, according to the guidance counselor, many of the students feel the pressure to enroll in the rigorous courses merely because their peers have enrolled in those classes and unfortunately some students become overwhelmed by doing so. When the students experience difficulty with their classes, the counselors must make

adjustments to the students' schedules and closely monitor their progress. Also, each year that the counselor has been at Church Valley High School the honors and AP courses have increased in enrollment and there have been more students in those courses than the standard or regular courses. Church Valley High School has a reputation for academic excellence and a school's academic prowess is often measured by the results of a state's End-of-Course Tests. Church Valley High School's test scores have been comparable to the scores recorded in the district and the state (See Appendix F).

Since this study's focus includes the student-athletes' athletic success, it would be imperative to note the athletic culture of Church Valley High School. According to the chairperson of the counseling department, a large segment of the school's population has participated in at least one sport. Also, it is interesting to note that at least half of the students who are currently ranked in the top 10% of the senior class are athletes. The most popular sports for girls have been lacrosse, volleyball, field hockey, and softball. The most popular sports for the Church Valley boys have been football, basketball, lacrosse, and baseball. While the boy's basketball team did not survive the first round of conference tournament play, it won the regular season conference championship while compiling an undefeated record. The football team had only two losses in conference play during the season. Also, the boy's lacrosse team has won two state championships within the last 4 years. Because of the coaching, training, and athletic experiences, a number of student-athletes aspire to participate in college sports. Additionally, the school spirit associated with athletics has improved as evidenced by an increase in student support throughout the school and attendance at football and basketball games as well as the other sports. The student

body has supported the Church Valley athletes, including the five who participated in the study and the study begins with Denny Hladik.

### **Student-Athletes in the Study**

#### **Denny Hladik**

The researcher and Denny held a one-on-one interview on Friday-14 October 2011 in Denny's home. His family includes two siblings – an older brother and sister – who do not live in the home. Denny's mother and father appeared to offer a stable home life for him and have lived in their present location for a number of years. Equally important, Denny's GPA is 3.0 in the core classes taken at Church Valley High School and these classes are listed below:

1. **Foreign Language** – Spanish I, II
2. **Language Arts** – English I, II (Honors), III (Honors), IV
3. **Math** –Algebra I (taken in 8<sup>th</sup> grade), Algebra II, Geometry
4. **Sciences** – Biology, Chemistry, Earth & Environmental Science
5. **Social Studies** – Advanced Placement (AP) US Government and Politics, Civics & Economics, Great American Conflicts, US History (Honors), World History

Denny is a senior and the starting point guard for the Church Valley High School basketball team. The point guard is responsible for directing the team's offense and ensuring that each member of his team is executing the plays the head coach calls from the bench. Sometimes those plays need to be modified depending upon the action on the court.

Oftentimes, the point guard is considered the “coach” on the court. Also, a high school basketball game is usually divided into four 8-minute quarters with a half time period between the second and third quarters. Therefore, a high school game is 32 minutes in duration. Denny averaged 27 minutes per game and was considered an iron man because of his stamina and ability to play so many minutes. Church Valley High School played 24 regular season games in addition to two conference tournament games and two playoff games – a total of 28. Starting every game, he led the team in points per game (24.0), assists (8.2), and was second in free throw percentage (76%) for the 2011-2012 season. Denny’s athletic prowess was evident in the statistics he compiled during his senior season. The researcher’s perception is that Denny is a true leader and deserving of any accolades for his basketball acumen.

Usually the point guard is perceived as the leader of a team and oftentimes that leadership manifests itself in other aspects of the player’s life. That appeared to be evident in a response Denny provided during the interview when he saw a classmate, who was a junior, sitting in the hallway contemplating skipping class in order to talk with some girls. Denny was on the way to the library and he asked him, “What are you doing, man?” After a brief conversation, Denny said, “Come on man.” He not only walked the student to class but he escorted the student into the classroom. According to Denny, the teacher appeared to be a bit disgusted with the student’s tardiness but allowed the student to enter after Denny told the teacher that the student was merely running a little late. Apparently Denny’s reputation around the school worked in the student’s favor in this instance, since this student was allowed to enter the class without a penalty being imposed upon him.

A significant aspect of this research study pertained to the five student-athletes' perception of the reasons that they have performed at a high level in the classroom. Denny responded to the first interview question by focusing on preparation as one of the keys to his academic success. Specifically, he said, "Probably being prepared and knowing what I have to do ahead of time." "So always knowing in a couple of days advance or so maybe a week in advance in some cases that I need to go see this teacher then I always mark down in my agenda or phone calendar that I set up times and reminders to what I need to do," he continued. Denny insisted, "It is my responsibility to make sure that I like check with the teachers to see if I like need to do anything else for the class. I want to stay ahead in my class work especially during basketball season because I need to leave school early for away games which are like far away."

Related to his independence and his initiative or to the teachers' unsolicited assistance, the teachers urged him to be a better student during his early high school experience. Now, Denny has taken responsibility for his own learning. "Well, early like the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade year that's when the teachers like push you because they always want to help you, but now I've become more independent and I do that on my own," Denny said. Denny's perception of his reasons for his past academic performance was his preparation and his taking ownership of his learning, even though during his first two years of high school his teachers offered encouragement. "After the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I learned to be the one to ask the teachers for help instead of waiting for them to check with me or tell me about how I am doing in their classes. It was a tough lesson to learn like I really had to be more

independent and do that if I wanted to make good grades. Making good grades like keep me on the basketball team,” Denny related to the researcher.

Moreover, this study focused on the perceptions that Denny had on his academic success and his athletic success. As far as his athletic success is concerned, Denny believed that his work ethic with respect to sports – particularly basketball – and duration have been integral in his becoming a successful player. To the inquiry pertaining to his perception of the reason for his athletic prowess on the basketball court, Denny replied, “Probably working hard. I’ve been playing since I was little and I’ve always loved the game so it’s always driven me to be the best that I can be.” Denny’s passion, hard work, and love for the game have been manifested throughout his play during this season. Another significant aspect of the study is the student-athlete’s perceptions of the relationship between his participation in athletics and his success in the classroom. Denny believed that one aspect of the relationship has been the association with friends who have similar interests. Denny continued, “My friends we like have like similar interests. Everybody that I hang out with play sports and we also know that we have to be able to work hard in the classroom to be able to perform or even be eligible to play and being around my friends all the time like keeps me balanced.” These interests were commensurate with being diligent in the classroom – being successful in the classroom – and recognizing that being a successful student is a prerequisite for remaining eligible to play basketball, which allowed him the opportunity to continue performing on the basketball court. He also mentioned that a balanced life is beneficial for being athletically and academically successful. He mentioned his formula for success, “Not too much school and not too much fun.”

Also, Denny's perceptions of the contributing factors for his athletic and academic success solicited an interesting response. His was very succinct and to the point as he said, "Parents staying on me. Wanting to better myself and do something with my life. And being able to play basketball" He expressed a desire to play basketball and remains committed to doing whatever it takes academically in order to continue playing on the team. "If I have to do 10 projects a week just to be able to play, then I am willing to do that," he continued. That sense of dedication was conveyed in his voice inflections and mannerisms during the interview as he responded to that question.

On his own volition earlier in the interview, Denny briefly mentioned the term balance and his perception of what it meant to him. To elucidate, he detailed his perception of the balance required for academic and athletic success. Denny reported, "I know that I have the responsibility of knowing the need to make up a test if it has been missed because of basketball." And while basketball is important to Denny, school work comes first before "I go out and work on my game." "It inspires me to want to take the test so I can go ahead and get it out of the way so that I can focus on basketball," Denny remarked. Why does he work so hard in the classroom and on the basketball? He chimed, "They both go together like so it's like you can't have one without the other like that's the way I've been brought up so if you want to play basketball you got to do well in school. And I want to do basketball obviously so that's why I definitely go a little extra."

Denny related the perception of his high school experience. "It's been a lot of fun. It changed when I switched schools. It was pretty much the same environment, the same kids from elementary and Cullen Middle School, but when I switched schools and came to

Church Valley High School it was like different like I knew people but like it was a different environment and it was bigger I should say like bigger than Vanborro so more people to get to know because I like meeting new people. More students at Church Valley High School.” He had changed from another high school which had a different feeder pattern of middle schools. The former high school was smaller and more intimate. A larger, different group of students attend his current high school and it has a different environment but one to which Denny said that he adapted to in a short period of time.

What is his perception of a role model and who would qualify as his role model? It is someone who teaches a person how to do things the right way and the proper way,” he answered. My dad would qualify as a role model. Just because he has always been teaching me the right things to do and what not to do. We always used to go outside and work hard on my basketball skills and then he’d come back in and say ‘alright what’s up with the grades’,” Denny said. Denny’s dad was within earshot of the interview and apparently heard the response to the role model question. A proud facial expression crept across his dad’s face when he heard that his son perceived him as a role model.

Denny shared his perceptions of his short-term goals when he said, “Get into college for an education – doing something productive with that free education. Not let it go to waste and taking advantage of everything that I have in front of me,” Denny continued. As of this writing, Denny had received several basketball scholarship offers and was most interested in a university located in the central part of his state.

Denny’s long-term goals were revealed when he confessed, “Big house, making a lot of money. Big family. That’s about it.” Denny came from a relatively small family –

only two other siblings. However, he would like to have a large family. “Yeah. I want a big family. Yeah. I always wanted a big family,” he said. But Denny did not want to elaborate on his perception of what a big family entails.

The next inquiry had Denny reflecting on his perception of his middle school experience as he anticipated attending high school. He desired to play on the varsity team as early as possible while being the best that he could be on the court and in the classroom. His goals were reflected as he said, “First of all I wanted to play varsity. I wanted to play varsity my freshman year. That was always a goal for me to pretty much always be the best. I never wanted to come second in anything so I figured that if I worked hard and set my mind to it then I can accomplish it.” He fulfilled that goal by starting his freshman year.

To ascertain various aspects of their academic perceptions, the researcher inquired about the student-athletes’ high school academic relationships and experiences. Denny responded to an inquiry pertaining to his favorite course at Church Valley High School. His favorite course at the time of the interview was Great American Conflicts – a history class. Taking a class which allowed Denny to learn what has transpired in the past has made his high school experience an enjoyable one. “I have always done well in history,” he said with a broad smile on his face. In fact, he has had such a good experience with history that he took two history courses during the same semester – (Advanced Placement) AP Government and Great American Conflicts. Denny added, “And I just have a thing for history. I like it. I know what’s going on and it’s good to know.” The researcher’s perception is that Denny enjoys history because it has given him a view of the past and he utilizes that knowledge as he plots his future.

Moreover, Denny was not satisfied with the interview until he provided the names of several teachers from his elementary, middle, and high school years. First, he quickly thought of Mr. Brown. Denny excitedly said, “He taught me civics and African American honors history in high school.” What was it about Mr. Brown that made such a big impression on Denny? “He was passionate about what he did and he really like got me motivated to like this like is really important and I need to know this. He was a good teacher overall.”

Second, Mr. Cangoc was his most influential teacher in middle school and was perceived to be a supportive teacher, as Denny commented, “He just was like the support I needed coming up.” However, this appeared to be an interesting reflection considering the fact that Denny had a mother and father living in the home and had perceived his father to be a role model. This relationship, though not a panacea for all the angst a middle school teenager might endure, was Denny’s “medicine” for a successful middle school experience. Apparently teachers can be perceived to have the potential to be ‘role models’ as well. Moreover, Mr. Cangoc was Denny’s Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) teacher, encouraged him to do his best at all times, and maintained an open line of communications with his family. “He always stayed on me. I mean he knows my mom and dad and he knows if I’m not doing something right. He made sure he told them and they stayed on top of me,” he added.

Finally, unlike his high school and middle school years, Denny’s elementary school years did not begin with an auspicious attitude towards school and the academic attention necessary for becoming a successful student. His 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher was Mrs. Green and she

was instrumental in inspiring him to begin the journey toward developing into a good student, even though he did not realize the benefits at that time. Similar to Mr. Cangoc, Mrs. Green knew Denny's mother and father and kept a line of communications open with the family. "She was that's like I feel like 4<sup>th</sup> grade was like my year when I kind of really like started focusing on my school work more because she knew my mom and she had my sister I believe," Denny explained to me. Mrs. Green apparently was a firm, yet caring teacher. He continued, "And my mom told me like she's no joke. She's serious and she's going to let me know. I was like I always wanted to do well for her because you didn't want to disappoint her." Denny compared his 4<sup>th</sup> grade year to being on the 'fence' and a turning point in his life. Some of his friends did not want to focus on their school work, but he did not succumb to their ways and their peer pressure. And Denny's perception was that his relationship with Mrs. Green was crucial in getting him to begin to focus on his school work.

Denny shared information pertaining to his participation in athletics and extra-curriculum activities. First, Denny estimated, "I have participated in athletics – primarily basketball – for 12 or 13 years." He was 17 at the time of the interview so he has been involved with athletics for most of his life. Part of his basketball success, he intimated, was due to longevity – playing the sport for so many years. Second, "basketball," he said, "has been my favorite sport and football would be my second choice." Denny chuckled just before answering the question about his favorite sport. "Love basketball, basketball," he answered. Last, he talked about his community involvement and other volunteer work, "I volunteer at a homeless shelter near my house. And I have tutored my god brother and god

sister in math and English.” Also, Denny shared, “I attended the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) Conference in Illinois in September 2009.” Emerging themes and an analysis of his perceptions will subsequently follow after data from the other student-athletes have been included.

### **Arthur Fischer**

The researcher and Arthur had a one-on-one interview on Wednesday-19 October 2011 in Arthur’s home. His family includes one sibling – a younger sister – who lives in the home. Arthur’s mother offers a stable home life for the family, even though their father does not live with them. For reasons he did not share, Arthur did not mention his father nor did he provide any information pertaining to any type of a relationship with his dad. Arthur’s family has lived in its present location for a number of years, which also added a measure of stability. Arthur was classified as a junior and was the starting power forward for the Church Valley High School basketball team at the time of the interview. Although Arthur was personable and appeared to be quite mature during the interview, he also appeared reserved and he did not offer additional information after responding to the interview questions. However, his perceptions pertaining to the questions the researcher asked were nonetheless revealing and informative. His GPA was listed as 3.3 in the core classes – classes which are listed below:

1. **Foreign Language** – Spanish I (taken in 8<sup>th</sup> grade), II, III (Honors)
2. **Language Arts** – English I, II, III

3. **Math** –Algebra I (taken in 8<sup>th</sup> grade), Algebra II, Geometry (Honors), Pre-Calculus (Honors)
4. **Sciences** – Biology, Chemistry, Earth & Environmental Science (Honors)
5. **Social Studies** – Civics & Economics (Honors), US History (Honors), World History

To begin, Arthur’s perceptions of the reasons for his academic success centered upon seeking assistance whenever the need arises. Being responsible and mature enabled him to be cognizant of the appropriate time to request assistance and those traits afforded Arthur the opportunity to be successful. He replied, “I get extra help a lot. Most of the stuff I get right off the top and when I don’t I either get help from friends or ask teachers questions and there are certain teachers I like to ask for additional help; these teachers have been the ones I have developed a positive relationship with.” According to Arthur’s perceptions of his success, he viewed being responsible enough to seek advice and assistance from teachers for his school work as a significant reason for his success in the classroom.

Arthur’s perception of one of the main reasons for his athletic success in basketball is longevity. He was 16 at the time of our interview and had been playing basketball for a number of years. “I started at an early age playing basketball, really early. I started at maybe 6 or 7 playing basketball. And just stuck with it the whole way and improved as I went on,” Arthur explained during the early moments of our interview. He had such a pleasant demeanor while talking about his basketball experiences that one could readily observe in his facial expressions the love he felt for the game as well as hear the joy derived from

playing basketball expressed in his voice. Arthur's perceptions of his athletic success: a love of the game and longevity. The researcher perceived Arthur to be passionate about playing basketball and representing his high school and family on the basketball court while earning a reputation as a successful student-athlete.

Ascertaining the student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between their participation in athletics and performing well in the classroom has been the primary focus of this research study. Arthur's response to the interview question was quite succinct as he answered, "If you don't have success in the classroom, you won't have success in your sports so my goal is to do good in the classroom so that I can make – leave – my mark on the court." Arthur perceived that the relationship between his academic performance and his classroom performance constituted a reciprocal one. Namely, one did not exist without the other and one could also say that each aspect supplied the incentive for the other.

As previously mentioned, Arthur was quite reserved and was a person who offered few additional words during the interview. However, he responded quickly and without hesitation to his perceptions of the contributing factors for his academic and athletic success when he said, "Dedication and hard work and the motivation to do what I can." He displayed a sense of pride as he provided the answer to this question. The researcher's perception is that Arthur's hard work and willingness to persevere were key factors in his academic and athletic success.

The dedication and hard work Arthur referenced for his success required a certain amount of balance. His perception of the balance required for academic and athletic success demanded that he maintain a constant focus on his academics which was in competition

with his participation in athletics. Arthur further explained, “There has been a balance but not an exact balance in the classroom and with my playing basketball. Class...think the class takes up a lot more of my time than basketball. Since that comes first, I spend more time on it than sports but after I do what I have to do for the classroom that’s when I spend my time on sports.” Apparently, his response was more than mere rhetoric because his GPA, as it was listed previously, was 3.3 at the time we conducted the interview.

With respect to the balance required for academics and athletics, Arthur said, “My perceptions about my high school experience had to do with the preparation for and the anticipation of high school. My high school experience has been pretty good and one reason was that I have heeded the advice and ‘warnings’ from those who have told me how it will be. When people tell you it gets harder as it goes on they weren’t kidding. It really toughened, toughened up as I went on this year – definitely it’s something. Just since I’ve gotten the word that it was tougher I was already prepared and ready for what was up to come.”

Although Arthur said that his mother has been a positive influence and a stabilizing force in his life, he did not mention her as his role model. Instead, he said that his role model is D. Wade – a professional basketball player for a team in Florida. He asked if it could be someone he perceived to be famous and he continued with an answer before he received a response to his inquiry. “D. Wade. D. Wade - he was a really good college athlete and I think he was really good in school-wise too like so he was like always one of my role models,” he offered.

Arthur was quite succinct in his responses to a majority of the secondary interview questions as well. In response to an inquiry about his short-term and long-term goals, he replied, “After high school go to a good 4-year college. I want to go to graduate school and earn a Ph.D. and get a good successful job. I want to get a degree just in case the athletics doesn’t work out and this degree will allow me to provide a good life for my family.” Notwithstanding his athletic prowess, Arthur did not desire to eschew academics for the sake of athletics.

In retrospect, Arthur had a simple goal for high school as he reflected back to his middle school experience. He was adamant about establishing and maintaining a GPA of 3.0 or better – a goal that he had accomplished as of the date of the interview since his was 3.3. One of the high school courses that is required and one that would need to be maintained at a high level happened to be his favorite course – math. He replied, I have always, as long as I can remember, enjoyed any course that involved math. I don’t know why but I do.”

In spite of math being Arthur’s favorite subject, he chose a teacher who taught a different course when he named and described his most influential teacher. Arthur began, “Miss McCall was my AP literature teacher. She was also my Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) teacher.” Why was she so special to him? “She’s always making sure that I do what I have to do to be successful in school,” Arthur responded with a definite measure of respect for her in his voice.

Additionally, Arthur shared information pertaining to his participation in athletics and in extra-curricular activities. First, Arthur replied, I have participated in organized athletics for about nine years.” Longevity appeared to be a prerequisite for performing at a high level which was evidenced by his athletic prowess and the number of years he has participated in organized sports. Second, he commented, “My involvement with organized sports has included basketball and football although I consider basketball to be my most beloved sport, with football being a distant second.” Arthur commented, “Basketball is just – I don’t know – I feel like it’s in my blood. Can’t help it. Basketball is my favorite sport.” Last, My other extra-curricular activities in school involved participating in a group known as Green Tigers. It is an environmental organization here at Church Valley High School. The organization’s mission is to take care of gardens and other landscaping projects around the school.” Arthur has participated in athletics for a number of years, and he has developed a sense of duty and obligation for his school and community.

### **Kevin Cross**

The researcher and Kevin had a one-on-one interview on Wednesday-2 November 2011 in Kevin’s home. His family includes an older brother who does not live in the home. Even though Kevin’s father does not live with him and his mother in the home, he and his mother appeared to have adapted to their circumstances and have moved forward. They had lived in their present location for only a few months before the interview. In fact, the information listed on Kevin’s student information data sheet had not been updated and it was via a phone call to arrange the interview that the researcher discovered the new address.

Kevin did not mention his dad nor did he provide any information pertaining to any type of a relationship with the dad. He was a senior and a starting lineman for the Church Valley High School football team at the time of the interview. Kevin was personable and appeared to be quite mature and energetic during the interview. Even though the interview took place in the evening after Kevin's football practice and homework session, he still seemed to have quite a bit of energy. Also, Kevin was quite animated and outgoing and his perceptions regarding the questions the researcher asked were interesting. He maintains a GPA of 3.1 in the core classes:

1. **Foreign Language** – Spanish I & II
2. **Language Arts** – English I, II (Honors), III (Honors), IV
3. **Math** –Algebra I & II, Advanced Functions & Modeling, Geometry
4. **Sciences** – Biology, Earth & Environmental Science, Health, Physical Science
5. **Social Studies** – African American Honors Seminar, Civics & Economics (Honors), AP US Government & Politics, US History (Honors), Great American Conflicts (Honors), World History

Kevin's core courses were challenging but he performed quite well in the classroom. The subsequent interview provided some insight into the reasons for his success. Kevin's answers, albeit short, were provided with a measure of excitement in his voice and a plethora of facial expressions. Kevin said, "The reasons I am successful in the classroom are being focused in the classroom, beginning my homework immediately, working hard, and seeking help when it's necessary. Yes, working hard and coming home and getting straight

to my work. And if I have problems going back the next day and asking the teachers about my problems with the work and paying attention in the class.”

Kevin brought into focus the influence of teachers who have also been his coaches into his perception of some of the reasons for his success on the football field. The coaches, according to Kevin, have preached that hard work, attention to detail when it comes to the athlete’s class work, and focusing on the athlete’s sport are essential to having and maintaining good grades and for continued participation in athletics. “I know you just asked me about Church Valley High School, but ever since I have been playing a sport there has always been school so every coach has preached to me to be a student-athlete – student coming first so you have to be in the books to play that sport so I take sports serious, but I take school that much more serious,” Kevin said.

Kevin’s perceptions of the relationship between academic and athletic success appeared to be quite transparent. He said with conviction, “Again, it all goes back to the student-athlete. If you want to play a sport, you have to be proficient in class to be able to play that sport or any sport. So, therefore, I try to do my best in class so I can go out there and have a chance to do my best out there on the football field.” For Kevin, he could not perceive of one entity without the other – being successful in the classroom was necessary for him to have the opportunity to be successful on the football field.

Kevin’s perceptions of the contributing factors that have enabled him to establish and maintain a measure of success in the classroom and on the football field involve three aspects – “my mother, the coaches, and my teachers”. During the interview, Kevin listed the factors in the aforementioned order and then reversed the order as he elucidated his

response. First, Kevin commented, “My teachers have always been willing to assist me with anything I needed that has to do with the classroom work. They have been ready, willing, and able to provide the help I have needed.” Second, “The coaches they understand if I’m late to practice getting the extra help with like a test or just homework they understand.” Last, his mother was perceived to be a contributing factor because she has always encouraged him and urged him to excel in his endeavors. “My mom she’s always there to encourage me and push me forward and help me with anything that she can help me with so I have a lot of influence around me,” Kevin proudly exclaimed.

Kevin’s perception of the balance that is required for his success in the classroom and the football field began with the word focus. “You can’t be too focused on one thing,” He started his answer. “Because it’ll slide your attention away from the other.” The researcher’s perception is that his goal has been to keep his school work and football in the proper perspective – his perspective. What he meant was football has been important but school is more important “so I can play football”. Even though Kevin’s focus has been on his classroom work, he sought a balance and that balance allowed him to expend a lot of energy when he got on the football field because “it’s all about football so everything else is out of my mind”.

During their middle school years, the student-athletes shared a common attitude towards their anticipated high school experience and the same attitude continued to exist after they reached Church Valley High School. They have appreciated being at the school and have enjoyed their experiences. Moreover, Kevin’s perception of his high school experience thus far was revealed with an animated reply, “Oh! It’s great! Teachers are

great! School is great! Students are great! Just everything about it is great! Great extra-curricular activities. Just everything about it. I'm going to miss it!" This was another example of Kevin's zealous responses and a definite characteristic of his personality.

While these student-athletes have been successful in the classroom and in their respective sports, it would be interesting to ascertain their perceptions of a role model because each one of them may be currently perceived to be a role model in the eyes of their peers and as a role model for others in the future. Kevin's initial's response centered on a leadership aspect. He believes that a role model exhibits leadership qualities, does more than that which is required, and sets an example for others to follow. "Taking the leadership – that extra effort to do over and beyond. One that will try to help others without being asked. One that leads by example," Kevin shared. He was proud to say that his role model has been his mother, because "I have seen her work through some tremendous things" and that has motivated Kevin to realize that anything is possible in spite of their current family situation.

Whereas the first set of interview questions were listed as primary ones, the next set of questions was termed secondary ones. It begins with an inquiry into Kevin's short-term goals after high school. "After high school, I plan to go to a four-year college and getting a degree in sports science. I don't know if I'm gonna be playing sports, but it's still in my mind but for me being fresh going into college I'm mainly focused on school work so," Kevin told the researcher.

Just like Kevin's short-term goals, his long-term goals pertain to academics and athletics. Kevin's ultimate goal, at this stage of his life, would be to pursue college athletics

while continuing to perform successfully in the classroom. He explained, “My ultimate goals are by the time I’m a junior or senior where I get college down pat where I know where everything is – I know what I’m definitely majoring in – I’m just set I’ll probably pick up on sports and I might go out for a football team or basketball team. And try to show them my stuff.” Performing well in the classroom, according to his perception, is paramount to being successful and his participation in athletics would be secondary.

To illustrate his desire to perform well in the classroom in high school, Kevin’s perception of high school, while he was still in middle school, revealed his desire to make good grades. Kevin said, “Just trying to get out of high school with – with good grades and with a steady mind. Taking as many courses as you can – trying to get into the best college that you can. Just being focused throughout the whole time I was in high school.” He also listed as a goal the intention to take as many core courses as possible so that he could get into a reputable college or university. To attain that goal, he was cognizant of the fact that he needed to remain focused throughout the entire time that he was at Church Valley High School. Moreover, one program which aided him with maintaining his focus and maximizing his academic effort was the AVID Program – a program which was designed to promote and to encourage a sense of independence and diligence. The latter description was noted by the counselor before he released the information on the student-athletes. Kevin offered, “Yes sir, I have some AVID classes. AVID is a great program to be in. It helps me with a bunch of stuff. It helps me with the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), American College Testing (ACT), and any kind of class work that I have – any problems that I have. It’s like a study hall but better so it’s like a study hall with steroids.”

Further, the next two questions involve Kevin's favorite class and his most influential teacher. First, his favorite core subject is math. While he enjoys working with numbers per se, Kevin does not particularly care for working with letters and variables. The reference here was to algebra, geometry, and the abstract nature of those subjects.

Admittedly, not enjoying the latter aspect of math did not appear to diminish his respect and love for the former. "I would say my favorite course is math because I like figuring out and solving things with numbers – not so much the letters and variables in it, but I like working with numbers."

Last, Kevin reverted to his elementary school days as he shared information about the most influential teacher in his life. "Okay. Well, my most influential teacher was from 4<sup>th</sup> grade I think if I can recall Mr. McCray. I just – it was like some kind of bond that we had. It was a great teacher-student chemistry. I could relate with him. I can relate with him in sports. I can relate with him in the classroom – just everything I needed to be successful," Kevin recollected.

In responding to an inquiry concerning his participation in sports and community activities, Kevin could not remember the exact number of years that he participated in organized sports but thought, "I've been participating in sports – athletics probably like maybe 12 years. It's been a while. I can't really remember. It's been a long time though." His years of participation seemed to match the sports in the sheer numbers. Kevin has played basketball, football, soccer, baseball, and was a member of the track team. Although he has played a variety of sports, football is his favorite sport and basketball is a close second. Football tops his list because "it really comes easy to me." Also, Kevin mentioned

that he has enjoyed running down the field while the crowd was cheering for him and the other players, and he really enjoys being outside in the elements.

Continuing his discussion on playing sports, Kevin explained, “Well, I played basketball and I’ve done track – completed seasons with both of those sports. For basketball I was – I guess what you could say was a hype man as a rapper would have. I was like a hype man for basketball when I would get in the game energy would be flowing off of me – players would have energy from me and the crowd would too and our bench would too. And in track I was the main man for hurdling so I – they use me for hurdles and 200 meter races.” However, he had not participated in any extra-curricular activities at school or in the community at the time of the interview but was planning to choose an activity in order to serve the community to fulfill his high school’s service obligations.

### **John Dove**

The researcher and John had a one-on-one interview on Sunday-19 November 2011 in John’s home. His family includes younger siblings – a brother and a sister – who live in the home. John’s father does not live with them. His home life, as will be written about later in this study, was a bit unstable at one point in his life. They have lived in their present location for a number of years. As with the previous three student-athletes profiled in the study, the researcher obtained the names of the participants from the senior counselor at Church Valley High School. John did mention that his father did not live with the family, but he did not provide any detailed information pertaining to the type of relationship he had with him. He is a senior and a starting wide receiver for the Church Valley High School

football team. John displayed a quite serious yet friendly demeanor during the interview. John appeared to appreciate being asked to participate in the study, and his perceptions pertaining to the questions the researcher asked shed some light on how his life had been disrupted but had become stable again.

John's GPA is 3.0 in his core classes:

1. **Foreign Language** – Spanish I (taken in 8<sup>th</sup> grade), II, III (Honors)
2. **Language Arts** – English I, II, III (Honors), IV
3. **Math** – Algebra I (taken in 8<sup>th</sup> grade), Algebra II, Integrated Math I, II, Computer Applications, Geometry
4. **Sciences** – Biology, Business Essentials, Chemistry, Earth & Environmental Science, High School Health, Physics (Honors)
5. **Social Studies** – Civics & Economics, US History, World History

John's goal is to be the first person in his family to attend college. The researcher's perception is that he is on the path that will make this goal a reality.

Even before John could answer the question about his perception of the reasons for his classroom success at Church Valley High School, he felt compelled to discuss what had happened in his life during the previous school year. John began, "Well, I left Church Valley High School last year to go to Georgia. And when I was in Georgia I kinda like centered my focus and I really really earned good grades and maintained a lot of the goals I had set for myself so when I came back from Georgia I tried to keep the same attitude when I got here and I knew that I would be playing sports so I try I just had to put in the extra time into my work and studying because I had to balance out sports as well." He attended a

high school in Georgia during his junior year and this change in schools was primarily the result of adverse financial circumstances in his family. John and his family decided that living with his aunt in Georgia would benefit the family because it would relieve some of the financial burdens faced by his mother who cared for two other siblings. These plans came to fruition during his junior year.

Not a surprise, one reason John gave for attaining a high GPA and maintaining it was for the privilege to participate in sports when he returned from his aunt's home in Georgia to Church Valley High School. His perception was that being successful in the classroom, as evidenced by having good grades, was absolutely necessary for participating in football and other sports. John explained, "When I came back from Georgia, I tried to keep the same attitude when I got here and I knew that I would be playing sports so I try I just had to put in the extra time into my work and studying because I had to balance out sports as well." He believed that being successful in the classroom was required for his participation in sports. The researcher perceived that John realized that a relationship existed between his success in the classroom and the opportunity to participate in sports.

Why was John able to earn a varsity letter in football? John's perception of the reason for his athletic success began with his explanation, "Well, during the season, I did not get as many yards receiving that I wanted to get, but I wanted to demonstrate my athleticism to the coaches while I was on the football field." He desired to be the best that he could be on the football field just as he desired to be the best in the classroom. While the former was important, performing at a high level with the latter was equally significant and

necessary. Earning a varsity letter and performing at a high level in the classroom were goals John set for his high school career, especially his senior year.

Considering John's perception of the relationship between his participation in football and his classroom success, he quickly compared the two aspects of his high school experience. They were viewed the same in some ways as his first response as he said, "I guess you could say the relationships are – they're both the same. You have to put in the extra time when it comes to like your school work – when it comes to studying but then you have to learn and memorize plays and things just as you do in the classroom. And I believe they're different – not just physically but mentally – same challenge." Even though academics and athletics are different because one is primarily mental and the other is primarily physical – according to John's perceptions – they were viewed as the same because of the challenges inherent in both.

Previously, John had mentioned that he spent a year in Georgia with his aunt. This was significant because his perception was that this was one of the contributing factors for his athletic and academic success. Other contributing factors John also shared, "I guess I could say my networks and the support that I have from family, from former employers that I worked for, lots of different things came my way last year I moved to Georgia with my aunt. I know she had more stable life financially so I moved with her and it just gave me more time to focus on my school work."

In addition to responding to an inquiry about the contributing factors for his academic and athletic success, John responded to his perception of the balance required for his success in these two aspects of his high school life. "My dad doesn't live with me and he

hasn't lived with me for a while and my mom works as a single mom so I'm the oldest child of my siblings so I have to kinda run the house – kinda of like the man of the house and as far as my athletics sometimes family problems they do come and you just try not to think about it when you're on the field. You know that's two different environments so you can't mix them – if you mix them you know you won't perform well on the field so you try not to let those cojoin,” John lamented. Since John's mother is the head of the household and he is the oldest sibling, he viewed himself as the man of the house and took on the responsibilities which accompanied that title. Sometimes he felt the strain of the obligations and concerns that came with being a successful student, the man of the house, and a football player. He completed the thought with his perception that academics and athletic are two different environments and they should not be thought about simultaneously. Otherwise, John believes that he would not have performed as well on the football field.

And John flashed a wide smile before he rendered his answer pertaining to his perception of his high school experience. While he anticipates attending a college or university, John said, “Honestly, I can say I lived the best four years probably of my life until I go to college. And I met a lot of great people. It started off as a freshman. I see a lot of improvements coming up my sophomore year – junior year was probably my biggest year. I moved to Georgia and kinda went to a new environment and I was really focused and I was – I was just ready for life and I came back and I'm trying to maintain it now and it's going good so far. And I had a wonderful high school – high school period.” He said that each year – freshman though senior year – he experienced a degree of amelioration and

personal growth. In spite of the difficulties he endured, John's perception is that he has had a wonderful high school experience.

Continuing, John responded to his perception of a role model and the person he considers to be a role model. He believes that a role model is a person who lives a good life and sets examples for others to follow. They do good things and can be role models – examples – for younger individuals as well as older individuals. “I think a role model is someone who lives righteously and they basically set trends as far as behavior and etiquette. They kinda teach anyone older than them or younger than them. They kinda do things that other people should follow. They uphold righteousness.” John's role model is a singing artist named J. Cole. What was interesting during the interview was a misunderstanding about the person he said was his role model. The Biblical character Jacob from the Old Testament was first thought to be the role model.

Following the protocol from the previous student-athletes' interviews, the interviewee responded to secondary interview questions. The first question John answered pertained to his short-term goals. John told the researcher, after some hesitation and thought, “I plan to go to college. I'm not exactly sure where I'm going to attend. I'm thinking about a state supported school, but I'm looking at other schools as well. Just weighing my options and...” He believes that he has time to enroll although there was not a definite decision or clear-cut choice made at the time of the interview.

Unlike John's response to the first interview question, he appeared to be more decisive about his long-term goals. He quickly shared divulged two aspirations for his career – a businessman or a professional athlete. After pondering both careers, he realized

that both careers could be a reality since a professional athlete's playing time may last only a few years. "I plan to either run my own business or play sports which I'm not sure which one would be a better opportunity for me, but I'm pretty good at both," he replied confidently.

John was honest as he assessed his perception of the years prior to high school and the goals he had set for himself. He confessed, "In middle school - I was not really focused in middle school to be honest. Early on in middle school – it wasn't until I got around half way through 7<sup>th</sup> grade going towards 8<sup>th</sup> grade so I really didn't have the understanding that my grades were important like I had to get them up and that's when things became better and I told myself when I get to high school I have to be ready because I know the work is actually going to be at the next level of work. You can see the progress from my 9<sup>th</sup> grade year all the way up to my senior year – started off the grades were not the best but you show progress each year." Also, he relished the fact that he could be the first person in his family to attend a college or university. That possibility provided a spark and it provided an extra incentive to perform at a high level in his academics.

John responded to a question pertaining to his perspective on a favorite course. "I think I'll say my favorite – my favorite class is English because I write music and I like to keep my vocabulary substantial and I just enjoy the class overall topics we choose and everything and I also like theater," he said. John has the perception that theatre and English have some commonalities. Consequently, he has also enjoyed his theatre classes at Church Valley High School and one of the reasons John cited was that he likes the theatre class because it has involved activities which test the mind. "We do a lot of mind-related

activities in that class,” John revealed. “And I feel like it’s just good for strengthening the mind.” Also, another reason that John appreciated and enjoyed the theatre class was the opportunity “to learn how to react to certain responses and different things”.

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While, for John, English and theatre focused primarily on the spoken and written language, his music classes centered on particular words which he sang. John’s perception of his most influential teacher is one who has been associated with the latter and has been John’s chorus teacher. “I believe my most influential teacher is my chorus teacher – Mr. Nabors. He’s the man to where he’s always in a good mood and he’s always willing to help. And he can help just as many people as wants at the same time. He moves around He’s pretty good at his job. I’d say he’s like one of the best teachers I have ever had and he can make you feel good because singing isn’t the most comfortable thing to do when you sing in

front of a group of people I'd say. And he just makes you real comfortable. He runs I feel like he runs his class really well," John said.

Not unlike the secondary interview questions for the previous student-athletes, the next four questions pertain to athletic participation and community involvement. In spite of the lack of years participating in organized sports, John certainly made the most of his brief foray into sports as he earned a varsity letter in football for his participation during his senior year. Although it is not very common, he assured me that others have earned a letter even if they had participated in a sport for only a brief period of time. Furthermore, football has been John's sport of choice even though he tried out for the basketball team his senior year. He did not attain success with the basketball team tryouts but learned, as he did with his family situation, that life teaches difficult lessons and one has an opportunity to become stronger as a result of these challenges.

Previously, John mentioned that two of his favorite courses were chorus and theatre. His response to a question about extra-curricular activities, therefore, seemed to follow that his answer would include participating in musical performances, which combine singing and acting. "I'm involved with some of the musical performances that we include in our school and talent shows come up that I participate in and I've performed at our school a few times, and in my sophomore year I – we had to write poems for English class that would be performed in Southern Village which is near my home And we also took another trip to Eason and performed with these guys called Sacrificial Poets. They are like professional poets that speak about the real life and how they fell about their views on life and they are pretty influential like around the high school. And they did a few activities with us. We get

to meet people from other schools in the area and it was pretty fun. Had a good time enjoying the music and stuff like that,” he said proudly.

### **Nathan King**

The researcher and Nathan had a one-on-one interview on Sunday-27 November 2011 in Nathan’s home. His family includes one sibling – a younger sister – who was reviewing some homework with her dad during the time of the interview, within earshot of the interview location. Nathan’s mother and father appeared to offer a stable home life for him and his sister, and they have lived in their present location – a community of upper middle class homes – for a number of years. An interesting first statement uttered by the father was actually one rule strictly enforced by the mother “please take off your shoes if you’re planning to go past the living room”. Noting Nathan’s academic prowess, his GPA is 3.6 in the core classes that he is taking at Church Valley High School – a GPA which was the highest of the five student-athletes:

1. **Foreign Language** – Spanish I, II, III (Honors)
2. **Language Arts** – English I (Honors), II (Honors), III (Honors)
3. **Math** – Algebra I (taken in 8<sup>th</sup> grade), Algebra II, (Honors), Geometry (Honors), Pre-Calculus (Honors)
4. **Sciences** – Biology, Chemistry, AP Earth & Environmental Science, Health, AP Psychology
5. **Social Studies** – AP Comparative Government, Civics & Economics (Honors), AP US History, AP World History (9<sup>th</sup> grade), World History (10<sup>th</sup> grade)

It appeared that Nathan's course work which included high level classes and his GPA indicate that he is a serious student and the interview will attempt to substantiate that assessment.

Similar to several of the other student-athletes which were interviewed, Nathan's demeanor was that of a mature, serious young man and one who was very polite yet reticent. He did not volunteer additional information without being prompted to do so. Succinct could be the word used to describe the manner in which he responded to the questions during the interview. The first question posed to Nathan was his perception of the reason or reasons for his academic success at Church Valley High School. He credits hard work, listening or focusing in his classes, and the support system that is in place. "I credit hard work – that's mostly it and if you work hard at it it comes easier and just paying attention in class. I guess and having support around me to do well," Nathan said with conviction.

Patently waiting for the next inquiry, Nathan responded to a question about his perception of the reasons for his success on the football field – earning a varsity letter. By comparison, his answer actually mirrored the one he gave for his academic success: hard work and the support from family and friends. He explained, "The same with academics. Hard work will get you far and then the support from your family and friends will – helps you with the 'cost'." The cost? Nathan explained, "Well, at times they take away from each other. There are so many hours in the day that you can devote to both, but if you approach both with the same mentality or do well in it in both fields. School – your work in school you can bring that – use your intelligence you gained in school on the football field. And

from football to school you know you have support to do well on your team and in the classroom.” There has been a lot of time required for studying and for completing assignments. Likewise, football has consumed a plethora of his energy and time. In spite of those aforementioned factors, he has been successful in both endeavors because of the conscious efforts and the choices he has made.

At this point, Nathan referred to paying the cost of not only being a student-athlete but performing at a high level – athletically and academically. Coincidentally, the ensuing question brought into focus another observation that Nathan made and one that Coleman also referenced. He responded to a question pertaining to his perception of the relationship between his academic success and his success on the football field. Nathan confessed that participating in athletics and performing at a high level oftentimes conflicted with each other. Notwithstanding Nathan’s perception of the dichotomy presented by being successful in two significant elements of his high school life, he persevered and discovered strategies to attain a measure of success in both. Nathan candidly replied, “Well, at times they take away from each other. There are only so many hours in the day that you can devote to both, but if you approach both with the same mentality you can do well.” Furthermore, he theorized that a football player can use his intelligence, gained in the classroom, on the football field. From a football perspective and thinking about school, he surmises that a football player can rely on a team oriented support system to perform on the field and then in the classroom.

Again, a recurring theme for Nathan was the support system which surrounded him. Another aspect of his success was a willingness to exert the effort necessary to accomplish a

lot in school. These answers were Nathan's response to his perception of the contributing factors for his academic and athletic success. "The support you get from the people around you. The drive to do well in school and if you do well in school how much better your life can be once you finish school. And what it allows you to do after," Nathan recounted.

Even Nathan has admitted that maintaining academic and athletic success was a difficult task because of the requirements demanded by each. Therefore, a germane question was one about his perception of the balance necessary for the success expected in the classroom and on the football field. Nathan believed that both have been significant aspects in his life, however academics was more important since sports usually lasts for a relatively short period of time when compared to the benefits of academics, and academics would be a necessary benefit for the rest of his life. "They're pretty even, but I would have to say that academics would be more important because that's always a good fall back," He said pragmatically. In sports you can get hurt and you still have to go to school. But athletics is important too. But I feel that academics will get you farther." Moreover, ascertaining their perceptions of other aspects of their high school experience has been an interesting part of this study. Nathan revealed, "I've enjoyed high school a lot. Allows me to meet a lot of people and gets you involved in activities in and around the school – like out in the community".

Moreover, ascertaining their perceptions of other aspects of their high school experience has been an interesting part of this study. Nathan has enjoyed his high school experience a great deal. One reason for this feeling is that he has enjoyed meeting new people – a lot of new people. Additionally, he has fond memories of high school because it

“gets you involved in activities in and around the school – like out in the community”.

Feeling comfortable and enjoying high school appeared to be a common characteristic of the student-athletes participating in the study. The researcher’s perception is that the five student-athletes took full advantage of the opportunities present at Church Valley High School, activities such as challenging courses, clubs, and athletics.

Ascertaining the student-athletes perceptions of a role model is important to the study because these perceptions potentially provide clues to the reasons why the student-athletes have performed successfully in high school. Has each one’s role model provided a blue print for his behavior and performance? Nathan said, “A role model? Someone that you can learn from – that you try to follow in their footsteps.” Nathan’s listed his role model as Donald Glover. Upon further examination, it was not too difficult to understand why Nathan named him as a role model. “He is an actor, comedian, musician, and writer, and he was able to balance all of these things. And then he does work on the side helping in the community. And he works with the youth,” Nathan answered proudly. Nathan believed that balancing things in life can be a key to being successful in various endeavors.

Throughout the first segment of the interview, Nathan exhibited a quiet, mature demeanor. These characteristics continued during the secondary phase of the interview questions. Most of his responses were simple and to the point. Consequently, his responses were short and succinct. Furthermore, it appeared that the five student-athletes shared a common goal and their responses were resounding ones as they answered the question about their short-term goals. And going to college was a short-term goal. Nathan confidently said, “I plan to go to a four-year college majoring probably in teaching.

Probably becoming a history teacher. Those are my short-term goals.” At this point, Nathan responded to a question pertaining to the prospect of becoming a football coach; he answered after a very long pause “I don’t know”.

Next, Nathan focused on his long-term goals and goals he had set while in high school. First, Nathan’s long-term goals include having “a family – wife and kids and live happily in a nice neighborhood”. The researcher perceives that the latter response was the result of the experiences he had at the time of the interview and that experience is living in an upper middle class neighborhood with his family. His perception of the goals for high school as he attended middle school was to graduate at the top of his class, to “own” lacrosse, and to meet new people. As of September 2011, Nathan was ranked 172 out of 342 students at Church Valley High School and had not attained his goal of being at the very top of his class. Still, a 3.6 GPA was commendable for a student-athlete who had registered for challenging core courses and who had been successful in lacrosse and football, especially given the demands of participating in these two sports.

Previously mentioned, Nathan related that his favorite course has been history and his short-term goal is to become a history teacher. For these reasons, it was no surprise that his most influential teacher was his World History teacher who taught him during his junior year. Nathan proclaimed, “My most influential teacher is probably my history teacher from last year. He was my World History teacher – both that I connected with him.” Mr. Melega, according to Nathan, was focused on his students and was “very open to help me with the subject”.

Then Nathan's responded to a query pertaining to his athletic career. First, he said that he had been playing organized sports since he was five years old. His athletic participation began with soccer until he attended middle school. Then he became interested in playing football, which has continued in high school. Second, as he alluded to earlier in the interview, soccer gave way to football and then he became interested in lacrosse. Unlike the reticence he exhibited with his responses to earlier questions, Nathan seemed excited to talk about the history of lacrosse and its connection to Native Americans. He also spoke of the scarcity of African Americans who play the sport. Indeed, there was the hint of pure joy as he talked about the game. Finally, Nathan had a difficult time listing his favorite sport – having to choose between football and lacrosse. While lacrosse has a faster pace, Nathan likes football because of the team aspect. A lacrosse player can conceivably “go off and you can do your own thing”. But in football if one part of the play breaks down then “most likely the play has already died.” Because Nathan plays football, he has learned to work together with others and his perception is that the experience of being a member of a team could serve him later in life as he becomes a member of another athletic team or a member of other organizations.

Last, Nathan discussed whether or not he has been involved with extra-curricular activities or community activities. Since Nathan was 5 years old, he has been involved with a youth group called Faith Formation. The members participate in church-sponsored activities in his place of worship and in the community. As with the football team and lacrosse team, Nathan experiences a feeling of belonging and enjoys the camaraderie.

Further, the researcher's perception is that Nathan benefits from belonging to a group. Even though Nathan is quiet, he is a gregarious individual.

### **Summary**

No doubt the face-to-face interviews with the five African American student-athletes were interesting, poignant, and quite revealing. They were asked to share their perceptions of the relationship between their participation in athletics and their performance in the classroom – these shared experiences being an important aspect of qualitative research. Shared experiences via in-depth interviews are a significant aspect of qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Furthermore, they were gracious enough to consent to participate in this study in order to share their perceptions of the reasons for their success on the football field or basketball court while attaining academic success at Church Valley High School. Even though they revealed other aspects of their lives and their high school experiences through the primary and secondary interview questions, the crux of the study centered on their perceptions of the relationship between their athletic participation and academic success. Emerging themes and other aspects of those experiences, along with administrative implications, will be forthcoming in the ensuing chapter 5.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions and Implications

*All our knowledge has its origins in our perceptions* – Leonardo da Vinci (2011)

This study's primary focus transcended the debate which has existed for a number of years – a debate that centered on the relationship between academic participation and academic success. Coleman (1961) and Whitley (1996), who conducted their research on the topic, proffered their results and were on opposing sides of the debate. While Coleman argued that student-athletes pay an academic price for participating in athletics primarily because athletics require an enormous amount of time and energy, Whitley countered that sports provided student-athletes with an added incentive to perform at a high level in the classroom. However, the debates were devoid of one research component: the perceptions of the student-athletes who were successful in the classroom and who also performed at a high level on the football field or the basketball court – success evidenced by them earning a varsity letter in their particular sport and by attaining a GPA of 3.0 or higher. Since the study focused on their perceptions, an examination of the significance of perceptions would be pertinent at this point.

Philosophers and researchers have studied the significance of an individual's perceptions, and this collection of research data provided a level of credence to the importance of the study of perceptions and its relationship to reality. Furthermore, philosophers have believed that the concept of perceptions and its consequences was worth debating. Philosopher Antoine Arnauld argued that thoughts and perceptions are self-

reflective and he believed that he could be cognizant of perceptions and could analyze one perception by another. When he scrutinized a perception, Arnauld claimed to be able to scrutinize a perception or an idea of something. Additionally, David Hume argued that there is nothing really present to an individual except for his own perceptions. George Berkeley and Immanuel Kant contended that perceptions can be the very things themselves or the representations of those things. (Yolton, 1996).

Elliott (2002) asserted that it was possible that students who performed at a high level in the classroom and did well came to believe that they possessed high ability. Perhaps, in other words, the students believed that the perceptions of their high ability fostered higher achievement in the classrooms. However, he has been cautious about interpreting his data and making such assumptions about the relationship between students' perceptions and their ability. His cautiousness has been linked to the utilization of questionnaires rather than interviews, and his belief that the questionnaires typically used to assess the relationship between students' beliefs about the causes of their success or failure and academic achievement did not adequately address such a relationship. "This shortcoming speaks directly to our belief that surveys must be complemented by individual interviews, so that such intuitive relationships can be explored" (Elliott & Bempechat, 2002, p.9).

In-depth interviews to ascertain the students' perceptions might have eliminated the cautiousness associated with the interpretation of the Elliott's data. This study could be potentially strengthened because the interviews with the five African American student-athletes garnered data associated with their perceptions – perceptions of their participation

in sports and its relationship to their academic achievement. Albeit the study focused on perceptions, it became apparent that other themes also emerged as the result of information gleaned from the student-athletes' responses to the primary and secondary interview questions.

### **Perceptions of Academics and Athletic Performance**

It is true that there is an ongoing debate centered on the relationship between academic success and athletic participation. Moreover, there are researchers who have weighed in on the debate, with opposing opinions. Heretofore, what has been absent from the literature published by these researchers is the perceptions of the student-athletes who have participated in athletics while being successful in the classroom. This study aimed to focus on the perceptions of the five African American student-athletes at Church Valley High School who have been successful in both endeavors. Another theme that surfaced was the perception that academics was the key and the motivation for their continued participation in athletics.

Furthermore, student-athletes' motivation for academic performance was the subject of research conducted by Danielle Tower (2008). She interviewed four student-athletes who reported being internally motivated to perform academically, even though remaining eligible in order to continue participating in their sports was evident in their responses. Also, performing academically was viewed as a necessary prerequisite to further their education in a college or university – the same aspiration as the five student-athletes in this

study. Still, participating in athletics appeared to be a motivating factor to performing well in the classroom.

On the other hand, Eitle and Eitle (2002) reported that African American males were 2.5 times more likely to participate in football and 5.7 times more likely to participate in basketball. This information appeared to be quite germane to this study because Eitle and Eitle argued that student-athletes who participated in football and basketball have not necessarily been linked to positive academic achievement. In fact, the association between athletics and academics may have had a negative impact. The student-athletes in this current study are African American males and have participated in football and basketball. So, following the argument set forth by Eitle and Eitle, these African American males' academics should have been negatively impacted while participating in football and basketball. On the contrary, each Church Valley High School student-athlete in this study has been successful in the classroom while performing at a high level on the basketball court or the football field.

Another researcher conducted a mixed study – using qualitative and quantitative methods – on the effects of athletics and academics. White (2005) concluded that there was evidence to support the notion that participating in athletics can have a positive effect on academic performance. Furthermore, he purported that athletic participation also positively affected other facets of the student-athletes' lives. These areas included work ethic, academic attainment, positive attitudes, self-esteem, positive student behavior, and positive choices pertaining to drugs and alcohol. The aforementioned attributes appeared to

characterize the student-athletes at Church Valley High School who participated in the study and they seemed to be on target to becoming well-rounded, productive citizens.

One could say that researchers have debated the relationship between academic performance and success in the classroom. However, this study focused on the student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between the two phenomena. The researcher believes that this study has added credence to the notion that there is an association between participating in athletics and its positive affect on academics. Heretofore, there have been quantitative and qualitative studies conducted on the phenomenon – a relationship between academics and athletics. But these studies have not been concerned with the student-athletes' perceptions, so this study is unique in that regards. The five African American student-athletes shared their perceptions of the relationship as well as other factors which contributed to their success in athletics and in the classroom.

Furthermore, Denny's perception was that he believed that being successful in the classroom was necessary in order to be able to compete on the basketball court. To be able to navigate through that perception, he associated himself with friends who shared the same interests, motivation, and beliefs about the connection between academics and athletics. "Being around my friends seems to keep me balanced. Not too much school and not too much fun all the time," he said.

Arthur's perception of the relationship between participating in athletics and his academic success was that if he doesn't have success in the classroom "you won't have success in your sport". His goal was to be successful in his academics so "I can leave my mark on the court". Arthur's mother works for the local school system, but he gave the

researcher the impression that he has already internalized the value of academics. He did not require constant prodding from his mother to attain and maintain his current academic status.

Also the researcher perceived Arthur to be passionate about playing basketball and representing his high school and family on the basketball court while earning a reputation as a successful student-athlete. His mother works for the school system and his attention to academics, it appeared, has been positively influenced by her. Arthur appeared cognizant of the fact that academics would be the foundation for a successful life when his athletic skills begin to diminish.

Kevin perceived the relationship between academics and athletics to be reciprocal: participating in football requires him to be a successful student and if he's a successful student he can be afforded the opportunity to play football. Kevin responded, "Again, it all goes back to the student-athlete. If you want to play a sport, you have to be proficient in class to play that sport or any sport." He appeared to be the most enthusiastic during the interview and that was the manner in which he approached his academics and football. Kevin was the only interviewee who participated in football – his primary sport – and basketball. He admitted that the coach inserts him into the game when the team needs an infusion of energy. A sense of humor tempered with a sense of responsibility and maturity characterizes these student-athletes who have participated in the study, and Kevin appeared to be the epitome of that characteristic.

Previously, John had been characterized as a pragmatic young man. This description was also evident in his perception of the relationship between his participation in athletics

and his success in the classroom. He believed that they were very similar in that both required extra efforts. One could also say that his perception illustrated that academics and athletics shared a certain degree of reciprocity. To elucidate, studying for his school work required extra time and football required extra time. However, the benefit can be counted because the extra effort pays dividends when the strategies he utilized for memorizing school work were transferred to memorizing football plays. Likewise, the techniques he acquired for learning the plays in football were transferred to the classroom. “You have to learn and memorize plays and things just as you do in the classroom,” he said during the interview. The researcher perceived that John realized that some type of relationship existed between his success in the classroom and the opportunity to participate in sports.

The researcher’s perception is that John has persevered through difficult periods in his life and he will parlay those experiences into a productive life. After hearing John speak of his attitude during his middle school years, the researcher believes that educators should make a concerted effort to inform students of the importance of establishing a foundation for their academics by attaining higher grades and encourage them to maintain those grades during their high school years. John participated in a variety of activities, including football, and the researcher’s perception is that these activities enabled John to become a well-rounded individual; he participated and performed well in sports, performed well in the classroom, and made his mark in the arts.

At this point, it may be interesting to note that Nathan and John shared a common theme as it pertained to their perception of a connection between athletics and academics. Both of the student-athletes believed that one could benefit the other. To clarify, Nathan

noted that a certain mentality is required for football and in the classroom. He went on to say, “School – your work in school – you can bring that – use your intelligence you gained in school on the football field.” Also noteworthy is the fact that Nathan was perceptive enough to recognize that oftentimes sports and academics conflict with each other. Coleman (1961) echoed similar sentiments in his work *The Adolescent Society* as he proclaimed that participating in athletics has a negative effect on academics because athletics usually demands an exorbitant amount of time, which Coleman termed zero sum. Zero sum, in other words, states that a gain in one area means a loss in another. Participating in sports at a high level (gain) means performing poorly in academics (loss).

On the surface, it appeared that Nathan’s perceptions of the reasons for his academic and athletic success were aligned with an assessment made by Coleman (1961). Coleman had argued that participation in sports comes at a cost and the cost has been poor academic performance because of the lack of time necessary for the student to adequately prepare for the class work. In other words, Coleman believed that a student possibly could not perform at a high level in both entities – sports and academics. Therefore, Coleman might have suggested that athletic success and academic success could not co-exist; one would more than likely need to supplant the other. Coleman referred to this claim as a zero-sum situation because the gain in one area – athletic participation at a high level – would be offset by poor academic performance. However, Nathan – as well as the other African American student-athletes in this study – apparently has defied those odds, which were promulgated by Coleman.

But in spite of the demands that sports placed upon student-athletes, these five student-athletes at Church Valley High School have demonstrated a penchant for competing at a high level in their athletic endeavors while performing at an equally high level in the classroom. Equally important to the study, they consented to share their perceptions of the reasons for their success in both endeavors.

Moreover, face-to-face interviews can be described as synchronous communication and this interview method can take advantage of social cues. These social cues include voice inflection, intonation, and body language – all of which can be observed by the interviewer. Through these observations, the interviewee can unconsciously provide a lot of extra information which adds to the verbal answers to the interview questions (Opdenakker, 2006). So, one could say that an advantage of a face-to-face interview is the interviewer can observe the facial expressions and other reactions of the participants. The researcher was able to do this while interviewing the participants in the study.

### **Athletic and Academic Performance Influenced by Perceptions**

The student-athletes believed that there was a relationship between participating in athletics and being successful in the classroom. Kevin commented that his coaches preached that being a student-athlete comes first. If you want to participate, the classroom work had to be done. And Kevin proclaimed, “To play a sport, you have to be proficient in the classroom. Do your best in the classroom for the opportunity to do your best on the football field.” Denny remarked, “I have to work hard in the classroom to be able to perform on the basketball court – being eligible to play. Arthur noted, “Success in the classroom equals

success in sports.” His goal was to do well in the classroom so that he could leave his mark on the basketball court. The researcher perceived that for them to be successful there has to be a certain amount of effort exerted, balance maintained, and support with stability.

### **Hard Work**

Working hard was a perception that surfaced as an underlying theme for the student-athletes’ success in the classroom and on the basketball court and football field. Thomas Edison, a well-known and successful inventor, was given credit for proclaiming that there is not a substitute for hard work. Also, individuals who have been successful and those who have been great achievers were characterized as diligent workers. Another quote pertaining to hard work that has been recorded is one uttered by Vince Lombardi in which he remarks that the dictionary is the only place that success comes before work.

Specifically, each one of the student-athletes – Denny, Kevin, John, Arthur, and Nathan – mentioned hard work as a reason for their success in the classroom. Kevin even linked hard work with the desire to begin his class work almost immediately after arriving home from school. “Just working hard and coming home and getting straight to my work,” he said. Even though his mother was usually home when he arrived from school, Kevin maintained that she did not need to remind him to begin his work; he started it on his own volition. Denny’s approach to basketball involved hard work too. He developed a sense for one of the main ingredients that enabled him to be successful on the basketball court and it was “probably just working hard”. Nathan exclaimed, “Hard work makes it easier and

paying attention in class.” Their perception of hard work and putting that particular characteristic into practice was one of the primary reasons that these student-athletes were successful in the classroom and in their athletic endeavors. The researcher believed that these assertions pertaining to hard work were sincere and hard work was the reason for their success in the classroom and in athletics.

### **Balance**

Moreover, the participants commented on their perception of the balance that is required for them to manage the rigors associated with playing a sport at a high level and doing well in the classroom – doing well has been defined as maintaining a B average or higher in the classroom and earning a varsity letter. Denny told the researcher, “I have the responsibility of knowing the need to make up a test if missed and making up school work comes before working on my basketball game. That is the inspiration to complete work so that I can get to play basketball. Focus on basketball after class work and I have to do work to enjoy basketball.” Arthur said about balance, “There is more class time than basketball. School work comes first then sports and I spend time on basketball after class work.” Kevin expressed an even keel as he said, “I avoid being too focused on academics or athletics.” John commented, “Try not to mix the two – focus on each one individually. I can’t perform on the field if I am thinking about other things.” Nathan’s perception of the balance pertained to the importance of each - “athletics is important but academics gets you farther”. The researcher believes that the participants have developed an awareness of the balance

required for them to be successful at Church Valley High School. Being cognizant of the balance required to be successful now should be a useful trait in their future endeavors.

### **Support**

Another theme which emerged from the five interviews was the student-athletes' perceptions of the support provided by their teachers and their family members. Pertaining to the former, studies have shown that students who experience caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in school will more than likely develop positive academic attitudes and values and develop an affinity for the school environment. Furthermore, the research has illustrated that students need to believe that their teachers are involved with them and care about them (Klem & Connell, 2004). Also, teachers can have a positive effect on students because they are the ones who "gently close the classroom door and perform the act of teaching". The teachers have been the individuals who set in motion the policies after interpreting them, and are the ones who spend a great deal of time with the students (Hattie, 2003, p. 2).

Chen (2008) reported that parental involvement is another element of support which is a key to a student's academic success. She contends that parental involvement enhances academic achievement. Furthermore, Chen argued that parental involvement has been shown to be directly proportional to a student's success. In other words, the greater the amount of parental involvement the greater the amount of success the student could potentially attain. Also, Chen reported that parental involvement has been shown to taper off after the students enter middle school and high school. Unfortunately, this is a period in

the students' lives when parental involvement is critical, especially if the students have college potential. She reported that parents can influence their child's academic performance – the type of academic success necessary for them to be accepted into a college or university. The researcher's perception is that this information can be relayed to parents and guardians of middle school and high school students and it could alter parents' attitudes and behaviors which will ultimately benefit their children.

While Denny and John discussed their perception of support that centered on their families, the other student-athletes shared information about the support that they received from their teachers. John's support arrived at a time when his family was experiencing financial difficulties and he moved to Georgia with his aunt. Denny's support came in the form of encouragement from his mother and father as they were attuned to his academics, and they supported his participation in athletics by attending all of his basketball games. Arthur, Kevin, and Nathan reported that their support came from teachers and those teachers were instrumental in their academic success. "It's like certain teachers that I know will help me," Arthur reported. The student-athletes' teachers, especially those alluded to earlier in chapter four, were perceived to be influential teachers. Researchers provided, through their studies, a framework for identifying some characteristics of effective and influential teachers. The student-athletes in this study discussed their influential teachers and the teachers at Church Valley High School appeared to display the characteristics listed by McCord (2010) & Allington and Johnston (2000) in chapter 2.

Moreover, Denny spoke very highly of Mr. Brown, his Civics and African American Honors teacher, when he said, "Very passionate – motivated him to learn and to appreciate

history.” While volunteering additional information about teachers who influenced him, Denny credited his 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher Mrs. Green with encouraging him to focus on his academics and he admitted that at the time he was at a crossroads in school. Their relationship inspired Denny to make academic progress because “I always wanted to do well for her because you didn’t want to disappoint her”.

A second example of a relationship between a teacher and one of the student-athletes was provided by Kevin who appreciated what Mr. McCray – his 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher – meant to him. It transcended a relationship because he referred to it as something special. “It was like some kind of a bond that we had. It was great teacher-student chemistry. I could relate with him in the classroom – just everything was there that I needed to be successful,” Kevin pointed out. Kevin, at the time he had Mr. Cray as a teacher, was dealing with the absence of a father in his home and this relationship – the researcher believes – was crucial to Kevin’s success.

A final example of the effectiveness of a teacher was shown during the interview with John. Mr. Nabors was perceived to be one of the best teachers that John had in school because Mr. Nabors was always in a good mood, always willing to help his students, made his students feel comfortable, and conducted a well-managed classroom. He was sensitive to his students’ needs and requirements because he “can make you feel good because singing isn’t the most comfortable thing to do in front of a group of people”. McCord (2010) & Allington and Johnston (2000) delineated the characteristics of effective and influential teachers; the student-athletes, it appeared, were positively affected by their teachers who exhibited those types of characteristics and teaching styles. From the five student-athletes,

the researcher sensed a real devotion to the teachers who had influenced them and encouraged them and their expressions illustrated thankfulness for what the teachers had done. Their perception of the support enabled them to be successful at Church Valley High School, especially in the classroom.

### **Administrative Implications**

Even though the crux of this study has been focused on five African American student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between their participation in athletics at a high level and their success in the classroom, the study would not be complete without noting the significance of the individuals in the school milieu who potentially have the power to influence student achievement, namely administrators. Similar to the debate concerning the relationship between athletics and academics, there has been some debate on the role principals or administrators play in students' success in their schools.

Furthermore, Cotton (2003) reported that principals who have been the instructional leaders in successful schools have exhibited certain traits and characteristics. In essence, success in schools has been defined by scores on standardized tests and achievement based on the guidelines under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). These traits, according to Cotton, are the characteristics of effective administrators and are not considered to be "a mere collection of behaviors" (Cotton, p.7). She included these traits for the readers' perusal. First, researchers have argued that one of the most fundamental elements of a successful school has been the establishment and sustainability of a safe and orderly school

environment. Characteristics of principals who maintain a safe and orderly environment are as follows:

1. Personable and accessible
  2. Establish broad-based agreements pertaining to student behavior
  3. Communicating to the students high expectations for their behavior
  4. Soliciting from the students their opinions pertaining to student behavior
  5. Consistency when enforcing rules – day to day and student to student
  6. Permitting teachers to establish and maintain disciplinary authority
  7. Providing in-school suspension with policies for students who are very disruptive
- (Cotton, p.8)

Second, principals entertain a vision of high expectations for student learning. These principals communicate those expectations for student learning to the school's students, the staff members, and other stakeholders – especially the parents and guardians. Moreover, students in heretofore low performing schools have demonstrated a knack for success when administrators, without making unrealistic demands, have provided an environment conducive to learning while providing the support and encouragement that is necessary.

Third, her research discovered that collegial administrators spend quite a bit of time outside of their offices and spend that time moving throughout their schools, not sequestered in their offices. Instead of being in static positions, these successful administrators observe in the classrooms and visit all areas of their schools (e.g., cafeterias, hallways, and outside areas). The purpose of these travels is to interact with and observe

teachers, without being overly critical, and to interact with their students. While interacting with the teachers, staff, and students, the administrators should employ a sense of humor which could cause the people in the school to feel at ease and comfortable. In Proverbs 17:22, it is written that a merry heart doth good like a medicine – a fitting scripture for one's 'excuse' to display humor.

Fourth, public and formal recognition of student and staff achievement has been linked to administrators who lead successful schools. While the recognition of students and staff has been associated with high achieving schools, it is important to note that caution must be taken to attempt to maximize the positive effects and, at the same time, the administrators must appear to be fair and impartial in those recognitions. Otherwise, a morale issue could develop which could potentially negate the positive intentions.

Finally, the administrators in successful schools model the behavior that they request from their students, staff members, and teachers. If administrators propose staff development activities, the administrators should whole-heartedly participate in those activities with the teachers and staff. Also, the administrators should model appropriate attire while allowing for appropriate attire on special occasions such as spirit days or dress down Fridays. One could also say that another important example of an administrator being a role model has been when the administrators display a love for all of the students (Cotton, 2008).

Cotton's reported characteristics of successful administrators appeared to be exhibited in one high school. This high school illustrated Cotton's characteristics when it was reported that each quarter the administrator presents a Most Improved Student Award,

which is based upon teachers' recommendations or suggestions. The administrator summoned the student from class, presented the student with a keychain (Parent/Teacher Association sponsored) and certificate, read the recommendations from the teacher, and provided a letter for the parents/guardians. Also, the high school sponsored a Student of the Month and Athlete of the Month Award. These students' names were placed on the school's marquee for others to see. Additionally, an administrator holds a forum in the conference room – twice a month – for students to voice their opinions on school policies or school activities, or to register complaints (Shore, 2002). These administrative strategies appeared to make a positive impact on the school environment. Thus, they have made an impact on the students' learning.

Continuing with a theme of administrative influence on student success, Jarvis (1996) argued that administrators who take the time to exhibit a genuine care for students can positively affect their behavior – behavior which can progress from poor to excellent. She reported on a program referred to as Adopt-A-Senior Program at her high school. This program was designed for at-risk seniors who are invited into the program as a strategy for ensuring that they will graduate on time. To elucidate, the program has been a collaboration effort between the administrative team, the counselors, the department deans, and the teachers. In spite of their poor start, a majority of the seniors who had been involved with the program were able to graduate on time. One could also say that this program illustrated an example of educational equity rather than equality. These at-risk students received the extra attention and support that was necessary for their success.

Another study by researchers reported that there is a relationship between student achievement and principal leadership. Andrews and Soder (1987) conducted a two-year study and reported findings which suggested that an administrator can play a critical role in the academic performance of students, even students who have been classified as low achievers. To illustrate how principals aided in the academic achievement of students, their study delineated four aspects of principal leadership – resource provider, instructional resource, communicator, and visible presence. First, the principal was responsible for providing the resources – funds, materials, information, and opportunities – necessary for the teachers and staff members to assist the students in their educational endeavors. Second, the principal sets the tone for continuous improvement via staff development for the teachers while participating in the activities with the staff, a trait previously mentioned in this chapter. Third, the principal communicates and models the high expectations for the students while reminding the teachers and staff of the school’s vision for the students’ success. Last, the principal should be highly visible in the school environment. The principal’s presence should include visiting classrooms, checking the hallways, being involved with grade level or departmental meetings, and “holding spontaneous conversations with staff and students” (Andrews and Soder, p.9).

Eberts and Stone (1988) authored a study which argued that principals’ behavior and other attributes significantly impact individual student behavior. Their quantitative research was based upon the results of the conclusions derived from case studies linked to data gleaned from a national study – a study which was a representative sample of over 14,000 elementary school students. Their research purported that effective principal behavior has

been demonstrated via instructional leadership which includes arranging and participating in staff development. Also, the principals have established policies for conflict resolution that involve creating and maintaining effective discipline strategies and resolving disputes. This research attempted to confirm the effectiveness of school principals as instructional leaders who have established and maintained educational environments conducive to students' learning.

Furthermore, effective administrators could encourage more students to participate in extra-curricular activities so that the students could benefit from the intangible and tangible aspects inherent in them. These extra-curricular activities could include athletics. Also, as Kevin pointed out the importance of his coaches' attitudes, administrators could hire coaches who view the athletes as student-athletes first and foremost and not merely members of his team – a team which needs to win at all costs. Administrators can set the tone for the culture of the school and athletics – a focal point in many high schools – can be utilized to ameliorate the academics of students in the school.

While the debates pertaining to the relationship between athletic participation and academics have been ongoing for a number of years, other researchers have continued to join the fray on either side of the debates. Does athletic participation cause an athlete's academics to suffer as Coleman (1961) professed? Does athletic participation provide the impetus for student-athletes to perform at a high level in the classroom? Regardless of the answers to these questions, prior research has not delved into the student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between their participation in athletics and their success in the classroom. The five African American student-athletes in this study were provided with

the opportunity to give voice to their perceptions of the reasons for their academic success even as they participated in their sports. This study has offered a different perspective on the debate – the student-athletes' perceptions.

Is it possible for individuals' perceptions to change? One's environmental perceptions have been influenced by past experiences, beliefs, and expectations. For that reason, individuals' perceptions of reality are quite different. Changing the individuals' core beliefs can possibly change the way in which they perceive the world around them. Thus, this change in their core beliefs can allow for a change in their perceptions of that world (Positive Thinking Principles, 2012). In this case, the individual's world is the educational environment. Moreover, African American student-athletes who do not share the same perceptions as the five student-athletes in this study may be persuaded to change their perceptions of the relationship between the athletic and academic environments when presented with the results of the study. While adopting the same perceptions, attitudes, and work ethic as the five student-athletes in the study, other student-athletes might experience amelioration in their athletic and academic endeavors.

### **Summary**

Furthermore, it is recommended that future research should perhaps focus on the perceptions of student-athletes of other genders and cultures – namely African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian females, Hispanic males, and Caucasian males. The results of those future studies can then be compared to ascertain whether or not there are common themes that will produce information which can be utilized by educators in order for them to

create an atmosphere and culture which would enable all student-athletes to perform at a high level.

The researcher perceived the five student-athletes to be individuals who cared about their teammates, their academics, their high school, and their community. Their perceptions of the positive relationship between their participation in athletics and their academics enabled them to develop a work ethic and regimen centered around a balanced life which propelled them toward a journey of success in both endeavors. They perceived that individuals – parents, coaches, teachers, counselors, and administrators – were instrumental in aiding them as they traveled along the arduous journey. Success, they realized, would not have been possible without their support and encouragement. As with the student-athletes in the study, student-athletes' perceptions can change and those in the education environment and parents must encourage these changes so that other student-athletes can benefit from the same kind of success that characterized these five student-athletes. What else? Parents and educators should support athletics, provide continuous encouragement, extol the virtues of hard work, model a balanced life, and provide whatever stability and support is necessary.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon parents and individuals in the education milieu to attempt to change the perceptions of other student-athletes in order for them to partake of the type of success Denny, Arthur, Kevin, John, and Nathan attained while attending Church Valley High School. Their perception was that if they desired to continue to participate in athletics they needed to be a student first and do well in the classroom. In other words, doing well in the classroom – a necessity to remain eligible to play their sport

– was the proverbial carrot in front of the horse; remaining eligible to play provided an incentive to becoming successful in the classroom.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned sports-related incentive for being successful in the classroom, these five student-athletes also became aware of the benefit of doing well academically and the subsequent benefits for their futures. And if and when the NCAA increases the admission standards for high school athletes from 2.0 to 2.3 in 2016, student-athletes should be able to rise to the occasion because of their perception of the positive relationship between athletic participation and academic success. It is then that student-athletes could have the incentive to be successful in the classroom and also be successful in their respective sports as they...“Play Ball!”

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## Appendices

## Appendix A

### Interview Guide (Primary)

1) According to your transcript (report card), you have achieved a measure of success in the classroom (B average or better). What is your perception of the reasons for the success you have achieved in the classroom?

2) Since you have earned a varsity letter in your sport, it appears that you have been successful on the football field/basketball court. What is your perception of the reasons for the success you have experienced while participating in athletics at your school?

3) You have been successful in the classroom and you have been successful on the football field/basketball court. What is your perception of the relationship between your participation in athletics and your success in the classroom?

4) What is your perception of the contributing factors for your academic and athletic success?

5) What is your perception of the balance required for your academics (classroom responsibilities) and your athletics (athletic responsibilities)?

6) What is your perception of your high school experience thus far?

What is your perception of a role model? Who would qualify as your role model?

## Appendix B

### Interview Guide (Secondary)

- 1) What are your short-term goals (plans after high school)?
- 2) What are your long-term goals or your ultimate goals?
- 3) What goals did you have for high school (think back to your middle school experience as you anticipated attending high school)?
- 4) Do you have a favorite course(s)? Please tell me about it.
- 5) Describe your most influential teacher(s).
- 6) How many years have you participated in organized athletics?
- 7) What sports have you participated in during your “career”?
- 8) If you have a favorite sport, why is it your favorite one?
- 9) Are you involved with any other extracurricular activities at school or in the community? How long? What is your role in those organizations/activities?

## Appendix C

### IRB

**NC STATE UNIVERSITY**

Campus Box 7514  
Raleigh, North Carolina 27695-7514  
919.515.2444 (phone)  
919.515.7721 (fax)

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From: Deb Paxton, IRB Administrator  
North Carolina State University  
Institutional Review Board

Date: 7/29/2011

Title: African American Male Athletes' Perceptions of their Participation in Athletics and its Relationship to their Academic Performance in an Urban High School in a Southeastern State: Implications for Education Administrators

IRB#: 2039-11-7

Dear Mr. Brown,

The project listed above has been reviewed by the NC State Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research, and is approved for one year. **This protocol will expire on June 30, 2012 and will need continuing review before that date.**

NOTE:

1. You must use the attached consent forms which have the approval and expiration dates of your study.
2. This board complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU the Assurance Number is: FWA00003429.
3. Any changes to the protocol and supporting documents must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
4. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days by completing and submitting the unanticipated problem form on the IRB website.
5. Your approval for this study lasts for one year from the review date. If your study extends beyond that time, including data analysis, you must obtain continuing review from the IRB.

Sincerely,



Deb Paxton  
NC State IRB

## Appendix D

### Assent Form

(for participants ages 11-17)

### **ASSENT (Permission) TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY**

NC State University

My name is **Josephus C. Brown** and I am a graduate student in the **Education Department** at **NC State University**. I am conducting a research study entitled: **African American Male Athletes' Perceptions of their Participation in Athletics and its Relationship to their Academic Performance in an Urban High School in a Southeastern State: Implications for Educational Administrators.**

I am asking you to take part in this research study because I am trying to learn more about your reasons for performing at such a high level in the classroom and for performing at such a high level in your sport. This portion of my research will take about an hour of your time as I conduct a one-on-one interview with you.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to consent to an interview, as I mentioned above. You do not have to answer any question you don't want to and you can stop participating at any time. In addition, no one will be able to know how you responded to the questions and your name will never be used.

Please talk about this study with your parents before you decide whether or not to participate. I will also ask your parents to give their permission for you to participate. To acknowledge their consent, your parents will be asked to sign an **Informed Consent Form** and they will also receive a copy of the consent form. Even if your parents say "yes" you can still decide not to participate. You may also change your mind before or during the study.

You may ask me questions about this study.

By signing below, you are agreeing to participate with the understanding that your parents have given their permission for you to take part in this research study. You are participating in this study because you want to do so. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form after you have signed it.

**Printed Name** \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

## Appendix E

### Informed Consent Form for Research

#### North Carolina State University INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

African American Male Athletes' Perceptions of their Participation in Athletics and its Relationship to their Academic Performance in an Urban High School in a Southeastern State: Implications for Education Administrators

Josephus C. Brown

Dr. Paul F. Bitting

#### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or for more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. Also, please note that my specific study will involve reviewing some artifacts in the school; these artifacts include the student-athletes' attendance records, discipline records, and grades. If at any time you have questions about the participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

I plan to conduct research on five African American male high school student-athletes' perceptions of the relationship between their success in athletics and their success in the classroom as defined by earning a varsity letter in his sport and attaining a B average or better, respectively. This research study is significant because the findings could indicate that more African American male high school students should be encouraged to participate in athletics which could positively alter their perceptions of the education environment and enable them to achieve similar success in the classroom. Ultimately, I hope the research will be used to add to an existing body of knowledge which will benefit other African American male high school students.

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

If you give your consent, you will be asked to participate in a research study which will directly involve a total of five African American male high school students in your school – student-athletes who play football and basketball (3 football players and 2 basketball players). Since you are a minor, I will include a signature line on the consent form for your parents/guardians to sign. As a participant, you will be asked to submit to a one-on-one interview with me while I ask questions from interview guides which have been approved by members of a committee at NC State University. I may request a second interview if some of the questions and discussions, after a review of the information, require further clarification (further explanation). These interviews would be one-on-one sessions in your high school in an area of your choice and an area which is convenient. I plan to limit our interview session to 90 minutes or less. If a second interview is requested, the second interview will also last 90 minutes or less. You will have the right to end the interview session(s) at any time. More importantly, you will have the right to change your mind and to end your participation in the study at any time, without any consequences. My research study will include observations of your athletic contests and also observations during the course of your school day, particularly during your core classes. Your role will be completed after we review the data which I will have collected. The final review is referred to as member checks.

#### **Risks**

There will be no risks associated with my study.

**Benefits**

There will not be any direct benefit to you; however, there is the possibility that knowledge may be gained which could potentially assist other African American male high school student-athletes through changes in educators' philosophies and behaviors and through changes in education policy.

**Confidentiality**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored and locked securely in a file cabinet in my home office and I will be the only person with the key. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. In fact, I will use a pseudonym (fake name) for you as I reference you in the study. You will NOT be asked to write your name on any study materials so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide.

**Compensation**

You will not receive any compensation for participating in my study.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher:

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

**Consent to Participate**

"I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I

agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate

or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am

otherwise entitled."

**Subject's signature** \_\_\_\_\_

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

**Investigator's signature** \_\_\_\_\_

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

**Parents'/Guardians' Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

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

## Appendix F

### School Report Card (2010-11)

#### Church Valley High School

#### Performance of Students in Each Course on the ABCs End-of-Grade Tests

	English I	Algebra I	Algebra II	Geometry	Biology	Physical Science	Civics & Economics	US History
Our School	89.5%	44.9%	92.9%	---	90.7%	93.3%	86.9%	94.4%
District	89.2%	85.6%	90.5%	---	90.2%	85.0%	89.3%	89.5%
State	80.6%	76.7%	82.3%	---	79.9%	76.5%	80.0%	81.5%

Geometry tests were eliminated from the ABCs beginning with the 2010-2011 school year  
Performance of Each Student Group on the ABCs End-of-Course Tests

Percentage of Passing Scores on the End-of-Course Tests Grouped by Gender, Ethnicity, and Other Factors

	Male	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	Amer. Indian	Asian	Pacific Islander	Two or More Races	E.D.	N.E.D.	L.E.P.	Migrant Students	Students with Disabilities
Our School	88.2%	89.7%	<95%	70.9%	73.6%	<95%	82.6%	N/A	92.0%	65.4%	<95%	35.0%	N/A	61.4%
# of tests taken	871	895	940	223	212	12	178	N/A	201	371	1,379	117	N/A	127
District	88.3%	89.3%	<95%	67.6%	77.4%	>95%	83.1%	N/A	92.2%	64.8%	<95%	47.0%	N/A	61.7%
State	78.4%	81.0%	87.7%	66.0%	74.0%	71.3%	86.6%	82.6%	82.4%	69.4%	88.2%	48.7%	59.2%	45.0%

E.D. = Economically Disadvantaged    N.E.D. = Not Economically Disadvantaged

L.E.P. = Limited English Proficiency    N/A = Fewer than five students

#### School Attendance

Our School	95%
District	96%
State	95%

## Appendix G

### Profile of the African American Male Student-Athletes

Name/Family Status	Classification/Age	GPA/Ranking	Sport/Position	Accolades/Highlights
Denny <b>Both Parents</b>	Senior <b>17 Years Old</b>	3.0 <b>185 of 322</b>	Basketball Point Guard	Leading: scorer, assists, minutes played, scholarship to Division I school
Arthur <b>Single Mom</b>	Junior <b>16 Years Old</b>	3.3 <b>180 of 342</b>	Basketball Power Forward	Leading: rebounder, shot blocker, games played
Kevin <b>Single Mom</b>	Senior <b>17 Year Old</b>	3.1 <b>170 of 322</b>	Football Running Back & Linebacker	Started all games; won a game with a touchdown run
John <b>Single Mom</b>	Senior <b>18 Years Old</b>	3.0 <b>186 of 322</b>	Football Defensive Back & Wide Receiver	Started all games; conference game Most Valuable Player
Nathan <b>Both Parents</b>	Junior <b>16 Years Old</b>	3.6 <b>172 of 342</b>	Football Defensive Back & Wide Receiver	Started all games; two interceptions in one game