THE SUCCESS FACTORS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN
MASTER OF ARTS TEACHING PROGRAMS

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The problem of not enough African American males enrolling in masters level teaching programs was addressed in this study. This phenomenological study examined the experiences of African American males in master of arts teaching (MAT) programs to understand why they enrolled and what factors led to persistence throughout their program enrollment. Six African American males currently enrolled in MAT programs in the southern, southwestern, and western regions of the United States participated. Data gathered for each participant included an individual, semi-structured interview and a demographic survey. Audio-recordings were used to capture the fullness of the interviews, and transcription software was used to code, analyze, and sort the data to help identify themes. This study looked through the lens of Strayhorn’s graduate student persistence and Albert Bandura’s self-efficacy theories. Factors that influenced African American males to enroll into a program were (a) education as a necessary credential, (b) desire to give back to society, (c) minority scholarship support, (d) making a connection to passion, and (e) desire to enhance teaching skills. External and internal factors were identified as assisting the males to persist within their programs. Academic institutions and policy makers may find the results useful for understanding the unseen educational barriers likely to limit African American males from enrolling in MAT programs, the issues likely to occur during the process of obtaining the degree, and the factors likely to be assistive to them for achieving program completion.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Looking back over my life, I soon realized that I never had an African American male teacher. I never had one throughout my K-12 experience, nor my college or my master degree program. Now, as I close the final chapter to my educational experience, I realize I have gone throughout my entire life without ever having an African American male teacher, which is very sad. This study was born as I asked myself, “Am I the only one with this story or are there others who share a similar experience?” In researching this topic, I soon found out that there were numerous topics on the lack of African American males in education and the issues African American males face, but few success stories were published. Therefore, I focused my study on how African American males who enroll into master of arts and teacher programs succeed in completing the programs in order to understand their lived experiences and enable them to tell their story.

Background of the Problem

The United States of America is dynamic and continues to evolve culturally as more and more people from diverse backgrounds enter or are born in this country. The United States was once a nation populated by large numbers of Caucasians but is slowly becoming a nation full of diversity and change. The U.S. Census Bureau projected that by the year 2043, Caucasians will no longer be the majority race populating the US (CBS News, 2012). For example, African Americans are projected to increase by 20 million people by 2043 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).
Even though the percentage of African Americans males is growing, African American males’ educational attainment through postsecondary degree completion lags behind in degree completion more than it does for any other race (Cuyjet, 1997; Harper 2005). According to Smith (2004), among the many children who are at risk for drop out and experiencing minimum success in school due to lack of various educational opportunities, the most vulnerable are African American males. Some of the reasons for their vulnerability include lack of educational resources; single-parent households; racism; low socioeconomic status; low-achieving urban educational environments; and lack of appropriate role models who look like them in primary and secondary education (K-12), in undergraduate institutions, and at the graduate level. Despite these disheartening conditions, some African American males do beat the odds and succeed academically and professionally. Some African American males do graduate from high school, enroll in college, complete a bachelors degree, and enroll in masters level teaching programs among other graduate programs. The advanced degree has become vital for the success of African American males matriculating from the primary and secondary education (K-12) system through the 4-year degree system and into the graduate level (Sethna, 2011).

Alongside the rapid change of cultural demographics is the need for individuals to receive an education. The idea and value of attending college are becoming more and more prevalent in the lives of Americans, as more and more jobs require some form of postsecondary education. Factory and manual labor jobs required only a high school diploma in the past, but these jobs have become uncommon (Richards, 2007). According to Gordon (2009), 62% of jobs in America now require some form of postsecondary education.
Only 52% of African American males graduate from high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), because the K-12 educational system is riddled with complications of less-qualified and dedicated teachers, poorer managed facilities, fewer academic resources such as books and computers, and a minimum number of role models (Hall, 2001). Of the African American males who graduate high school, only 60% enroll in higher education, and many of those students struggle to obtain the college degree due to access barriers, pressure to hold a full time job while enrolled, lack of knowledge about college, and minimal access to role models (Lynn, 2002). Harper (2005) stated that about 66% of African American males in higher education do not complete the bachelors degree; this percent is relatively high as it relates to other academic fields.

Sedlacek (1987) produced a comprehensive 20-year study on African American college males and elaborated on the racism, isolation, lack of role models, sociocultural challenges, and academic obstacles faced by African American males at predominantly White institutions (PWI). For the African American males who finish college, the National Center for Education Statistics (2010) showed that only 29.4% enroll in a graduate degree program due to educational barriers (Thomas, Thompson, Pollio, Greenburg, & Conwill, 2007), financial concerns (Crockett et al., 2003), and environmental factors (Levine, 2008). Despite the odds, some African American males persist through high school, finish college, and enroll in a master of arts in teaching (MAT) degree program. Many researchers highlighted the failures and lack of educational attainment of African American males (Blake & Darling, 1994; Cuyjet, 1997; Fordham, 1996; Noguera, 2003; Roach, 2001).
Within the ongoing exploration of the African American male experience, a need to study why African American males succeed at PWIs and to explore further their masters degree experiences exists. According to Harper (2003), “relatively little is known about African American male students who have persisted and excelled” (p. 23). Furthermore, Richards (2007) called for such research:

To improve achievement among African American students, educational professionals must pay special attention to African American male achievement and reframe the academic achievement gap as a treatment gap. This will entail analyzing the experiences of successful Black male students, the barriers they had to overcome, and the educational and social situations that helped them succeed. (p. 4)

One method of increasing African American male achievement and persistence is through provision of appropriate role models in the form of African American male teachers in the educational pipeline. Having just one African American male teaching inside the classroom increases the likelihood for academic success for young African American youth (Brown & Butty, 1997; James, 2002; Jones, 2011; Lynn, 2006; Sethna, 2011). African American male teachers create functional ties with their African American students, which allow the students to have the ability to make meaning of the learning process and form the desire to matriculate into higher education (Brown & Butty, 1997; King, 1993; Lynn, 2006). However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), the teaching profession is still an overwhelmingly White female dominated occupation that does not represent the ethnic and racial demographics of the U.S. secondary education population. During the 2007-2008 school year, a total of 3,898,420 school teachers were employed in the US. African American teachers
only made up 6.7% of the teacher population; and among African American teachers, less than 30% were male (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

The representation of African American males attending higher education to become teachers is minimal (Sethna, 2011). The presence of African American male teachers can be used to develop supportive learning environments for African American males hoping to complete bachelors and masters degrees. These supportive environments are built upon the personal connections and values African American males find in role models and teachers who look like them (Brown & Butty, 1997; James, 2002; Jones, 2011; Lynn, 2006; Sethna, 2011). “It lets them know they can achieve and will succeed because that faculty member is living proof” (Sethna, 2011, p. 3).

Even though the field of education confers degrees at the masters level, the numbers of African American males in masters level educational programs is scarce. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010) the 2007-2008 school year had a total of 175,880 students who received masters degrees in education, with Caucasian students making up over 76.7% and African American students making up just 10.3% of the population. Of the African American male graduates from masters programs, only 20.6% received masters degrees in education. Thus, the need to examine the supply pipeline for African American males in higher education and understand the needs for recruiting increasing numbers of African American males to masters level teaching programs existed.

Problem Statement

Young African American males have a minimal number of role models, mentors, and other individuals who look like them to assist them with their educational advancement from K-
12 to completing a graduate degree and to motivate them. Bennefield (1999) suggested improving the lives of African American males requires educational attainment, but the number of African Americans obtaining the higher education is far too few. Due to this problem, the number of African American males matriculating through the educational pipeline is low. Thus, the problem of not enough African American males enrolling in masters level teaching programs was addressed in this study.

**Purpose of the Study**

One may ask, why not study the experiences of African American males in curriculum and instruction programs? The curriculum and instruction program focuses on the standards that build quality teachers and the dimensions of how teacher education contributes to the content as it relates to student success. However, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of African American male teachers in academic programs focused on teacher preparation and preparing prospective teachers with pedagogical strategies. Given the overall purpose of this study and the emphasis on preparing students for the actual classroom environment, MAT programs were chosen as the focus of this study (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002). This phenomenological study examined the experiences of African American males in MAT programs to understand why they enrolled and what factors led to their persistence through the program and to help explain why certain African American males overcome societal and educational barriers to obtain academic success. The data collection process required the use of a demographic survey and semi-structured interviews to determine the life and educational experiences that ensured the participants succeeded.
Definition of Terms

_African American._ Black and African American are descriptive terms referring to a population in the US thought to descend from the Black racial groups from Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In this study, the two terms will be used interchangeably.

_Master of arts in teaching (MAT)._ MAT programs within the field of education develop and train teachers interested in advancing their teaching abilities and increasing student achievement within classrooms. MAT programs are focused on how students may be reached to learn.

Significance of the Study

Even though the representation of African American males in the K-12 system is low given the “low salaries, which cause most of our best and brightest to reject teaching as a career, absence of teacher induction programs, low hiring standards, and poor working conditions” (Levine, 2006, p. 21), increasing the representation of African American males in the K-12 system is vital for several reasons. First, the literature has been clear regarding the role of African American males in the classroom as it relates to serving as role models by “exposing students to Black men as authority figures, helping minority students feel that they belong, and motivating Black students to achieve” (Thomas-Lester, 2009, para. 6; Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010). Second, the literature has highlighted the role of African American males as teachers in classrooms as promoting just and equitable opportunities for young African American males in postsecondary education and ensuring these students’ voices are heard at the forefront and taken into consideration when developing policies and practices. Third, research findings have highlighted the importance of the visibility of African American males as
impacting the pipeline for other African American males and validating the desire for young
males to choose K-12 teaching careers. Howard University Provost, Alvin Thornton argued that
“students who don't see teachers who resemble themselves grow up to think they don’t
contribute to knowledge” (Thomas-Lester, 2009, p. 2).

The aforementioned points highlight the need for ongoing research concerning African
American males enrolled in MAT programs. Research on this population is essential for a
number of reasons. First, research specifically addressing this issue is needed to promote the
well-being of any MAT program or program focused on preparing educators for the K-12
educational environment. Many colleges of education have examined this issue through the
lens of policy reform and financial support (Jones, 2011). McCray, Sindelar, Kilgore, and Neal
(2002) reminded educational departments that one of the key ingredients for increasing the
number of African American males in teaching programs is learning from their personal stories.
Education faculty located within PWIs may find this study useful because of the revelation of
unseen educational barriers likely to prevent African American males from enrolling in and
completing MAT programs due to the issues they face during the process of obtaining the MAT
and the factors likely not to facilitate persistence and graduation.

Second, although federal regulations require teachers to hold at least a bachelors
degree to teach, McDiarmid and Wilson (1991) found that teachers with only a bachelors
degree were inadequately prepared for bridging the gap between understanding knowledge
and providing effective instruction, and these teachers more likely to exit the K-12 system very
early in their careers. In order for teacher preparation to be effective, the MAT or other
postbaccalaureate advanced degree in teacher preparation must be earned (Ashton, 1996).
Ashton (1996) argued that graduate degree programs should be designed to attract and support students of color becoming K-12 teachers. Programs need to train teachers to think critically, to adapt to the changing environments of schools and students, and to connect classroom lessons to life experiences within the cultural contexts represented in their classrooms. However, the extremely small pool of African American males completing college limits the amount of African American males eligible for teaching positions. Some of the reasons for few African American males entering MAT programs include the following: (a) low starting salaries of teachers,(b) lack of support from administration,(c) opportunities within professions that offer higher salaries,(d) the high level of stress involved in teaching; (e) the politics of universities’ education departments, (f) ability to obtain a successful score on the GRE test as defined by individual academic institutions, (g) how to pay for graduate school, and (h) the lack of appropriate African American role models (Blake & Darling, 1994; Brown & Butty, 1999; Conrad, Haworth, & Millas, 1993; Cunningham, 1993; Foster, 1990; Futrell, 1999; Graham, 1987; Smith, Mack, & Akyea, 2004; Strayhorn, 2005).

Third, the narratives of African American males enrolled in MAT programs may provide a context for other researchers seeking to understand how and why these men choose to pursue a degree in education. Jones (2011) urged colleges of education to use research to understand African American males’ life experiences within MAT programs to strengthen the pipeline of role models, mentors, and sources of inspiration for young African American males. Finally, the phenomenological outcomes may assist future educational leaders’ creations of programs and services designed to increase the number of African American males entering education and persisting beyond obtaining the bachelors degree.
Research Questions

The questions were designed to explore the experiences of African American males and the strategies they used to obtaining success in school.

1. What are the prevailing factors that influence African American male students to enroll in a MAT program?

2. What are the primary factors that influence African American male students’ persistence in MAT programs?

Conceptual Framework

In order to accomplish the objectives of this study, a qualitative research method was used. The qualitative research design ensured the ability to collect a vast amount of data centered on the participants’ perceptions of their experiences. To better understand and examine the dimensions of African American males in MAT programs, this study was conducted through the lens of the intersection of two theories to explain the experiences of African American male students in MAT programs. The two intersecting theories were Strayhorn’s (2009b) graduate student persistence theory and Albert Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory. Each theory added value to understanding the factors that influence enrollment and persistence of African American males in MAT programs.

Building upon the work of Tinto (1993), Strayhorn (2005, 2009a, 2009b) developed a graduate student persistence theory. His theory was formulated around Tinto’s belief that social integration must take place in order for students to persist to degree completion. Social integration is experienced when students make personal connections on campus with faculty or staff members or with other individuals with whom they share equal characteristics (Strayhorn,
Veal, Bull, and Miller (2012) concluded interactions with faculty or staff members who conveyed personal interest in and caring about students’ well-being positively influenced the retention of African American males. Strayhorn (2005, 2009a, 2009b) explored how graduate students make meaning of life beyond the undergraduate experience and what factors motivate them to persist through their degree program. The African American males in this study shared their experiences as such related to enrollment and persistence throughout their respective MAT programs. Given that “the forces that shape graduate student decisions and the way such factors coalesce under certain conditions for certain students remain unclear” (Strayhorn, 2009b, p. 127), the findings of this study are vital.

The second theory used to frame this study was Albert Bandura’s self-efficacy theory. Bandura (1977) examined psychological functioning on an individual’s interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental forces. According to Bandura’s (2001) social cognitive theory, individuals are more proactive now than in the past about developing their psychosocial skill sets. This proactivity plays a huge role in career choice. Bandura (1977) explained as follows:

Perceived self-efficacy is, therefore, posited as a pivotal factor in career choice and development. Perceived self-efficacy occupies a central role in the causal structure of social cognitive theory because efficacy beliefs affect adaptation and change not only in their own right, but also through their impact on other determinants. Self-efficacy beliefs influence aspirations and strength of commitments to them, the quality of analytic and strategic thinking, level of motivation and perseverance in the face of
difficulties and setbacks, resilience to adversity, causal attributions for successes and failures, and vulnerability to stress and depression. (pp. 187-188)

Bandura (1977, 2001) explained the theory of self-efficacy as composed of four parts. Each part was utilized as part of the theoretical framework in analyzing data for the current study. The first part involved the cognitive processes related to self-efficacy based on the self-beliefs and thoughts held by individuals. These thoughts of achievement and success are reached by knowledge gained from previous experiences and by applying the necessary skill sets to overcome obstacles, barriers, and challenges. The second part included the motivational processes that result from the individual expectation that behavior produces positive results and in alignment with self-belief about the likelihood of goal attainment. The ability to achieve positive results based upon conquering a difficult challenge fosters the mechanism of motivation.

The third part included the affective processes that require individuals to control their actions when presented with threatening situations (Bandura, 1977, 2001). But once coping efficacy is strengthened, individuals can walk into similar situations with a stronger belief about being able to achieve success and persist. The fourth part involved the selection processes; as people’s perceived efficacy to fulfill educational requirements and occupational roles increase, they become exposed to the breadth of career options they can seriously consider pursuing and in which they have interest. As a result, they have the ability to prepare themselves educationally (Bandura, 1993). Therefore, since beliefs of self-efficacy are gained through individual experience and perceived self-efficacy is connected to individual career choice, looking through the lens of self-efficacy facilitated an understanding of why African American
males chose to enroll into MAT programs and how these African American male students make meaning of their life experiences.

The application of the above theories highlights the role of social integration on the success of African American males and the factors that impact this social integration and overall success. Situating Bandura’s self-efficacy theory within Strayhorn’s graduate student persistence theory provides a lens for exploring the experiences of African American males in MAT programs, the factors that impacted their motivation to enroll in these programs, and the social integration factors that influenced their persistence through degree completion.

Limitations

Because the study included only the experiences of the six African American males who agreed to participate, other experiences may not have been captured in this study due to African American males who either chose not to participate or who were not invited to participate by individuals within their institution who received the invitation email. The small sample may affect the transferability of the findings. African American males at other institutional types (i.e., HBCUs) and geographic locations might have different experiences.

Additionally, participants might not have chosen to disclose specific experiences due to biases and might have reduced the study’s confirmability. As the researcher, I am of African American descent with a completed a masters degree in education. My background and experiences could have possibly led to bias in data analysis. However, my biases and my credentials are situated in the reflexivity statement in Chapter 3.
Delimitations

This study was delimited to only the experiences of six African American males at PWIs. The study was also delimited to African American males in the southern, southwestern, and western regions of the United States.

Summary

This study focused on the experiences of a population whose voice is often absent from the literature by capturing the experiences of six African American males at a critical point in their educational journeys. Males, particularly African American males, typically do not make the decision to teach elementary education or postsecondary education at an early age in the same way women do (Smith et al., 2004). As children, these males’ career goals might include more male-dominated occupations such as medicine, law, firefighting, etc. (Brown & Butty, 1999). Focusing on African American males in MAT programs to develop support programs and resources is necessary if the field is to experience greater gender and racial diversity. Increasing the representations of African American male teachers will in turn provide children with role models from diverse experiences and knowledge in K-12 education.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The cultural demographics of the United States are becoming more diverse. Consequently, it is essential that K-12 teachers are representative of this population (Sethna, 2011). The numbers of African American males seeking degrees in teaching are extremely few (Lynn, 2006). With a teaching community dominated by White, middle class, and female teachers in a masters degree arena dominated by the White population, exploring the reasons why some African American males enroll in masters level teaching degrees is of the utmost importance to increasing the number of African American male teachers (Jones, 2011). This understanding might provide insight into influences that impact decisions to pursue a career in teaching. This understanding will could shed light essential strategies and approaches that are necessary to assist in the persistence of these individuals through K-12 career paths. The vast number of studies on African American males in higher education have disproportionately been focused on adjustment issues at predominantly White institutions (PWI), limited access and under representation, racism and discrimination, and high attrition and departure rates at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Bonner, 2000, 2001a, 2001b; Cuyjet, 1997, 1998; Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2005; Onwuegbuzie, 1999; Roach, 2001; Strayhorn, 2009).

According to Fries-Britt (1998), “the disproportionate focus on Black underachievement in the literature not only distorts the image of the community of Black collegians, it creates, perhaps unintentionally, a lower set of expectations for Black student achievement” (p. 556). The reasons why some African American males teach (Brown & Butty, 1999; James, 2002), the pedagogy practices of African American male teachers (Lynn, 2006), and enrollment into
principal preparation programs (Hernandez & McKenzie, 2010) and reading programs to enhance teachers’ ability to teach students (Dewitz, Jones, & Leahy, 2009; Kenney, 1977) have been studied. However, few researchers examined the experiences of African American males enrolled in graduate degree programs (Bickham-Chavers, 2003), and more specifically, in teaching-oriented masters’ programs (Jones, 2011).

Several areas of concern remain. Little is known about reasons why some African American males enroll into teaching programs at the masters level when all they need is a bachelor degree to teach. The African American male experience during masters degree program enrollment is unstudied. The factors attributed to African American males’ successes and motivation to complete a masters degree, when large percentages of them do not, need further scrutiny (Onwuegbuzie, 1999). According to Jones (2011), the African American male masters level teaching program experience has remained an unexplored topic within higher education. Since no theories have been designed to address this specific area, a blend of Strayhorn’s (2005, 2009a, 2009b) graduate student persistence theory and Albert Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory serve as the framework for exploring the experiences of African American males in master of arts in teaching (MAT) programs.

This chapter attends to the literature regarding the demographic cultural shift in the country and the need for seeking an advance degree. The chapter continues with issues African American males face in K-12, undergraduate, and graduate school experiences and causing lack of persistence. Additionally, the chapter highlights how education at the masters level is sought after and why only a small number of African American males enroll in masters level teaching programs. Also the literature review includes the value of African American male
teachers to the K-12 system. This chapter concludes with a description of how theory guided this study.

Cultural and Educational Shift

With the turn of the 21st century, minority races represented more than 33% of the U.S. population (CBS News, 2012). Prior to the 21st century African Americans represented approximately 25% of the school age children, but they now comprise around 47% (Onwuegbuzie, 1999). The Black or African American population is expected to increase from 41.2 million to 61.8 million U.S. residents from 2012 to 2060. Its share of the total population will rise from 13.1% in 2012 to 14.7% in 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

During the year 2043, the U.S. is projected to become a majority-minority nation. The minorities’ populations will be larger as a combined group than the population of Whites. While the non-Hispanic White population will remain the largest single group, no group will make up a majority of the population by itself. All in all, the total minority population could more than double from 116.2 million to 241.3 million between 2012 and 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Alongside the racial shifting of the population, a growth in educational attainment has occurred.

As of 2009, 30% of young Americans between 25 to 29 years of age had obtained at least a bachelors degree, a figure that grew 7% since 1990 (Kim, 2011). Increasingly college and university campus diversity has been affected. Within the last 20 years, the racial makeup of students attending colleges and universities in America has changed significantly (Brock, 2010). Since 1995, minority enrollment has grown from 22% to 29% of the nearly 17 million students on America’s college campuses (Porter, 2006).
Specifically, African Americans enrolling in and obtaining bachelors degrees increased from 13% in 1989 to 18% in 2008 (Kim, 2011). Between the year 1998 and 2008, the total number of masters degrees conferred rose by 51%. During that period, the number of African Americans earning degrees increased from 30,616 to 61,847 but still lagged behind Whites. The lag has been due to small increases in African American males receiving masters degrees. The percentage of African American males earning masters degrees rose only from 2.1% of the population in 1998 to 2.6% in 2008.

Within the education system, the process of learning begins at the K-12 level during which students learn values, leadership skills, and how to establish a solid foundation of knowledge. This learning continues through the undergraduate experience as they prepare to enter the workforce (Levine, 2006). Graduate education builds upon those undergraduate foundations and enables students to gain advanced knowledge and enhanced skill sets that secure their futures in the economy as well as desires for continued, or lifelong, learning (Wendler et al., 2010). Even though Wendler et al. (2010) estimated that about 2.5 million jobs by 2018 will require a masters, doctoral, or other advanced degree, not many African American males persist through to the masters level and finish their degree (Harper, 2005; Onwuegbuzie, 1999; Strayhorn, 2009). “Although greater access to higher education for students of color is an absolute imperative . . . ensuring their academic success and readiness to thrive in an interconnected world remains the ultimate goal” (Kim, 2011, p. i). In the global economy, obtaining a postsecondary education has become essential. More employers seek to diversify their staffs and ask employees to obtain post baccalaureate degrees. Therefore, educational
institutions need to close the gap in educational attainment by increasing the persistence of African American males (Kim, 2011; Sethna, 2011).

African American Males and the Educational Pipeline

K-12 to College Issues

The K-12 system is designed to help children develop skills for learning how to follow directions and abide by rules, interact with other school age children, and deal with authority (Apple, 1982; Spring, 1994). The K-12 system supposedly creates an environment that supports diversity and a welcoming environment for children of all cultures to learn. However, according to Hilliard (1991), in the K-12 system Black males are more likely than any other race to be labeled as children with behavior problems, to be categorized as less intelligent, and to be considered as less likely to succeed. African American males are punished at higher rates than children of other races, even if the issue at hand is truly inconsequential. According to Meier, Stewart, and England (1989), African American males receive detention and suspension from school at higher rates than children of any other race. Thus, the challenges for African American males emerge long before they have a chance to enter America’s higher educational system.

For many African American families education is seen as a way to escape impoverished environments and to make a better life for future generations (Noguera, 2003). Societal demands, social classes, disproportional disparity in educational teaching in K-12 schools, and lack of emotional support may cause African American males to struggle while aspiring to enter college (Cunningham, 2001). The African American male stereotypes portrayed within the media include a disparate range of images, such super athlete, criminal, gangster, or hyper-
sexed (Cunningham, 1993; Stevenson, 1997). These unrealistic images create multiple barriers for African American males looking for role models while living in broken family homes and poor neighborhoods and rising above the low expectations they face within their school environments (McLoyd, 1998). Co-curricular opportunities in K-12 include being on the debate team, serving as the newspaper editor, or participating in a club, but are inaccessible to African American males. According to Noguera (2003):

> Such activities are out of bounds not just because Black males may perceive them as being inconsistent with whom they think they are, but also because there simply are not enough examples of individuals who manage to participate in such activities without compromising their sense of self. (p. 445)

Even though the percentage of African American males stepping out of their comfort zones to become involved with various school related activities that are not sports is low, majority of these males are marginalized, viewed by their peers as selling out or acting White, and discouraged by teachers who are supposed to push and support them (Noguera, 2003). Noguera (2001) studied African American male high school seniors in northern California and found 90% of the males wanted to succeed and attend college; however, over 40% did not believe they had support from their White teachers. Noguera surmised that they need role models and teachers who looked like them to motivate them to attend college.

**Issues Faced During the Undergraduate Experience**

When examining literature on African American males, most of the topics revolve around persistence. One continuing challenge faced by many universities is how to retain African American males. According to King (2006), African American men in college are the
least likely student population to graduate. More than two thirds of all African American males who begin college never finish (Harper, 2005). African American men on college campuses face many hardships that hold them back from completing their college educations.

Cuyjet (1997) divided the factors that cause African American men not to graduate from college into the categories of those preventing them from even entering college in the first place and those leaving them somewhat academically underprepared in relation to their fellow students when they arrive on the college campus. For the African American males who do attend college, many feel overwhelmed and academically underprepared to succeed (Cuyjet, 1997). They feel this way due to inferior junior high and high school educations, academic underachievement, lower expectations for excelling academically that they receive from peers and significant adults, peer pressure, financial burdens that limit educational access, lack of appropriate role models, and other barriers related to racism (Jacoby, 1991). Additional challenges faced by these African American males include the ability to become involved in student organizations, find help from other students and student affairs, and establish supportive and long-lasting relationships with faculty and staff on campus (Strayhorn, 2008c). The Black males who do achieve and succeed rarely have the opportunity to tell their stories (Harper, 2005).

Instead, emphasis is usually placed on the plight of the African American male collegian, the reasons why he is underrepresented in postsecondary education, the academic difficulty he often encounters, the racism and stereotyping that cause him grief and frustration, his incompatibility with predominantly White learning environments, and
the shortage of same-race faculty and staff on whom he can rely for mentoring and support. (Harper, 2005, p. 9)

The value of having a role model has shown over time to be very important to the success of African American males within their educational experiences. Harper (2005) studied the experiences of 32 African American male students at six predominantly White institutions (PWI) and revealed that over half of the high-achieving participants who were on track to graduate admired an African American male adult teacher who guided them on their way either from high school or in college. Thus, the value and emphasis of having an African American male teacher for African American males struggling through the academic pathway is essential to their personal development and persistence.

According to Gordon, Gordon, and Nembhard (1994), inadequate education by itself is a symptom of a more ominous dilemma and may be a major cause of the problems of Black males. A common entreaty in the Black community is: “if only they [some Black person] could/would [finish high school, go to college, and get a graduate or professional degree], they could make it” (pp. 518-519). According to Tatum (2003), educators must reevaluate and develop better teacher preparation programs to address the image of and to better equip African American male youth with tools for academic success. “Research on African American males has been too limited in its scope,” and more research that highlights the positive experiences of African American males is needed to develop knowledge for addressing the issues facing the Black community (Gordon et al., 1994, p. 522).
Issues at the Graduate Degree Level

Many times individuals who have acquired graduate degrees are in a position not only to widen the boundaries of knowledge but also to teach and motivate students as leaders, role models, and mentors to up and coming youth. Unfortunately, African American students have been severely underrepresented among graduate students even though African American students aspire to higher levels of educational attainment than their White counterparts (Onwuegbuzie, 1999). A large gap exists between Black graduate students’ educational aspirations and their actual degree attainment (Onwuegbuzie, 1999). Several authors highlighted the statistics for African American graduate students but did not focus on issues of enrollment and persistence of African American male graduate students at the masters level (Banerji, 2006; Cerrito & Hook, 2006; Levin, 2008).

According to previous studies the number of African American males in graduate school programs decreased from 22.3% in 1999 to 17.7% in 2003 because of societal and education system barriers (Crockett et al., 2003; Eston, 2003; “Good Jobs, More Debt,” 2003; Levin, 2008; Tatum, 2003). Educational barriers faced by African American males include fears related to taking the Graduate Record Examination, meeting the grade point average requirements for graduate school admission, and, once in graduate school, maintaining the required grade point average to remain in the program (Thomas et al., 2007). Financial concerns regarding paying for graduate school and maintaining family obligations also prevent African American males from attaining a graduate education (Crockett et al., 2003).

Samuels, Ferber, and Herrera (2003) discussed how society believes African American males are not equipped to be successful in graduate school, leading various institutions to put
forth less effort to recruit these men for selective programs (Hall & Rowan, 2000). Levin (2008) reported on the experiences of 16 African American males prior to entering graduate school and revealed that various elements such as environmental factors, financial status, and academic related factors represented barriers for the African American males. Environmental factors referred to home environments, peer influences, and parental involvement. Financial status referred to receiving economic assistance through scholarships and government assistance through loans and grants.

Gravios (2007) interviewed an African American woman who discussed the reason why her brother did not complete his degree. The participant said, “One of the reasons he didn’t finish is because he ran out of funding . . . he was trying to work full time and pay for school and eventually didn’t complete his degree” (Gravios, 2007, p. 5). This example highlights particular issues that psychologically affect African American male graduate students enrolled at PWIs. Regardless of the support systems available for the success of African American males, if financial resources are not available, the support system resources become void as African American males will never have the opportunity to utilize them.

O’Brien (1990) discussed how these men have to mentally transition to the new status as a graduate student, figure out how to overcome a lack of adequate financial support in order to finance themselves through graduate studies, find adequate role models and mentors who share their best interests, overcome the lack of fellow students from the same ethnic background, and cope with perceived feelings of racial discrimination. Despite the barriers faced by African American males, some prevail and persist through their academic degree programs. Prosocial academic factors include high school teacher involvement, college
professor and academic counselor involvement, and accessible resources. According to Levin (2008), African American males feel society and the education system do not encourage African American males to pursue a college degree, even though Black male professors play important roles in encouraging Black males to obtain the masters degree. “African American male professors would be more willing to encourage African American male students to enroll in graduate programs, whereas Caucasian professors would be more apprehensive about encouraging the group to enroll” (Levin, 2008, p. 75).

Having a teacher who believes in the student, looks like the student, and motivates the student plays an imperative role in African American males’ entrance into graduate degree programs. Strayhorn and Devita (2009), in their study of 149 African American graduate student males, revealed that student-faculty interaction had a huge impact on aspirations to pursue a masters degree and to persist toward degree completion.

Given African American men’s lack of representation among the graduate ranks, relative to their White, Asian, and Black female counterparts, more work must be done to assist Black men as they negotiate their transition from high school to college, through college, and from college to graduate school. (Strayhorn, 2009, p. 139)

Brief History of Graduate Degree Programs

Over the course of time, the masters degree has received little praise for its accomplishments over its 350-year existence in the United States (Hammon, 1987). The birth of master, meaning teacher, degree programs dates back to the early 12th century when it was first offered at the University of Paris. During this period, the masters degree was held in high prestige, as many professors obtained their degree through 3 consecutive years of further
learning after the baccalaureate degree and defending a thesis (Rashdall, 1895). The masters degree was transported to colonial American colleges from Oxford and Cambridge and was established as a 3-year degree with no prescribed subjects and no residence requirements (Hammon, 1987). The masters degree made its way on the American shores around the mid-17th century at the nation’s first college, Harvard.

Students who received masters degrees assumed roles as teachers and were viewed as very noble and distinguished individuals (Conrad et al., 1993; Pelczar, 1979). However, toward the end of the 1700s and start of the 1800s, the masters degree lost status as a distinguished badge of honor to hold (Mayville, 1972; Storr, 1953). According to Morison (1936), “As late as 1825 the master of arts degree was, for example, awarded in course to any holder of a bachelors degree from Harvard who let three years elapse and paid a fee . . . all a Harvard man had to do for his masters degree was pay five dollars and stay out of jail” (p. 69). Several attempts were made to resurrect the distinguished honors of the masters degree; however, it was not until 1859, when the University of Michigan awarded its first earned masters degree, that the masters degree was renewed and established as an educational honorary achievement (Eells, 1963). As more and more universities began to develop, graduate enrollment increased from 200 students nationwide in 1870 to 2,400 students in 1890 (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Finally, during the last part of the 19th century, “the earned masters degree—described by historians primarily as scholarly degree in the liberal arts and sciences” and designed for college teachers, finally begin to spread to other disciplines for its intended purpose (Conrad et al., 1993, p. 6).
Masters in Education

During the late 19th century, the masters degree began to showcase a new purpose as its focus shifted to various disciplines; thus birthing the masters in education, later known as the master of arts degree, which highlighted the growing emphasis on the “professionalization of primary and secondary teachers” (Conrad et al., 1993, p. 7). According to Brubacher and Rudy (1976), “the masters degree had practically become standardized in America as the badge of the secondary school teacher by the 1920s” (p. 194). The influx of the master of arts in teaching (MAT) thoroughly reflected the exponential growth of higher education. Factors such as the growing desire of high school teachers to further their education and the development of summer schools allowed K-12 teachers to pursue graduate work during their off-seasons and contributed to the expansion of MAT degrees during this time period (Snell, 1965).

According to Cohen and Kisker (2010), although many K-12 teachers were required to hold a bachelors degree in a subject area, “a fifth year of coursework or a masters degree in education had become prevalent” (p. 327). Becoming a teacher in most states does not require a masters in education or the MAT, but many aspiring teachers still desire an advanced teaching degree to further their knowledge. Some teachers pursue their masters to potentially earn more money as well as establish themselves as a highly qualified expert in their field (“Master of Arts in Teaching,” 2013).

The MAT degree focuses on the advanced coursework in a specific academic discipline, which enhances an individual’s knowledge in that particular subject area (Johns Hopkins School of Education, 2013). The MAT focuses primarily on the advancement of an individual’s teaching career and is often pursued by people who want hands-on teaching experience and seek to
work directly with students. The MAT focuses heavily on advanced coursework around pedagogical theory and implementation in a specific subject to sharpen one’s expertise.

Essentially, receiving a MAT degree teaches people how to be teachers through various forms of methodology and stylistic approaches with hands on experience in classrooms interacting with students (“Master of Arts in Teaching,” 2013). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008), education has become the leader in masters degrees conferred at just below 30% of all masters degrees conferred. Additionally, in the 2009-2010 school year, 182,139 individuals enrolled in degree programs representing the field of education, a figure up about 20% from the previous year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Even though the number of students attending masters in education degree programs increased, African American students still lagged behind their White counterparts. Specifically, African American enrollments in education at the masters level were 19,258, but the White population’s enrollment was 138,974. When broken down by sex, African American males only made up less than 30% of the African Americans total masters-level enrollment.

African American Males in Education

For some African Americans, majoring in education is seen as a proud tradition of being able to give back to their communities as a teacher (Gasman, Hirschfeld, &Vultaggio, 2008). According to Gravois (2007), “many African-Americans see their presence in education as a proud legacy—a sign that those who have succeeded academically” and moved onward past the bachelors degree have addressed the enrollment and education issues plaguing the Black community (p. 3). However, not many African American males decide to become teachers (Brown & Butty, 1999). Although much of the literature in examining the reasons why African
American males enroll into masters teaching programs is very limited, I explored the reasons why African American males decide to enter the teaching field.

The limited number of African American male teachers is a rising challenge for America’s K-12 educational systems. More studies to “explore the experiences of African American male teachers” are needed to attack the issues of retention of this population and assist with improving the educational achievement of Black youth (King, 1993, p. 115), because fewer are entering the teaching profession (Graham, 1987; King, 1993). The Harris and Metropolitan Life Foundation (1987) revealed that 33% to 50% of African American teachers entering the field will leave within 5 years, and male teachers are more likely to think about departure from education than women.

Although historically education has been a field in which African Americans were allowed to work (Gravois, 2007), with the opening up of alternative career opportunities, many African American males have explored other career avenues to make money and provide for their families. In a review of educational research, King (1993) revealed that African American males do not enter into the field of education because of the lack of prestige, low salaries, difficult working conditions, lack of upward mobility, and the lure of other more lucrative career opportunities. Fultz (1995) lamented that although salary was a leading factor as to why African American males do not enter the field of teaching, hegemonic forces to keep males out of schools is also strong. Mabokela and Madsen (2003) found that African American male teachers are labeled early in their careers as unable to provide children with emotional safety and are categorized as threatening and hostile to other teachers as well as the students’ parents, regardless of whether such perceptions are true or not.
Smith et al. (2004) studied 38 African-American male honor students from five high schools in Indiana and discovered that African American males in the K-12 system had a very negative perception of a career in teaching. These negative perceptions arose out of lack of African American male role models at their schools, lack of career awareness, lack of positive information regarding the profession, and lack of encouragement to enter the field. Continually, African American males are not equipped with the proper tools, receive very little training when it comes to teaching various subjects at the bachelors level, remain unrewarded for their efforts, and rarely are provided with methods for dealing with various aggressive actions displayed by students (Samuels, Ferber, & Herrera, 2003). King (1993) discussed inadequate educational preparation as a reason for many males choosing not to enter the field of teaching. Many of King’s participants believed that incoming teachers are not thoroughly prepared to be effective teachers within the K-12 system.

This may be an indictment of the educational system, which may not be adequately counseling individuals about the academic requirements necessary to pursue a teaching career . . . it may be an indicator of an inadequate recruitment process to teaching which has not made clear the steps necessary to enter the profession, including such possibilities as one-year masters programs. (King, 1993, p. 486)

Lynn (2006) studied the experiences of three African American males in the state of California. The African American males discussed how they did not learn how to deal with and relate to the students they served during their undergraduate teacher education programs, but they did learn many methods through their advanced degree programs.
As African American male students continue to pursue opportunities for development, it is essential that they equip themselves with the tools to be successful teachers within their classrooms (Brown & Butty, 1999; Futrell, 1999). Brown and Butty (1999) concluded that to prepare and retain more African American male teachers, educational leaders need to look beyond the bachelors degree and “encourage these men to further their degrees in education” in order to effectively teach within the K-12 system (p. 290). King (1993) argued that without obtaining graduate degrees in education, African American males are likely unable to pursue teaching careers. However, the African American males who do become teachers see themselves as responsible for the education of Black youth in order to improve the students’ desires to achieve college degrees and to improve overall quality of life (Adair, 1984; Franklin, 1990; King, 1993; Weiler, 1990).

There are various perspectives on the importance of having African American male teachers reflect on the value they bring to African American students as role models seeking to influence students’ mindsets toward success. African American students need teachers who understand their identity development processes, can teach them about the African American experience, and believe they can become successful (Alexander & Miller, 1989; King, 1993; McLoyd, 1998). Developing this strong connection with these students helps improve their desire and establishes a passion for the youth to take charge of their own educational attainment (Foster, 1990). African American male teachers are not only important within the environments encasing Black youth but are also instrumental in increasing the number of African American male students who graduate from high school and connect with a positive role model or mentor (Sethna, 2011).
Additionally, successful African American male teachers understand the value and importance of their role in strengthening the educational pipeline problem (Sethna, 2011). Brown and Butty (1999) emphasized that African American teachers and students are linked culturally for “enhanced communication, effective instruction, and positive teacher affect” (p. 282). Other researchers supported the claim that African American male teachers on campus increase Black male students’ academic and social development, decrease inappropriate sex-role socialization, and reduce maladaptive masculine identity formation (Cunningham, 1993; King 1993; Lynn, 2006).

Recently African American males provided their views about teaching and their reasons for entering the field in two separate studies by Lynn et al. (1999) and Motley (1999). Both authors highlighted the value of the Black men’s presence within school as having a positive effect on African American male students’ academic achievement. James (2002) concluded that African American male teachers have a fiery desire or passion to dedicate themselves to a life of teaching in order to invoke social change. With the passion for change in mind, the theoretical implications provided by the literature bear consideration for practitioners, educators, and policy makers.

Synthesizing Theory

Although very little about the experiences of African American males in MAT programs is known, these students do face various individual, institutional, and societal challenges within in higher education (Strayhorn, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Combining theories created a theoretical lens to understand the phenomenological experiences of Black male graduate students in MAT programs. “Blended frameworks of this sort are useful; they allow researchers to see in new
and different ways what seems to be overly complex or unambiguously familiar” (Strayhorn, 2009b, p. 125). This blended framework looked through the lens of Strayhorn’s (2005) graduate student persistence and Albert Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory.

Graduate Student Persistence Theory

Strayhorn (2009a) built graduate student persistence theory upon the foundational elements of Tinto’s (1993) theory. Strayhorn employed concepts about social interaction and an individual’s ability to connect personal values and beliefs with the surrounding environment in order to establish a level of comfort that could aid persistence. Tinto described social integration as the way students interact with peers, staff, and faculty members outside of the physical classroom environment. Tinto and Strayhorn noted that African American male students greatly need social integration to persist, and incongruence with the social environment often makes it difficult for these men to connect with and feel like a member of the campus community. Tinto believed that the social integration component of a relationship with a faculty member was very helpful for African American males. Having someone who believes in them, sometimes looks like them, and pushes them academically to reach new heights and not give up aids African American male students to persist and even consider graduate. Veal et al. (2012) studied 16 ethnically diverse graduate nursing students at a Midwestern university and found missed opportunities to socialize formally and informally outside the classroom sustained students’ negative feelings about the program and increased their levels of stress and thoughts about dropping out.

Holdaway (1997) sought to answer why some graduate students persist while others do not. Holdaway found students lacking the ability to get along with committee members,
patience for the time required for degree completion, and connection to the campus community were unlikely to graduate. However, social integration led to positive outcomes for the students. “Social integration was the fabric that held the community of scholars together,” and relationships with faculty members were key in assisting the students toward retention and graduation (Holdaway, 1997, p. 325).

Girves and Wemmerus (1998) found that African American male masters students with positive relationships with their faculty members persisted. “The support and encouragement faculty provide may indeed motivate students to perform well” (Girves & Wemmerus, 1998, p. 184). Strayhorn (2009b) concluded “graduate student persistence theory is a function of student’s attributes and external commitments” as well as of the commitments from their faculty, staff, and campus community to support student persistence (p. 127). In order for African American male students to persist, they need a high level of social integration to take place in the form of connections between faculty members and themselves (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Strayhorn, 2009b; Veal et al., 2012).

Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy can play a pivotal role accomplishing personal goals and objectives. Self-efficacy pertains to individuals’ beliefs about their own capabilities and whether or not they can control their thoughts and actions and affect their lives positively and prosocially. Efficacy beliefs influence the way people think, feel, utilize motivation, and interact with the world. According to Bandura et al. (1996):

Such beliefs influence aspirations and strength of goal commitments, level of motivation and perseverance in the face of difficulties and setbacks, resilience to adversity, quality
of analytic thinking, casual attributions for success and failures, and vulnerability to stress and depression. (p. 1206)

As students’ self-efficacy beliefs increase, they become more focused on their occupational pursuits, and the level of effort they put forth in reaching their goals increases (Bandura, 1993; 1996; 2001). Self-efficacy beliefs lead students to achieve wide ranges of effects through cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes.

Cognitive processes. The cognitive process relates to self-efficacy based on the self-beliefs and thoughts held by individuals. Most human behavior is entrenched around the ideal of personal goal setting, which is only achieved through an individual’s self-appraisal of achieving the task. “The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goal challenges people set for themselves and the firmer is their commitment to them” (Bandura, 1993, p. 118). These goals are achieved through individuals’ abilities and skill levels and through gaining knowledge based upon life experiences. However, the difference between possessing knowledge and skills and being able to conduct the task at hand is based upon the difficulty level of the environment (Bandura, 1993). Therefore, when individual reach personal goals, they use both skill and increased levels of self-beliefs and efficacy to be able to use those skills effectively. Thus, a person may perform poorly, with mediocrity, or well depending on their “fluctuations in self-efficacy thinking” (Bandura, 1993, p. 119).

In order for individuals to master multiple levels of self-efficacy, they must first work at improving their reactions to the events that affect their lives. According to Bandura (1993), in order to accomplish this task, individuals must first draw upon previously acquired knowledge to address the current situation or problem at hand. Next, they must test and revise their
judgments about how to approach the situation by recalling which factors worked in the past and how well they were tested and duplicating the pathway to the solution. “Perceived self-efficacy influences performance both directly and through its strong effects on goal setting and analytic thinking. Personal goals, in turn, enhance performance attainments through analytic strategies” (Bandura, 1993, p. 128). As self-efficacy increases, individual students seek out challenges and opportunities to expand their knowledge in order to attain personal improvement and greater self-efficacy.

Motivational processes. According to Bandura (1991), motivation plays a significant role in increasing self-efficacy. Motivation is brought to life through inner thoughts. People motivate themselves based upon their inner personal beliefs about performing the task at hand. They formulate likely outcomes based upon various possible scenarios of their actions. They set goals for themselves and create action plans aimed to accomplish valued futures and objectives (Bandura, 1993). “Forethought is translated into incentives and appropriate action through self-regulatory mechanisms” (p. 128). Therefore, motivation is a result of the individual expectation that behavior produces positive results as aligned with self-belief incapability leading to goal attainment. The ability to achieve positive results based upon conquering a difficult challenge fosters the mechanism of motivation. Thus, self-efficacy contributes to individuals’ motivation levels based on goals. Motivation is the level of effort needed to accomplish the task, the ability to persist in a challenging climate, and the ability to rebound following failures. This circular process between motivation and self-efficacy is continually repeated as individuals find new challenges that push their abilities to new heights.
Human motivation relies on discrepancy production as well as discrepancy reduction. It requires proactive control as well as reactive feedback control. People motivate and guide their actions through proactive control by setting themselves challenging goals that create a state of disequilibrium. (Bandura, 1993, p. 132)

**Affective processes.** The affective process of self-efficacy requires controlling actions when presented with threatening situations. When people try to cope with the threatening situations around them, serious side effects such as high blood pressure, increased stress, immune system declines, or dropping out of school and not completing their educational process can result (Bandura, 1988). But once coping efficacy is strengthened, individuals can respond to a similar situation with a stronger belief about being able to achieve success and persist. “Perceived coping self-efficacy regulates avoidance behavior as well as anxiety arousal. The stronger the instilled sense of coping self-efficacy, the bolder people are in taking on taxing and threatening activities” (Bandura, 1988, p. 83).

**Selection processes.** Self-efficacy relates to the selection process of how people are products of their environments. For example, career choices and aspirations are influenced by personal efficacy. Research with adults has revealed that beliefs of personal efficacy have a huge effect on their choice of occupational pursuits and development (Bandura, 1997; Betz & Hackett, 1986; Hackett, 1995; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). According to Bandura (2001):

The higher people’s perceived efficacy to fulfill educational requirements and occupational roles, the wider the career options they seriously consider pursuing, the greater the interest they have in them, the better they prepare themselves
educationally for different occupational careers, and the greater their staying power in
challenging career pursuits. (p. 188)

Focusing on improving the persistence and success of African American male graduate
students who enroll in MAT programs at PWIs requires support from faculty, administrators,
and the academy as a whole. Self-efficacy plays a role in the choice to enroll into the MAT
program. Presumably, African American males have a high level of perceived efficacy about
their career choices that aligns with their personal values and beliefs. Their chances to persist
revolve around being socially integrated within the university through their various interactions
with university faculty and staff as well as with their classmates. Therefore, viewing the
phenomenon through the lens of graduate student persistence and self-efficacy assisted me
with understanding the experiences of African American males in MAT programs.

Conclusion

As the country continues undergoing a dramatic demographic and culture shift so does
higher education, particularly in the field of teacher education. Although the number of
students enrolling in educational programs, particularly at the masters level has been
increasing, African Americans lag behind their White counterparts. Specifically, African
American males lag the farthest behind all ethnicities and females in enrollment and
persistence. For the disheartened graduate student, such as the African American male, with a
history of difficult setbacks or challenges in academic contexts, the level of academic challenge
combined with immediate environmental disconnections engender behavioral responses of
despondency and apathy and may lead to non-degree completion. Therefore, regardless of
African American male students’ initial expectations for academic success when they enter
graduate programs, program persistence and resulting academic development is tied to self-beliefs, actions, and relationships built with faculty, particularly with those who look the African American students and who could share similar experiences (Gasman et al., 2008).

Through institution-wide efforts to improve the academic and social experiences of African American male graduate students, it may be possible to achieve the goal of increasing African American male graduate student enrollment, retention, and degree completion and move closer to ameliorating the “dry pipeline.” (Gasman, Hirschfeld, & Vultaggio, 2008, p. 136)

Chapter 3 includes the research design and methodology used to conduct this study. I also discuss participant selection, data collection procedures, and plans for data analysis.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Schwandt (1997) defined methodology as “the theory of how inquiry should proceed, it involves analysis of the principles and procedures in a particular field of inquiry” (p. 93). The methodology used for this study answered the following two research questions:

1. What are the prevailing factors that influence African American male students to enroll into a master of arts in teaching (MAT) program?

2. What are the primary factors that influence African American male students’ persistence in MAT programs?

This chapter includes the research design, philosophical worldview, and strategies of inquiry. Additionally, the researcher’s role and research methods are discussed. The population and participant selection, data collection, instrumentation, and data analysis are explained. Lastly, trustworthiness and ethical considerations are discussed before the conclusion to the chapter.

Research Design

Phenomenological research was used for this qualitative study. Creswell (2007) defined qualitative research as “the means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Creswell asserted that qualitative research enables the examination of naturally occurring, complex phenomena. Lichtman (2006) concurred that the purpose of qualitative research is to “provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human experience” or social interactions (p. 8). Qualitative researchers tend to ask why questions to attain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon or experience (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Additionally, qualitative researchers attempt to gain a holistic
view or insight into the details of a situation’s dynamics (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). As Lichtman (2006) observed, “qualitative research relies on studying the whole of things” (p. 9). Jones (2011) urged colleges of education to explore and research the African American males’ life experiences in MAT programs to strengthen the pipeline of role models, mentors, and sources of inspiration for the young African American men.

Utilizing qualitative methodology required recruiting African American male students in master of arts in teaching (MAT) programs. They had the opportunity to share their holistic, lived experiences as such related to involvement in MAT programs. The prevailing circumstances that influenced their decisions to enroll into such programs and the primary influences that impacted their educational persistence were investigated. The narratives of the six African American males enrolled in MAT programs provided context for other researchers seeking to understand how and why African American men choose teacher preparation programs. The authentic voices of this population were essential understanding the educational success of the African American males in teaching preparation programs.

Philosophical Worldview

Social constructivism is a worldview in which “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). The goal of this research was to “rely as much as possible on the participants’ view of the situation” (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). In this case, I sought to understand how African American males in MAT degree programs subjectively make meaning and negotiate their experiences as manifested in phenomenological research which is based on individuals describing their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).
Strategies of Inquiry

Strategies of inquiry are approaches to inquiry and research methodologies (Mertens, 1998) and “provide specific direction for procedures in a research design” (Creswell, 2007, p. 11). Phenomenological research is defined as “a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 13). The most appropriate strategy for this study was phenomenology because I explored the “different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of and various phenomena in the world around them” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 82). Phenomenology is referred to as both a philosophy and a method due to its focus on understanding participants’ lived experiences (Creswell, 2007).

Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, produced writings that served as a foundation to introduce an alternative style of research that spread throughout Europe during the 20th century (Lichtman, 2006). Phenomenologist generally assume that human beings have some commonality between their perceptions of their experiences; how they interpret similar experiences; and how they seek to identify, understand, and describe experiential commonalities (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). This commonality of perception or essence is what researchers want to identify and describe in phenomenological research. In doing so, researchers study:

Multiple perceptions of the phenomenon as experiences by difference people, and by then trying to determine what is common to these perceptions and reactions. This
searching for the essence of an experience is the cornerstone—the defining characteristic—of phenomenological research. (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003, p. 437)

Thus, phenomenology was used for understanding the experiences of the six African American males’ journeys throughout their MAT programs.

Researcher’s Role

In phenomenological research, the researcher is a primary instrument for data collection and analysis of the study (Merriam, 2001). According to Locke (2000), two formal threats to qualitative research are research bias and the effect of the researcher on the setting/participants. As the researcher, I must identify my own personal biases, values, and personal interests of the topic of study. As an African American male doctoral-level graduate student, I must be careful not to lead the participants’ representations of their experiences toward reasoning biased by my personal experiences.

Digital audio recordings and member checking were used to ensure all participants’ statements were reported and analyzed accurately. “When a researcher is able to build trust and rapport, the conversation and dialogue with the interviewee can be more meaningful to the topic under study” (Richards, 2007, p. 87). Therefore, I established comfortable interview environments and listened actively and carefully to the participants as they told their stories.

Research Methods

Settings

This study was conducted at five institutions within the southern, southwestern, and western regions of the United States. For purposes of this study, I named the five institutions: (a) the University of Lender, (b) Bisquete State, (c) Lobu University, (d) University of South
Benton, and (e) University of Cyclone Station. The five schools were selected purposefully; each of them offered the MAT. Table 1 depicts the five campuses’ demographics as related to the purpose of this study. To protect the identity of the participants and institution, exact numbers were not provided in the table; only values rounded to the nearest thousand or nearest hundred were used as approximations.

Table 1

**Demographics at Studied Institutions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Total # of Students</th>
<th>Total # of Graduate Students</th>
<th>Total # of Master African American Males</th>
<th>Total # of Students in the Master C&amp;I Program</th>
<th>Total # of Faculty of Color</th>
<th>Total # of Credits for Degree Completion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Lender</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>*N/A</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of South Benton</td>
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<td>1,000</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1,000</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>*N/A</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisqute State</td>
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<td>35</td>
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<td>Lobu University</td>
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<td>*N/A</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>50-54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *N/A as not available, because additional IRB approval was needed by the institution listed for this information.

Population

The selected population was African American males between the ages of 23 to 56 years old. This age range was chosen based on national statistics reporting the same range for the average age of African American men in masters degree programs. Participant selection, as discussed below, resulted in interviews with African American males in MAT programs within the southern, southwestern, and western regions of the United States. I focused solely on the experiences of African American male students enrolled in the second semester or beyond in an
MAT program at one of the five respective institutions. The men within the study self-identified as African American.

Participant Selection

A purposeful sample used for the selection of the participants of this study. According to Patton (1990), purposeful sampling is based on the supposition that the researcher wants to ascertain, comprehend, and obtain information from whom the most can be learned. This targeted selection process allowed the researcher to gain rich information and in-depth data for the study. “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2009, p. 178). To aligning the research questions with the overall purpose of this study, the participants were selected if they were enrolled in a second semester or beyond; were a graduate student, male, and African American; and enrolled in one of the five schools’ MAT programs. Professional contacts were used as key informants to identify prospective participants who met the criteria of this study. More specifically, I sent invitation emails (see Appendix A) to 108 department heads and program coordinators of the individual MAT programs in the southern, southwestern, and western regions. Out of the 108 institutions I contacted, only 50 responded. Out of the 50 respondents, over 60% (i.e., over 30 schools) did not have one single African American male in their MAT program.

As department heads and program coordinators learned about this study, a snowball sampling technique was able to be used. The invitation emails sent to department heads and program coordinators included the criteria for participating in this study, a brief description of the study, data collection procedures, and my contact information. The invitation email
requested the contact, or directory, information (i.e., name and email) of any interested African American males currently enrolled in the respective university MAT programs.

One program coordinator suggested I put my study on the national MAT organization’s list serve and emailed me the person to contact. Once I was granted access to the list serve, I posted my study and received contacts from four individuals. Two individuals who served as department heads at their institutions emailed me and told me, “Although we don’t have any males that fit your study, I would like to read your study once you finish because it sounds very interesting.” The other two individuals contacted me and told me they would forward my study inquiry to men fitting the criteria for participation. I was eventually contacted by one African American male who did participant in the study as the result of these efforts.

After the names and e-mails were obtained from the professional contacts, I sent an invitation email directly to all prospective participants (see Appendix B). The approval of the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board (No. 13408) was granted before I contacted any African American males on the contact list. The recruitment email text explained the nature of the research and information regarding the interview process and requirements for participating in the study. Interested individuals who met the criteria were asked to reply by email and to indicate their willingness to participate. They were asked to provide a convenient day and time to participate in a face-to-face or Skype interview within the time frame of this study.

Prior to the start of any data collection, participants’ right to confidentiality were fully explained, and they received, reviewed, and signed the informed consent form. At the end of the interview, the participants were asked to identify others who might be interested in
participating in this study and all participation was voluntary. After the extensive participant recruitment process, I interviewed a total of six African American male participants.

Data Collection

Creswell (2007) asserted that all data falls into the four basic categories of “observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials” (p. 129). Interviewing is one of the major ways qualitative researchers collect data about their study (Creswell, 2007). Data were collected by a demographic questionnaire completed by participants and a semi-structured interview conducted with the participants either face-to-face or by Skype.

For students who chose to participate in the face-to-face interview, prior to the start of each interview each participant was asked to review and sign the consent form (see Appendix C) and complete a short demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D). Next, the face-to-face interview took place. For participants who choose to participate in the Skype interview, I emailed them the consent form; then, they signed the consent form and demographic questionnaire and emailed the two forms back to me prior to beginning the Skype interview. Next, the Skype interview took place at the appointed date and time.

The semi-structured interviews followed the collection of demographic data from the six participants. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2003), semi-structured interviews consist of “a series of questions designed to elicit specific answers on the part of respondents” (p. 456). Researchers can perform a variety of techniques, but at the heart of qualitative research is the desire to expose the human part of a story (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Implementing the interview method in person or via Skype allowed for the exploration of various aspects of the African American males’ educational experiences.
Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix E). During each interview, I asked follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding of the African American male’s experiences. In order to capture the fullness of the interviews, each interview was audio-recorded. I engaged in note taking procedures in the event of technological difficulties and to capture observations and information useful to the data analysis process, and I wrote in a reflexive journal in addition to taking interview notes. Each interview was transcribed verbatim.

Instrumentation

Demographic Questionnaire

I used a demographic questionnaire to obtain participants’ background data. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2003), “background or demographic questions are routine sorts of questions about the background characteristics of the respondents” (p. 458). The questionnaire asked for each participant’s age, bachelor degree obtained, and additional background information. Demographic data enabled the acquisition of a broad understanding of the overall experiences of African American males enrolled in MAT degree programs. Additionally, information obtained from the demographic questionnaire complemented the information gathered from the interviews and was essential in the data analysis process, because the goal of qualitative research is to obtain as much information about each participant as possible. This information provided a context for each participant prior to his interview.
Interview Protocol

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) stated that “the analysis of narratives can provide a critical way of examining not only key actors and events but also cultural conventions and social norms” (p. 80). The interview protocol laid the foundation for producing rich data pertaining to the research questions. The semi-structured interview protocol included questions to ask the students about their experiences in the program. The interview questions comprised questions regarding the students’ motivations for pursuing the MAT, experiences that shaped their overall development, and perceptions regarding their role as an African American male in the K-12 system. Questions focused on their experiences, behaviors, opinions, values, and feelings (Patton, 1990). More specifically, the interview protocol included the following questions: (a) what is your purpose of pursuing a degree? (b) What experiences have helped shape your development? (c) What motivating factors—both internal and external—assisted you in pursuing a master degree? (d) What factors have assisted in your persistence through your degree program? (e) How do you view your role in the K-12 system?

Data Analysis

Lichtman (2006) offered two ways to conceptualize data analysis in qualitative research: (a) identifying themes and (b) telling stories. “The goal of qualitative analysis is to take a large amount of textual data that may be cumbersome and without any clear meaning and interact with it in such a manner [to] make sense of” all data gathered (p. 166). The aim of the data analysis is to allow the themes to create a structural description of an educational journey or experience. In order to take the raw data from the interviews and formulate it into substantial material, I followed the Lichtman’s (2006) five step model detailed in the subsections below.
Step 1: Initial Coding

I navigated between all of the responses to gain a central idea of the responses. I read through each transcribed interview. I began to write in the margins themes that emerged.

Step 2: Revisiting Initial Coding

I revisited the data by looking at the themes to see if they made sense and fit the meaning provided by the students during the interview. I began thinking about the common themes emerging during this process.

Step 3: Developing an Initial List of Categories or Central Ideas

I reviewed the data, categorized emergent themes, and determined whether they encompassed one main or central concept to explain the phenomenon.

Step 4: Modifying the Initial List

I sorted through the data, pulled out common themes, and placed the themes into categories thought to support the research questions. I modified the categories by eliminating those that failed to indicate much relevance to the research purpose.

Step 5: Revisiting Categories

I reexamined the selected categories and began to align the categories into themes for generating successful concepts. I used these concepts to finalize the common themes. I also formed a coherent, common picture that could illustrate clearly the individual stories of the African American males.

Trustworthiness

Credibility

Triangulation, reflexive journaling, and member checks are used to establish credibility (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; Glesne, 1999; Shenton, 2004). Regarding triangulation, the multiple
data sources included a demographic questionnaire, participant interviews, observations, and researcher memos and journaling. According to Creswell (2009), “recording of documents and visual materials can be based on the researcher’s structure for taking notes. Typically, notes reflect information about the document or other material as well as key ideas in the documents” (p. 181). Credibility is established through member checking, after the interview process (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 1999). The transcribed interviews are returned to the participants to review for accuracy.

Member checking was used, and the participants had opportunities to make any necessary changes to their transcribed interviews and to revise their words as necessary. However, each participant gave minimal feedback regarding his transcribed interview. In fact, only four of the African American males responded to the email they received with their transcribed interview attached. The comments stated from the participants were, “Looks good,” “Great job,” or “Man, I didn't know I talked that much, but good job.” This led me to two possible conclusions: (a) I conducted a thoroughly accurate and detailed transcribing process or (b) the males did not have time to read through their interviews completely due to homework, taking care of their families, work priorities, or other activities.

Reflexive journal entries contained my thoughts, reactions, and observations for each interview. After each interview, I reflected over my notes in order to ensure my own understanding what the participants discussed. While reflecting over each interview’s notes, I thought about participant body language and physical responses. During the data analysis phase, I used my journal entries as a form of “progressive subjectivity [for] monitoring [my] own developing constructions” (Shenton, 2004, p. 68).
Finally, I provided the themes that emerged during data analysis to the participants for final review and comment (Glesne, 1999). Again, I received very little feedback from the participants regarding the themes that emerged from the study. The comments I received from the participants were “I totally agree with you,” “Looks good,” and “Can’t wait to read your final copy.” This led me to believe that the themes emerged from the data represented their stories accurately.

Transferability

In discussing transferability within qualitative research, Shenton (2004) stated that the researcher must “ensure that sufficient contextual information about the fieldwork sites is provided to enable the reader to make such a transfer” (p. 69). I carefully and clearly described the recruitment and data collection strategies and procedures. Additionally, contextual information, rich thick descriptions, actual participant quotations, and theoretical framework allow readers to determine the suitability of transferring findings to their own environments and contexts (Shenton, 2004).

Dependability

Shenton (2004) proposed that in qualitative research dependability is established through a thorough accounting of the research process, “thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain same results” (p. 71). In addressing this aspect of dependability, I explained in detail the overall methodology, research design, recruitment procedures and strategies, data collection methods, and data analysis strategies to be utilized.
Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings of the study are “the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). Through my reflexivity statement, I highlighted and bracketed my experiences as a member of the population of this study as such pertained to my biases and experiences. Additionally, measures were taken during data analysis to ensure confirmability. The presentation of the results included direct quotes from the participants which were traced back directly to the original transcripts. Additionally, an audit trail was established across my original transcriptions, reflexive journal entries, and researcher memos (Glesne, 1999).

Ethical Considerations

It was extremely important to ensure the protection of the participants’ confidentiality. Creswell (2003) described several significant ethical areas of concern when conducting social research with voluntary participants. Some of these ethical issues included not harming the participants, maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of the identity of each participant, identifying the researcher, analyzing, and reporting all facets of the research, and abiding by codes of professional ethics. Prior to the start of this study, approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Texas.

Prior to data collection, the participants read the informed consent information that was also thoroughly explained to each of them. The students were also informed of their right to stop the study at any time and/or not to answer any question about which they did not feel comfortable. Participants understood their participation to be voluntarily and they had the
right to withdraw at any time; the participants were not coerced into participating (Creswell, 2002). Written permission via the consent form was obtained from each participant of the study.

To ensure confidentiality, the purpose of the study and the requirements of the participants were explained thoroughly. Personal and identifiable information such as names and institutional affiliations were not used in presenting the findings. Pseudonyms were used for both the participants’ names and their institutional affiliations. For purposes of this study, the five institutions were masked and labeled as the University of Lender, Bisquete State, Lobu University, University of South Benton, and University of Cyclone Station.

Conclusion

This chapter included the specific methodological details of the study designed to convey the lived experiences of six African American male MAT students. Qualitative methodology was engaged to gain insights into the African American males’ MAT experiences. Six African American males were interviewed for this study. Interviews were conducted at five institutions in the southern, southwestern, and western regions of the United States to determine why the African American men chose to enroll into these programs and what internal and external factors motivate them to persist in their respective MAT programs. The interviews were recorded. The data was analyzed and transcribed. Member checks were made. The results were compiled and are reported in Chapter 4.
The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of current African American males enrolled in a master of arts in teaching (MAT) program. The exploration of this population included a detailed investigation to answer the following research questions:

1. How do African American male students describe the factors that influenced them to enroll in a MAT program?
2. How do African American male students describe the primary factors that influenced them to persistence in MAT programs?

As described in Chapter 3, data were drawn from participants’ individual, semi-structured interviews and demographic survey responses.

This chapter highlights the experiences of the six African American males in their own voices. More specifically, the findings emphasize the experiences of African American males in MAT programs at predominantly White institutions (PWI) and their reasons for enrolling and persisting through programs designed to prepare them to teach in the K-12 system. Although the males interviewed in this study represented multiple institutions, they shared similar experiences. In this chapter, the findings for the above research questions are discussed.

Research Procedure

I explored the phenomenological experiences of six African American males currently enrolled in MAT programs in the southern, southwestern, and western regions of the United States. The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to gain an understanding of how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences. This process translated into “gathering
‘deep’ information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions, and participant observation” as it related to the way participants described their experiences (Lester, 1999, p. 1). Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual. The researcher listens to the participant’s story, watch’s the participant’s body language, and describe the feelings presented by the participant during the interviewing process (Creswell, 2007).

In order to recruit participants to participate, 108 colleges and universities in the U.S with MAT programs were contacted, only a total of 50 schools responded. Over 60% of the MAT programs contacted did not have a single African American male enrolled. The program directors of 40% of the MAT programs with enrolled African American male students sent out emails to their students who fit the criteria and asked them to participate in the study.

A total of 10 students from these programs responded and said they were interested in participating in the study. After multiple email exchanges, only six African American males followed through with participation. One interview was held face-to-face, while the other five where conducted through Skype. Each participant signed the consent form and completed the demographic survey prior to the beginning of the interview. After completion of the survey, a 30 to 40 minute semi-structured interview took place.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. After analysis, the list of themes was sent to each participant to ensure that the contents reflected the personal experiences they had described. All six participants were in support of the themes. Table 2 provides brief background information about each participant.
Table 2

Participants’ Background Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>University Location</th>
<th>University Type</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Program Semester</th>
<th>Bachelor Degree</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Current Teacher</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Ron</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>23-33</td>
<td>2nd Semester</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
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<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>South</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>34-44</td>
<td>2nd Semester</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Private</td>
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<td>3rd Semester</td>
<td>American Studies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Student Teaching</td>
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<td>Private</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>2nd Semester</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>23-33</td>
<td>3rd Semester</td>
<td>Business Mgmt.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>34-44</td>
<td>2nd Semester</td>
<td>Religious Studies/Humanities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demographic Questionnaire and Background Information

The section includes the findings from the participants’ demographic questionnaire and additional information they shared that was not captured by the questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to provide the participants’ background as well as their attitudes, thoughts, and sources of motivation. The items in the questionnaire asked for age range, highest education level, number of siblings, parental education level, neighborhood in which they grew up, educational plans, the most important trait for educational attainment, and level of achievement. By using a carefully crafted questionnaire, vital statistics and additional personal information about participants were gathered. The questionnaire data provided both a comparative analysis of each participant’s demographics and corroboration for information obtained in the face-to-face interviews, which provided additional data concerning the experiences of the participants. These data are provided in the narrative below.
Ron

Ron, born in Washington, DC, was attending University of Lender, located in the southwest region of the US for his MAT degree. As an undergraduate student, he was exposed to various summer programs to participate in internships at various institutions, one being the University of Lender. He received his first masters in mathematics from the University of Lender. At first, he was going to continue onto the Ph.D. level, but he felt burned out and realized that his passion for research was gone.

Ron is the oldest of five children and has two brothers in the 10th and 12th grades of high school and two sisters in the 1st and 2nd grades. At times, Ron felt it was his responsibility to be a leader for his siblings by paving the way. The highest level of education completed by his father was high school, while his mother took some college classes.

The neighborhood in which he grew up in was between poor and middle class. Ron thought he practiced good educational planning with a medium level of achievement. He said “determination” was the most important trait for educational attainment. In addition, Ron served on the executive board for a Black student organization on his campus.

Frank

For his MAT degree, Frank, who was born in Clarksville, Tennessee, attended the University of South Benton located in the south region of the US. Right out of high school, Frank went into the military and learned various skill sets to shape his character. During his tenure in the military, Frank decided to get a degree in criminal justice at a public university on the east coast. However, working various jobs after college, he soon realized that his true passion was for working with low socially economic children in the K-12 system.
Frank has one brother with a high school diploma, one sister with a HS diploma, and another sister with the general education diploma. Frank did not have a relationship with his father, and did not know his father’s educational attainment. The highest level of education completed by his mother was some high school.

Frank described his hometown neighborhood he grew up in as being poor. Frank felt like he practiced good educational planning with a medium level of achievement. He believed “determination” to be the most important trait for educational attainment. Frank has previously researched the academic and sport experiences of Black athletes versus White athletes.

Tim

Tim, a native of Houston, Texas, attended the University of Cyclone Station in the southwest region of the US for his MAT degree. Tim was very passionate about working with kids. I could tell that for him, teaching was more than a job and was a career because many of his responses really related to his drive for helping kids. His family is very important to him, and he applies same values and structure used at his home to his classrooms.

Before enrolling at the University of Cyclone Station, Tim was an undergraduate in an educational enrichment program at a small liberal arts school in the Midwest. He had one brother currently in college, and two sisters with his school diplomas. The highest level of education completed by his father was high school, while his mother took some college classes.

Tim described his hometown neighborhood as poor. Tim believed he practiced good educational planning, because he balanced a fulltime job, a family, and a full time course load.
Additional he believes he has a high level of achievement and echoed “determination” as the most important trait for educational attainment.

Shun

For his MAT degree, Shun, born in Missouri City, Texas, also attended the University of Cyclone Station in the southwest region of the US. He received his bachelor degree in psychology but originally wanted to major in music. He chose to minor in music and major in psychology because he was intrigued in studying the behaviors of people and why they do what they do. After receiving his degree in psychology, he was invited to attend a 5-year intensive doctoral program in the western region of the US, but he turned it down because “I couldn’t see myself going 5 years without music.”

Shun is the older of two siblings. One has an associates degree, and the other has a Bachelor of Arts. The highest level of education completed by his father was some high school, and his mother holds an associates degree.

Shun described his hometown as middle class. Shun thought he did not practice good educational planning, due to having to balance a family, a full time job, and a fulltime course load. He believed he had a medium level of achievement. He also said “determination” is the most important trait for educational attainment. In addition, Shun has applied for a grant to connect music to technology to “set-up a workstation and a computer/keyboard lab” at the K-12 school in which he is currently employed.

James

James, born in Jackson, Tennessee, attended Bisquete State in the south region of the US for his MAT degree. He thought coming from a mixed-race high school and attending a PWI
was totally different. James says, “It was culture shock.” James received his undergraduate degree in business management from the same institution at which he is working toward the MAT. He chose business management because he wanted to own his own business, and after graduating worked in the business and financing industry for 5 years.

James has two younger sisters, both currently in college. The highest level of education completed by his father and mother was high school. He described his hometown neighborhood as middle class. James felt he did practice good educational planning because of his ability to balance his graduate assistantship, classes, and family. He also had a high level of achievement, due to his strong faith in God. He believed “leadership” to be the most important trait for educational attainment.

Chris

Chris, born in Eugene, Oregon, attended Lobu University in the western region of the US for his MAT degree. He received his undergraduate degree in religious studies from a public PWI in the western part of the country. He currently worked as a school transition specialist in the same city in which he grew up with ninth graders “having a hard time making the transition to high school.” Chris is a musician who studied music and multimedia at a community college.

During the interview, Chris identified himself as an MC (a.k.a., master of ceremonies), and at times, this label showed to be accurate due to his ability to let his story flow as if it were song. Chris has one brother and two sisters. The highest level of his parent’s education is unknown. Chris described his hometown neighborhood as poor.

Chris felt he practiced good educational planning, had a high level of achievement, and reported “determination” to be the most important trait for educational attainment because of
all the struggles he had to overcome within his life. Also, I could tell that Chris had a great relationship with his children. It was evident when he described his son’s ability to describe personal experiences, which just made him “a proud papa.”

Research Question 1: Why African American Males Enroll in MAT Programs

The first research question addressed the prevailing factors that influenced African American males to further their educations and earn the MAT. Although each male described his own personal reasons for pursing the MAT, many of their stories as to what led them to further their education with a focus on K-12 were similar. The main themes that emerged relating to Question 1 were the following: (a) education as a necessary credential, (b) the desire to give back, (c) a minority scholarship program, (d) making a connection to passion, and (e) enhancing teaching skills.

Education as a Necessary Credential

The concept of “education as a necessary credential” was a consistent theme shared among the six males. Although all of the males discussed the necessity for more education, each male defined and described it differently based upon his own personal experience. Ron and Frank discussed education as a credential from an internal perspective. They equated obtaining more education as a way to increase self-efficacy about their abilities and skill sets.

Obtaining the MAT was important for Ron to feel prepared to teach. Ron already had a masters degree in mathematics but believed that having more education would position him to be more appealing and attractive to prospective employers. Even though he already had a masters degree, he felt that in order to go into teaching, he needed a great deal of education to
feel confident in his abilities to be an effective teacher. When asked to say more about this, he said:

I felt like, at the time, I was not ready to go straight into teaching, and I did not feel like one masters was good enough. I wanted to make myself more marketable, so I started looking for other masters degree programs. I started to look into education because that is what I really wanted to do.

Frank, a third semester male attending a public PWI in the southeast, shared the same belief. He elaborated on many of the same ideas as Ron but highlighted the fact that he did not feel that the skills and knowledge learned from his bachelors degree were enough to be an effective teacher in the K-12 system. Consequently, he had to increase his knowledge and skill sets by enrolling in the MAT program. When asked to share more about his motivation to obtain the MAT, Ron stated:

I want to do it because I felt that I needed to go back to school and learn a little bit more because my bachelors just wasn’t enough to be effective in the classroom. So, let me go back to school and get my masters and learn this academic language and let me actually learn my content so I’ll be a good teacher. So, the masters degree was like a little bridge for me to tap into that education that I had learned when I got my bachelors, but it’s bringing it back to me in a way that I can understand the content a lot better and apply it better to the classroom in order to increase the students’ learning.

Tim, Chris, and James viewed a MAT degree as more of a credential for a particular K-12 position. Tim, currently working in the K-12 field and attending a private PWI in the south as a
third semester student, discussed the MAT as a credential in terms of a requirement to work at the K-12 school of his choice. Tim shared the following:

My host school ... is a pretty prominent private school here in the area. Everyone who wants to teach there . . . . You have to have a masters degree . . . . It is, it is different with charter schools, but at these prominent private schools in the K-12 system, everyone's saying "masters, masters."

However, Chris, a married male with three kids attending a private PWI in the West, discussed how the idea of earning a masters degree never really interested him until the principal at his school wanted to make him a full-time teacher:

In all honesty, I do not really see it as I have been very intentional or set out with a vision to be an educator, or to even get my masters, and all of those things, but when they saw the way I worked with the students, sort of in a mentor capacity, that is when they gave me the job as a transitional specialist during the day and then they proposed to me: “Hey, we want you to be one of our teachers, and we will support you through a MAT program,” so I said, “yea, ok, cool.”

James, a third semester student at a public PWI in the Southeast, discussed education as a credential from a different perspective. While the other participants viewed the need for education from internal perspectives and about obtaining particular K-12 positions, James discussed pursuing the MAT as a perquisite for obtaining a doctorate. He talked about strategically planning his educational career a trajectory for earning a doctoral degree. He said, “After my masters probably within a year or two, I do want to get my doctoral degree in leadership, because if I do stay at the high school route, I do want to be a principal.”
For Shun, a second semester student at a private PWI in the South, obtaining the MAT was a personal endeavor. He had already been teaching for 5 years and had finally got a hang on balancing marriage, kids, and work. He felt that the time had been right for him to go back to school and get his masters degree.

Although each African American male had a different reason for pursuing the MAT degree, they all believed in the importance and value of a masters degree assisting them in reaching the next level. Whether earning the degree was out of necessity, to better themselves, to gain more education, or just because the time was right, each male identified within himself the importance having the MAT in order to the skill sets of effective teachers.

The Desire to Give Back

A second theme that was consistent throughout the voices of the African American males was the importance of giving back. All of the males shared how working in the K-12 system was a way for them to give back to students and assist them in pursing their dreams. The African American males viewed obtaining an MAT degree as a way to become a part of a K-12 system with the mission to work with and prepare young students to be positive and impactful citizens. The males shared their aspirations for giving back in several different ways. For example, Shun discussed his love for music and his passion for grooming students interested in music. When asked to elaborate on the role of music and his motivation for pursuing a MAT degree, he stated the following:

So, I just love sharing that whole aspect of music, the basic theory of music with students, seeing them become excited about what I love and then years later have them
come back with excitement telling me they are in band, they are playing the violin, they are first chair, and all those different things, it is like a feeling that just cannot be beat. Shun described how giving back to the students created a strong feeling of happiness in knowing that he helped students achieve their goals.

James had similar sentiments but drew particular attention to the role of teachers in the lives of students. He discussed how oftentimes teachers do not understand their impact and the opportunities they have to show students how they really care about the students’ personal well-being and futures. James elaborated on this thought:

I think a lot of times in the education profession you have a lot of teachers that are quick to write students off as if to say these students are bad. I do not think all the time students are just bad. I think sometimes students just want to think somebody actually cares. A great quote by John Maxwell states, “People don’t care how much we know, until they know how much we care.” I think sometimes teachers give up on students too quickly. So, I feel with some of my experiences, I can help change some young man’s life or some young lady’s life ... so kind of give back.

Tim concurred with James’ thought as it related to the role of teachers. Tim further discussed how many teachers helped him become the person he became today. As a result, he aspired to give back in the same fashion. When asked to share his experiences as they related to his K-12 teachers, he asserted:

Many of my K-12 teachers pushed me to go to college. You know, that was an experience that really stayed with me, and I think that's part of the reason why I wanted to give back and sort of do the same thing that those teachers did for me, and again it
was just already feeding off my internal values. I love working with kids and teaching them the right things, and things like that, so that is, that is why I chose education.

Frank viewed his role in giving back as that of a role model and confidant. He valued the opportunities to be a listening ear for the young African American boys, while also challenging them to complete their work. Frank highlighted that sometimes African American males just need someone to talk to and someone to take a genuine interest in them. When asked to say a little more about how he viewed his role and his experiences with K-12 students, he reported:

Oh, the Black boys talk to me on a daily basis, all of them.... I see the difference you know. It is easier for them to flock to me, and we just talk about regular things, but we also do the education piece. I also make them understand—hey, this is what we are here for. We are here for school. You know, we are here to do these things. You have to learn this. And I mean, I hope I am making a difference.

Ron and Chris were giving back without realizing it or intentionally setting out to give back. For example, Chris shared how he was just following a similar road map from those who paved the way for him to reach his goals, and now it was his turn to give back to someone else who may need it. He stated:

So really, I’ve just been following the lead. I’ve had really good people giving me cues. I seem to have good feedback on the work that I do. I enjoy it. It has purpose and meaning to have an impact on the youth.

Ron’s experience was similar. In his position as a tutor and teaching assistant (TA) in college, he never looked at what he was doing as giving back. He thought of himself as

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increasing the pipeline and paving the way for more African American males to come after him. He explained:

After I [served as a TA], I encouraged other people to do it too, and now it is not a thing anymore. I think my senior year I recommended three people for the job, and they all got it, and these were all African American males … I just feel if I’m doing it, then it may encourage other people to do it, which would be a really good thing because we are just increasing our numbers to becoming teachers.

Being a teacher in the K-12 system for these men gave them an opportunity to give back to students and assist students with reaching personal goals. The concept of giving back for some of the males was intentional, while other males were simply following the steps of the individuals who paved the way for them. Regardless of how the males ended up in their giving back situations, they valued the opportunity to be a role model. Enrolling in an MAT program assisted them with their own personal development and equipped them with the tools needed to be able to give back in their own way.

Minority Scholarship Program

Many times the cost to attend a graduate degree program can be challenging. However, sometimes with the assistance of a scholarship, earning a master degree can become a reality. Many of the African American males discussed how minority scholarships influenced the decision to pursue the MAT. Tim said:

I had heard of this program called Breakthrough. It is a nationally known student teaching program. A lot of my friends who went to my high school, who found out that I was very interested in working with kids, you know, because I always love working with
kids. I am very family oriented. They told me that I should do the program. I signed up for it, and I learned a lot about teaching and that turned my path to enter the field of education.

Being a part of a program that focused on teaching and aligned with his personal values allowed Tim the opportunity to continue to pursue his masters in an area he loved.

Ron discussed how his undergraduate institution enrolled him into a scholarship program that prepared him to move beyond the bachelors degree:

I was part of a scholarship program, the marvel scholarship program, to get minorities to get advanced degrees. I was comfortable with that. When I was first introduced to the program, I met very good people. They had good goals for us, and they were going to help us get to graduate school and stuff like that, so that was one of the main reasons that I chose to attend my undergraduate institution, and while I was there, they really want us to get started early to get ready for graduate school.

Frank talked about how he always wanted to be a teacher, so he sought out a program that assisted students who had a desire-to-teach:

When I first got out of the army, I was going to do this teaching program, which takes you straight into just getting your certification in teaching. They try to get military members to teach if they have a bachelors degree right out of the military. What they do is, they give you like $5000, or they give you $10,000, in grant money if they can see a way to help pay for your certification, and this is all bent on you would teach in an area that had at least 40% to 50% poverty. I went for it because that’s where I wanted to teach. The program is good because they send you stuff all the time of an actual job,
and if you have your certification or your praxis, you can call those principals and get interviews, which is a lot different than trying to go through the school and looking on websites and stuff.

Chris talked about how his district suggested he join a teaching program that was designed to increase the numbers of teachers of color in classrooms. Chris explained:

So, they have a program, right, that they have been working on and essentially what they are trying to do in this program is to get students who have come through the area to come back and become teachers, and again, part of that is they want to see more people of color in the classroom. That’s part of the incentive for the program, so I really think any students of color wanting to become teachers the district is really looking to support those students, like myself.

After visiting an informational session about the MAT program and hearing about all of the perks, such as financial aid, to assist with paying for the program, Shun felt the program seemed applicable:

Before I actually jump into something like [the master degree program], I went to one of their informational gatherings where they kind of gave you insight on the program, when the classes were going to be held, and I kind of left there weighing [financial aid] things out, and it just seem doable.

Although not connected to a specific scholarship program, James stated he chose his school because of the connection he had during his time as an undergraduate and his ability to secure a graduate assistantship. By taking advantage of the various scholarship programs, these African American males were able to pursue a master degree within the field they loved.
Making a Connection to Passion

Sometimes people accept a job that they may not enjoy. They do this for many reasons including just to have some form of income; however, these young men were able to find a connection between their passion and their jobs in the K-12 system. James discussed how he always had a passion for coaching because it was a great way for him to give back in an area from which he learned great skill sets that translated into different areas of his life. When discussing connecting football to education he stated:

Football has taught me so many life lessons about things, how to be accountable, dependability, great work ethic, were all of the lessons football taught me. I wanted to get back into coaching, and I was like, ah, I’ve always wanted to be a math teacher. I’ve always loved numbers, so with the degree, I could possibly coach high school students and also teach as well, and that is what kind of led me into getting my masters in education.

Ron spoke about how his undergraduate experience of being a math tutor and a TA helped him to discover his passion for working with children and his desire to be an educator. He stated the following:

I always liked helping people in math, so I think I started that spring as a math tutor for the learning center. I loved that job like it was the best thing in the world. I love going to work. I worked many hours. So in the spring of my junior year, I was a TA for three sections and kept going because I loved being a TA, loved being a tutor, and loved helping people and with all of those experiences put together. I just knew this is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life without a doubt.
Chris shared how he was able to connect his undergraduate degree in religious studies to his passion for teaching:

I was a religious study major--mainly because I am interested in all things humanities, social sciences. I think religion is one of those things that make humans tick, so my goal is to be a social studies teacher. I really like history, psychology, anything that has to do with being human and what makes humans human. I feel that I can deliver it in a way that is exciting for students in order to keep students engaged.

Shun, discussed how he had a passion for music along with the desire to share that love for music with his students:

So at first, I thought being in the regular classroom wasn’t for me, but that’s when I realized that whatever you teach, it really helps when the instructor has a passion for what they are teaching, and since my passion is music, that’s when I kind of connected the two. Since that’s my love and I love sharing it with other people, that’s when everything started clicking and connecting, so that’s really how I made my way into the education field and that’s where I’m at now.

Frank and Tim shared similar views about how they enjoyed working with the “kids.” They received joy from helping a young person understand his classroom assignment. They received satisfaction “seeing a student move on to the next grade,” or by connecting “on various levels with the young Black boys” and creating “a comfortable environment for them to learn and develop.” Frank and Tim had a true passion for working with the young African American boys who gravitated to them on a daily basis.
Once these six African American males were able to tap into their passions and desires in life, they connected the things they loved to do with a job that would allow them to do it.

Enhancing Teaching Skills

In order to be an effective teacher, one must have certain skill sets to be successful in the classroom. Some of these come naturally while others have to be developed. The desire to strengthen their own teaching skills as well as gain knowledge of others was another theme the males shared.

Tim explained the importance of being trained to be a teacher and how this training equates to being successful in the classroom. He further stated how the MAT program will train him to be a successful and effective teacher:

One, you have to go through the training. The research will tell you that some teachers are not trained enough [and] they’re not prepared to enter into the classroom. You have to be knowledgeable about modern research as it pertains to student success, effective classroom management, and active participation in the classroom, effective lesson planning, and being able to encompass an environment that is optimal for all learners. Without those, the chance of you having a successful group is not that great. So, this MAT program is, like, my training.

James talked about how teachers must be able to build connections with their students. He shared how the MAT program was training him in being a leader in the classroom. When asked to say more about this, he stated:

A leader: someone that is stern but is able to connect with their students. You have to be able to be approachable. Your students have to trust you, because they have to
know that you have their best interest at heart [as] somebody who is accountable, somebody who has a great work ethic. I think someone who is making sure that all of their students are striving toward perfection and not someone who is just going to pass their students along just because they feel they are a bad student or because they have discipline problems, which are characteristics I have, but through this program hopefully will strengthen.

Chris discussed the role of the MAT program in clearly teaching how to engage students in the classroom effectively:

Whenever the teacher engaged me as a person, it made me more interested in the knowledge they had to share...I feel like it’s a privilege to deliver knowledge. A proficient teacher is one who remembers they are there to help develop learning, not to get test scores up. We are supposed to be helping young minds learn how to learn, so someone who is aware of that, that’s their intention and they work on developing their craft of helping develop learners. Getting people excited about learning is the characteristic I hope to strengthen in my program.

Ron talked about how a teacher must be knowledgeable about what they are teaching the students and must be able to teach the material in a way that connects with all the students:

Someone who is very knowledgeable. I feel like if someone really knows the subject and material well enough; those are the people you want to learn from, because these are people who understand it and hopefully know it enough to where they can explain it to someone else. I would want to make sure my students understand the material, even if
I have to reteach the whole lesson again the next day, then so be it. I would want to make sure I develop these characteristics as I go throughout the MAT program.

Frank discussed one of the traits he hoped to strengthen was being prepared. He felt in order to be a successful teacher one must “be on schedule.” Shun talked about consistency as the trait he hoped to strengthen: “I define it as during the day where you actually give your expectations and stick to them.” Each of these men shared different views on what they felt made up a strong and proficient teacher and the various skill sets they hoped to increase during their MAT programs.

Conclusion for Question 1

Each African American male set out on a different path that brought him into enrolling in their MAT programs. The six men had different views about the need for more education, the desire to give back, a minority scholarship program, making a connection to passion, and enhancing teaching skills. However, their beliefs all centered around one common passion, the love of working with students and seeing them succeed. These reasons aligned with Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy selection process because of higher level of self-efficacy had by the participants increased their investment in their career choice. Frank stated:

I enrolled into the MAT program because I wanted to just be a better teacher, and I just feel like that we need to show minorities that you don’t have to be a superstar. You can just be a regular everyday teacher ... We are there for you. We are just like you. You can do the same things we did, and I think kids need to see that normal minority.
Research Question 2: Why do African American Males Persist?

The purpose of the second research question was to explore how African American males describe the factors that motivated them to persist through their degree programs and find the strength to endure during challenging circumstances. Based on previous research on African American males in higher education, the percentage of African American males that complete bachelors degrees is low, and the representation of those who enroll and persist through masters level degree programs includes even fewer African American men (Strayhorn, 2009). Thus, how did the six African American males find the motivation to persevere? The first research question highlighted the factors that motivated African American males to consider and enroll in MAT programs. Interestingly, the African American males expressed different factors as motivating them to persist through their respective MAT programs. Two different categories emerged from the participants’ responses, external versus internal motivating factors. The external factors yielded two sub areas: (a) family members and (b) non-family members. The internal factors yielded three sub categories: (a) self motivation, (b) self-determination, and (c) moving forward.

External Factors

*Family members.* There were some external factors that impacted the experiences of the African American males. All of the African American males discussed how members of their families played major roles during their MAT program journeys. These men looked to their family members for support and motivation to move forward in their degree programs. Frank wanted to be an example for family members coming into college behind him. Frank shared how he was the first in his family to enroll in and persist through a masters degree program.
This accomplishment motivated him to be an example for the individuals entering postsecondary and postbaccalaureate study after him. When asked to share why his family was a motivating factor for him to persist, Frank stated:

No one in my family, my brothers and my sister, they finished high school, but my mom she didn’t finish high school. My dad, who knows, and my other sister, she got her GED, so I figured as far as I know in my family, even with my cousins, I can be the first to get a masters degree. So that is something that I kind of wanted to do, and at the time, my wife had a degree, so it made me want to go do something and pave the way for them.

Ron shared how his grandparents were the ones who he could go to for strength when times got rough. He further explained the role his grandparents played in encouraging him to persist through his MAT degree: “My grandparents were always the ones to support me and motivate me to stay in school, do my best, and never give up.” Ron took this explanation a step further and discussed how his mom enrolled him at an early age into programs she felt would better him as a person and take him off the streets. When asked to say more about the role of his mother in his motivation to persevere and the challenges he faced while trying to better himself, Ron stated:

I come from one of the poorest areas in my neighborhood, and I had to deal with a lot of issues and people telling me, "Oh, you a sellout and a trader for trying to leave the hood." But my mom heard of a college preparatory school that was specifically for low-income families. She said, "I don't care what you say. You can fight me all you want to. I’m sending you away to go to this school," and she sent me there. I hated it for the first year or year-and-a-half, but once I realized the track some of my friends were going, and
the type of resources the school was offering me, to this day, that was the best decision she's ever made for my life, because I learned so many skills that have helped me continue throughout my life.

Shun talked about how his family instilled spiritual values in him to lean on when things got rough.

I would have to say my parents were a great motivational support for me. Growing up my parents taught me to believe that God has a divine plan for my life and to always seek Him when in doubt. This is what I've striven to do throughout my life.

Thus, Shun was able to align the values of his parents with his very own and develop a deeper sense of motivation through a spiritual connection of his personal beliefs.

Chris shared a personal experience regarding his son. He explained how his son, at an early age, realized that he did not have an African American male teacher in his early educational process. This motivated Chris to persist through the MAT program. Chris wanted to be a solution to the problem by situating himself to obtain a position in the K-12 system so that other African American males would not have the same experiences as his son. Chris further explained:

My kids for example, my son, realized and said to me, “I have never had an African American male teacher before.” It was like he just realized it. I asked him what does that say to you? Who is supposed to teach or not? So that kind of open up the dialogue for us to talk about it. At first I was like, “Wow.” It really made me realize that it was a problem, and it just motivated me to be the example for my son so he can at least know of one Black male teacher who is trying to make changes.
Tim shared how being another African American statistic was not something that he wanted for himself. In fact, his father wanted more for him and did not want him to have the same experiences that he had growing up. When asked to share more about how his father motivated him to persist through his MAT program, Tim stated:

I did not come from probably the wealthiest family, but I came from a family where my parents instilled the right things in me and pushed me to excel. They are pushing me even now to keep on excelling in my masters program. I guess my father wanted to make sure that I was not going to be a statistic. I mean, he probably knew all of the things he was faced with in school or when he was growing up, and he wanted to ensure that I was going to have the spirit to deal with any of those things.

Each of these African American males leaned on their families and family values to get them through the tough times. They also used their family members’ values, beliefs, and spiritual guidance as motivation to persevere during the MAT program.

*Non-family members.* In addition to the role of family members, the African American males discussed non-family members’ impact on their persistence in their MAT programs. All of the African American males acknowledged that someone outside of their families believed in them, exposed them to the importance and value of receiving the degree, and supported them through the tough times. Shun also discussed how his program fostered a cohort environment supportive of his needs and to help him get through successfully:

The cohort program is built to where I’m taking classes with other teachers that are actually currently working in the field. It’s designed to be supportive ... being that you’re in a class with individuals who are already working or getting off work coming to class
meeting once a week. Classes are small, so you have the opportunity to network and connect with students throughout the week. So, that’s the design of the class to really be a supportive system for you to get through the classes.

Moreover, James discussed the individuals within his program and gave credit to his teachers. He shared how many of his teachers in his MAT program took the time to go over the class material with him outside the normal classroom time and assisted him in moving forward in the program. James described how his teachers assisted him in persisting through the MAT program by stating:

I had great teachers and professors that have worked with me, set up office hours for me to come by and broke things down a little bit for me, explained stuff a lot more, which has helped me succeed in some of my classes and get good grades.

Tim had many of the same experiences with his teachers as James reported having. Tim talked about how many of his teachers saw potential in him at an early age and instilled in him the importance of going to college and the value of receiving an education. Tim explained:

I had some pretty influential teachers in my life. Being exposed to teachers who really cared about students and were able to relate to me as a student and inspire me, I had multiple teachers, who were saying, "Hey, you're a seventh grader. You're getting ready to go to college. This is what you're gonna need to learn." In most schools, you know, you don't get that type of talk, that type of high expectation. Being able to be exposed to that, I think, had a tremendous effect on my path, my inspiration, my motivation, and determination in what I wanted to do in life.
Frank shared his experiences about two African American males who became mentors for him. He elaborated on how they influenced him to persevere through his MAT program in the following manner:

I went to talk to Dr. [Mentor], and he really helped me being a Black male, and he shared with me how he could barely read and now he had a doctorate, and he is an assistant principal. So, he and my professor who is in behavioral analysis, he’s a doctor too, those two Black males really helped me as a MAT student because they are someone who I can look at and be like ok. I can get there, because they are there and they basically took the same route I did.... That really motivates me to have someone. I guess you could say, kind of like, a mentor but just somebody who I can reach out to.

While the other African American males shared current experiences, Chris shared how his middle school experiences served as motivating factors to persist. When asked to say more about this, he asserted:

I would say it started in middle school, I had good mentors, I had an African American male principal, which was very unique for this area, and we had some teachers that were very aware and culturally committed. So the teachers allowed us to develop like a Malcolm X class as eight graders, and they let us student teach a Malcom X class...that was really my introduction to being an educator as well as being interested in history and social studies.

The African American men in this study attributed their perseverance in the pursuit of education and a meaningful career throughout their lives to their family and non-family members. Their personal connections and willingness to accept the values that were taught to
Internal Factors

The African American males highlighted the second factor that assisted in their persistence through their MAT program in terms of internal factors in the following terms: (a) self-motivation, (b) self-determination, and (c) moving forward. These young men tapped into something inside their inner beings and use it as a source of strength to persist through specific difficult situations. The young men told different stories about how their internal drives were developed and how drive sustained them through their MAT programs.

Self-motivation. The African American male participants highlighted self-motivation as a factor that positively impacted their ability to persist through their MAT program. This self-motivation emerged out of their desire to “be better than” or to move past needing to feel like they had to prove themselves to others. While all of the African American males highlighted self-motivation as an internal factor, they shared different experiences about how they developed this self-motivation. When asked to share how he developed this “self-motivation” that assisted in his persistence through his MAT program, Frank said he gained motivation from wanting to be better than his dad. He further asserted:
Well, I don’t want to be like my dad, and I think if I am successful as a kid that grew up fatherless, then I can show those kids that I see on a daily basis: “Hey, I grew up fatherless, I grew up, and you can do this. You know. You gotta find it in yourself to be better.” I would say that “you should be better than your mom or your father generation.” That’s my goal with everything and what motivates me: seek better than your mother’s and father’s generation, and that was rough for me, but I just had it in mind that I do not want to be like my father. I do not want to be like him. I want to be someone that someone can look up to.

Frank’s desire to be better than his father because of growing up fatherless fostered a sense of focus for him as he moved forward with this career.

Chris shared how he was homeless and living on the streets at a very young age. He elaborated on how these experiences strengthened his sense of internal motivation to continue through the difficult times. When asked to share more about these experiences and how these experiences assisted him in developing self-motivation, Chris said:

When I get down and out, I remember how I’ve been out on my own since I was 15, and I didn’t really have a lot of positive male figures. I had to rely on my survival instincts to get me through. I mean I was a homeless teenager, but I had an innate vision and drive. And it was these factors, which moved me to overcome hardship and create my own success as an adult. So, I just use that experience to motivate me to continue to fight and survive any experience that comes into my life.
James and Shun talked about how a “spiritual connection” and how their personal faith gives them strength during hard times and how they both lean on it as a motivating factor to achieve their goals. James stated:

I would say that I’ve always been a self-motivated person, and I’ve always tried to be the best at my craft in whatever area at that particular time. The greatest motivation as an adult is knowing that with God I am in control of my destiny, and I can go as far in life as I choose.

Shun stated, “Again, I would say God because His words in the Bible inspire me to keep going even when obstacles are present and roadblocks appear.” Thus, both of these men used their spiritual connection to their religion as a tool for self-motivation to move forward when presented with challenging situations.

Tim shared different experiences than Frank, James, and Shun. Tim shared how he gained motivation from seeing other people make a difference and how this contribution developed internal motivation to want to contribute in a similar manner. He stated:

It’s funny because I have this good friend of mine; he’s a Black male that was all about it at school. Once he decided to do the teaching program, it was “I know I’m qualified, for this position. I am trained, and I’m ready to be that role model for those students, so that when they get older, they have a story to tell.” He has now become a strong leader in the K-12 system in creating programs to help support the kids. When I look at that, it creates a sense of like internal motivation within myself to strive to do better and make a difference and do this program.
Although seeing another person was an external factor, it fostered an internal response of motivation inside of Tim to move forward within his program of study.

Ron discussed his development of self-motivation in terms of the impact of his MAT program. He shared how his MAT program’s ability to increase his learning skills motivated him to persist by stating the following:

I think this program is still good, and even though it’s a lot of work, I’m still learning small things that I’m going to use in the future, so I don’t think this is a complete waste. I mean this is something that I chose to do, and it’s for free, so I might as well just keep going on with it, so that’s a big motivation, and I really do want to learn how to become a better teacher.

The African American males discussed developing self-motivation through external experiences. The external factors varied for each participant. However, the external factors triggered internal responses that served as sources of self-motivation for the six participants.

*Self-determination.* Self-determination was another constant theme shared by each African American male. According to Webster (2014), determination is defined as “a quality that makes you continue trying to do or achieve something that is difficult” (para. 1). These males were determined to break down stereotypes and change the lives of young kids in the K-12 system by being positive role models. Ron talked about how he was determined to overcome the challenges of the MAT program by seeing the end goal in mind:

How I’m overcoming it is just being as organized as possible. I’m just trying to hang in there, and I’m honestly just trying to take it one day at a time. I’m just hanging on there if you can kind of imagine a cat hanging on a branch of a tree, and I’m just hanging on
there just so I can finish. I mean I have to finish, and I’m just determined to finish because I want to be a successful teacher.

Tim discussed how his determination to fight and dismantle stereotypes serves as a point of self-determination for him. When asked to say more about these stereotypes and his determination to alter the perception as it relates to perceived stereotypes, he asserted:

Wherever I go, there's gonna be some stereotypes about what I'm capable of and, the expectations that people have, especially for African-American males. So, just being sure that every opportunity that I get, regardless of a certain perceived stereotype that people in and out of the classroom whether it be blatant or very clandestine, fighting those off, and, you know, having the determination to do that. I just wanna make sure that I’m knowledgeable enough to fight those stereotypes. I’m just determined to fight it no matter what happens, because if I don’t then who will, and that's just how I feel.

Chris shared how being the only African American male in his county fostered a spirit of determination and the desire to change perceptions about the role of an African American male in the classroom for the youth:

Right now, I cannot name one African American male in Funk County, not just my school district, all of them. The only African American males in my school are either cleaning up or doing security. I feel that it’s not only a detriment to African American students, but I think it’s a detriment to all students because it really gets into people’s minds to define what’s possible. It subconsciously tells people what people’s roles are, so what it communicates to the students is that African American male teachers don’t belong in
the classroom, and I’m just determined to change it. I know I can’t change it everywhere, but I sure as hell am determined to try and change their mindsets here.

Frank felt his role was to show not only the Black students but the other races as well that not all successful African Americans have careers in sports. In fact, some are educators and are full of knowledge:

My presence provides the Black kid someone who they can see who looks like them that is successful. But it also provides the White, the Asian, and Hispanics who may have certain stereotypes of what Black males are like, and all of a sudden they see me, and it’s almost like they’re shocked. Cause they’re like, “Wow, Mr. Frank you are actually smart.” And I’m like, “yeah, I think anyone that goes to school and learns how to do stuff can be smart.” So, I think more Black men have to be determined to educate other races too because they can see a Black male in a different light than what they see on TV and hear at home.

Shun had a slightly different experience and talked about how the ability to apply his passion of music to his MAT degree created a sense of self-determination that assisted him in persisting through his MAT program. He shared how he was determined to keep music in his life because it was his passion and he wanted to share it with his students. In explanation of this Shun stated:

I had an opportunity to go to a school in southern California to get my Ph.D. in counseling, and they told me that for those five years, I would have to focus just on that. It was such an intense program that there was no way that I was going to be able to do music during those five years. However, I was determined to have music in my life no
matter what, because I knew that’s what I wanted to share with future students, so I sought out a degree that would allow me to bring the two together.

James’s spirit of determination came out of his need to provide for himself and his family:

I’m already a determined person, so I already have a game plan. Just having different options, I still have banking to fall back on. I have my ability to coach. Soon I will have my master degree so I can teach and possibly my PhD, so I just kind of want to make sure I’m fine, my family is fine, my wife is fine, my kids are fine. So, I’m just determined in just setting some stuff up so me and my family will have some form of security for our future.

These males differed in the determination to break down stereotypes, be positive role models, and provide for their families. While this is the case, they all relied on inner self-determination to get through various situations.

Moving forward. An attitude of moving forward, to make advance or progress in their degree programs, was internal motivation method used by the African American males to persist through challenges such as program difficulties and racial issues. All of the African American males provided particular individual situations that motivated them to keep moving forward and to persist. For instance, Ron talked about how when he enrolled into the MAT program, he was supposed to take six credits in the summer and 12 credits in the fall semester, but instead the program enrolled him into 18 credit hours:

The program advisor informed me that I was going to be taking six credits in the summer and 12 credits in the fall and spring, piece of cake, but as soon as I got accepted
into the program, I was informed that “oops, sorry, we aren’t offering summer classes so you are going to have to take them in the fall.” Even though I’m tired and stressed, I keep telling myself I’m still learning how to be a better teacher, what it takes, what you need to do, how to deal with classroom management, how you should build lesson plans. There are still those things sinking through that are like ok you got to keep on going, because it’s really important, this is really good material, it’s still valuable. So, once I tell myself that every night, I keep moving forward to the next day.

Ron viewed his unfortunate situations and circumstances as factors that assisted him in persisting through his MAT program. He viewed these situations as factors which assisted the ideal of moving him forward to reaching his goal. Shun discussed how being the only African American male in class presented many challenges for him that, at times, were difficult for him to overcome, but internally, he just “numbed himself to the issues.” He understood his goal of moving himself forward and used these experiences as motivating him to move forward. He explained:

Sitting in those classes, I felt like I was sitting on the outside, and I really had to work to even participate in the discussions. You really had to encourage yourself like, “Hey, this is who you are and this is your goal. You are going for the same degree as everyone else.” However, I felt like they had a certain perception about me, and I really had to fight through that. In that aspect, it was really difficult, but I mean, now I’ve just kind of gotten used to it, like, “Oh well, this is how it is going to be, let me just move on and move past it.”
James shared how he had to overcome racism indirectly in the classroom and directly outside of the classroom. These experiences motivated him to move forward and not allow the actions of others to move him off his path:

At times, I felt like I had to carry myself at a higher standard, felt like I was kind of watched a little bit tougher. You had those times maybe on campus and outside like within the community where people might call you out of your name, but those are just ignorant people that you can’t pay no mind to. You got know what you’re here for, that you’re here to get an education, and you can’t let any of those things bother you, so I just told myself, “James keep pushing forward.”

Chris shared that people on his job did not agree with the principal’s decision to support Chris’ MAT degree pursuit. However, he was not going to let that stop him from moving forward to reach his goals:

I mean, you can just tell some teachers just don’t like it. I think there are teachers with the attitude like folks are just getting handouts, just because they are people of color and that’s the only reason they are getting hired. So, you can kind of just feel some of those attitudes. Even in class, I feel a lot of pressure, especially when they say certain words or topics on diversity. Everyone automatically looks over at me, but I just make sure that I do what I do better than anybody else and keep in mind that I want to be the best teacher in the whole school. I’m sure as not going to let anyone sway me from reaching my goals, so I just use it as fuel to keep on moving forward.
Frank talked about being the only Black male in his class created a lot of pressure for him, but in order for other young Black men follow his success, he believed he had to go through the conflicts to pave the way:

In my MAT program at times, it’s very frustrating because I feel like I always have to be on my game. I always have to have the right face on. I can say something that differs, but I can’t get like real mad and debate with it, because they’re like “Oh, there goes that crazy Black man again.” Instead of just looking and seeing the passion that I have, I feel like they judge, so it’s a lot of pressure. I don’t want to fail because I feel like If I fail, then I feel like it hurts a whole lot of other people if I fail. And I don’t want to fail those kids, so I just keep moving on through it so I can pave a way for those kids.

Tim shared the racial issues he had to overcome. These experiences made him a stronger person:

I mean, there are not very many people like me in my program nor at the school I work at. I think because of my skin color and because I’m an African-American male, they hold you to sort of lower expectations and standards. They think you’re not capable of achieving things, and regardless of what they think or how often I address it, you know, it exists. I know it exists. So, I just have to continue to fight the stereotypes and keep on going.

Conclusion of Question 2

All six of the African American males overcame various types of challenges through various external and internal factors. The external factors led to establishing connections that fostered support systems through a variety of sources. The external connection supports
Strayhorn’s (2005, 2009a, 2009b) graduate persistence theory that in order for persistence to take place social integration had to happen for these males through relations with various individuals of the university. These experiences forced the participants to tap into their inner strengths of self-determination and motivation in order to move forward and persist through their MAT programs. Each talked about how difficult it was inside and outside their programs as they fought against racial and non-racial issues. These issues had a tremendous effect on how they approached their personal outlooks on the classroom. However, their internal motivation and determination did not allow them to give up, which aligns with Bandura’s (1977, 1993, 2001) self-efficacy theory, specifically the cognitive, motivational, and application processes. They knew deep-down inside only they could make a difference in the lives of other African American male students. Shun stated:

I think number one, many of my classmates really were not raised around many African Americans and possibly their perceptions of African Americans were based upon prior experiences. But really I felt like they were uncomfortable with me there. Even when we would get into groups, I kind of felt like it was really up to me to break those barriers down, but it just felt like there was an apprehension there, so if I didn’t push on in there myself and make it a point to participate and get involved. Then, basically they would be to themselves, and then I would be to myself, and on top of that, because of my personality, that just made it more of a push when I realized that’s what I had to do.

Additional Findings

The interviews with the six African American men produced additional findings that did not align with the overall purpose of this study. However, due to the overall research on the
experiences of African American males in MAT programs and the information received from the participants, I concluded these additional findings supported the richness of the study. Five out of the six young men never had an African American male teacher during their K-12 experiences. Frank shared, “I noticed that I didn’t have a Black male teacher throughout all my years in school from K-12.” Shun said, “Most of the African American males I saw were both track or basketball coaches. I never really had them as my teachers, and when you really think about it, it’s sad.” Tim stated, “I can’t tell exactly why Black men don’t go into the classroom, I guess everybody wanna be Kobe or LeBron.”

In support of the previous statements, some of the African American males offered suggestions on ways to increase the number of African American males enrolled in MAT programs. Chris talked about programs assisting financially and starting to recruit early:

Getting programs to pay for it. I mean, that’s just what I think, like go ahead and flip the bill, and expose students to financial opportunities that can assist them in paying for their master degree. Start helping these students while they are in high school, help them fill out the applications, and scholarships, make it a point that they understand that going to school is possible for them, to succeed in school is possible for them, that there is scholarships out there and ways that they can get the support they need to go. If MAT programs would go help the African American male kids in the high schools, that would be big.

James talked about how MAT programs need to do more research and be specific in their marketing:
I think just getting feedback. I don’t know if my school really reaches out to get other minority students, but I think doing some of things you are doing right now as far as asking questions to show more of an interest and also to make their institutions more marketable to African American male students.

Ron suggested that MAT programs need to show African American male students the benefits of enrolling into these programs:

I can't speak for every African-American, but most people want something in return. Students need to understand the benefits of the program. Why should I continue my education? Why should I spend two more years in school for a degree in education? What am I getting out of this? You can't just expect people to do it just for the sake of doing it. They have to understand why it's important and why it will help them in their future careers.

Shun had similar thoughts to Ron and believed that universities should try to improve their recruiting strategies in how they target African American male students:

I think more can be done in the recruiting aspect. I think that universities and colleges can send out informational emails to districts, specifically to minority male teachers who currently work as an instructor or teacher. I think that some type of support group consisting of fellow African American males studying in a masters program can also be beneficial in regards to MAT program retention.

Finally, all of the African American males discussed how happy they were to take part in the study and tell their stories about their experiences. James said, “I wish I had responded to your email sooner. I really enjoyed this and what you are trying to do.” Tim stated:
I enjoy studies like this to be able to just add to the cause, and hopefully, this study is able to go a long way in terms of what you're trying to do, you know, increasing the pipeline and increasing our numbers in education. I just really thank you for giving me the opportunity to tell my story.

These six men offered insight on ways for universities to increase the numbers of African American males in MAT programs and to boost the numbers of Black role models available for young boys look up to in their classrooms.

Conclusion

In this chapter, an introduction was given regarding the analysis of the data presented through the stories shared by the six African American males in the study. Themes emerged from the data, which revolved around answering each research question. Results from the first qualitative research question revealed that although there were slight differences as why each participant decided to enroll in a MAT program, they all saw their purposes in life as helping people, particularly students in the K-12 system.

The themes of Education is a Necessary Credential and Enhancing Teaching Skills aligned with Ashton’s (1996) conclusion that many teachers do not feel equipped to teach effectively after just receiving their bachelors degree. Therefore, there is a need for more education if teachers are to be efficient and effective in classrooms. The Desire to Give Back and Making a Connection to Passion themes coincide with King’s (1993) reasons why African American males choose to become teachers. The A Minority Scholarship Program theme relates to various studies of how financial assistance influences minority students’ decisions to obtain graduate degrees (Banerji, 2006; Crockett et al., 2003; Gravios, 2007; Levin, 2008).
The data aligned with the research found in the literature about the reasons why African American males enroll in MAT programs in particular. Results from the second research question revealed that each African American male’s reason for persevering through the master degree came from two external factors and three internal factors. The two external factors were family and non-family members and aligned with Strayhorn’s (2009a) graduate persistence theory: When individuals make social connections to people with whom they share similar views and beliefs, they feel supported. In this study, the African American males made connection that fostered the desire to persevere.

The internal factor themes such as Moving Forward support Bandura’s (1977) theory on self-efficacy. Bandura (1993, 2001) further asserted that the skill sets that come from within are based upon prior experiences and knowledge and are essential in shaping career paths. The internal factors of Self-Determination, Self-Motivation, and Moving Forward were all traits shared by the six African American males as part of the desire to complete their programs and fulfill the passion to educate the minds of students in the K-12 system. The next chapter presents a discussion of the findings based on the demographic and interview data, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of current African American males enrolled in a master of arts in teaching (MAT) program. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the results of the demographic survey and in-depth interviews in relation to the research questions. The implications for practice, recommendations for further research, and a conclusion are also included in this chapter.

Discussion of the Findings

The goal of the study was to bring to light the factors and influences significant to the six African American males when enrolling in and persevering to earn a master of arts in teaching (MAT) degree. This section discusses the findings for each of the two research questions.

Research Question 1: The Prevailing Factors that Influence African American Male Students to Enroll into a MAT program

Based upon the stories shared by each of the six African American males in the study, five themes emerged as reasons for enrolling in a MAT program. Each theme aligned with Bandura’s (1977) theory of self-efficacy specifically the selection process. The six African American males’ career choices were influenced by their own high levels of self-efficacy having a huge effect on their reasons for pursuing the MAT degree, which they believed aligned with their personal values. Self-efficacy motivated the men to invest fully in preparing themselves educationally for the role of being an effective teacher in the K-12 system.

*Education is a necessary credential.* This theme exemplified the value the African American males put on education as a tool for equipping themselves with the skills needed to be better teachers and for propelling them into positions that would offer them more
opportunities for advancement. The results from the study supported Ashton’s (1996) conclusion that radical changes in teaching education programs are needed, and individuals use the furthering of education as a method to fight the issue of underpreparedness. All six of these men believed in the greater power postbaccalaureate education held for securing a position and increasing their skills sets. They did not believe their bachelors degrees did adequately prepare them to be effective teachers in K-12 classrooms.

The desire to give back. The African American males viewed obtaining the MAT degree as a way to become part of a program (i.e., the K-12 system) whose mission was to work with and prepare young students to be positive and impactful citizens. They saw being teachers as offering a platform for giving back to their communities and giving to African American boys via classroom environments. In Gasman, Hirschfeld, and Vultaggio’s (2008) African American male graduate students saw majoring in education as “a tantamount to joining a proud tradition in the Black community, as they are able to give back to their communities by becoming a teacher” (p. 127). Although each male shared a different method of giving back, they all rallied around one purpose and that was to increase the understanding of African American males in relation to the value and importance of obtaining a graduate education. They believed their efforts would consequently increase the pipeline of African American males interested in pursuing advanced degrees.

A minority scholarship program. Having financial assistance was another theme shared by the participants. Teaching is not a high paying job. In fact, according to Eggers and Calegari of the New York Times (2011), teachers make 14% less money than any other profession that requires similar level of education. These six men had entered at a point in life that required
them to work to provide for themselves and their families. Continually, attending college for an advanced degree can become an added financial burden.

Thus, with a minority scholarship program in place, they found the dream of obtaining an advanced degree possible. Crockett et al. (2003) also found that paying for graduate school was a reason why African American males do not enroll nor persist through a graduate degree program. Therefore, with a system in place to provide financial help, these males found an avenue to be supported by institutions with missions to increase the number of African American male teachers in the K-12 system.

Not only did these men choose schools offering the MAT, but also they chose their current colleges due to their minority scholarship programs. Financial support is essential in the success of African American males and allows African American males the opportunity to consider completing the MAT. This finding corresponds to psychosocial constructs such as institutional commitment, motivation, and perceived support (Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langle, & Carlstrom, 2004) and the role of these constructs in student success.

Making a connection to passion. The research participants shared how the MAT program allowed them to connect what they were passionate about in life with a career. Each of these men was passionate about something, such as football or music, in their lives. Each believed he would be able to share his area of passion with students as a teacher. Brown and Butty (1999) showed that African American males enrolled in master of education programs if they were good fits or could connect their desires to the knowledge to be learned. Therefore, once individuals can see how a job aligns with their personal values and beliefs, they soon look at their jobs in a different light because they are doing something they truly enjoy.
Enhancing teaching skills. All of the males believed that enrolling in a MAT program would teach them how to become better teachers. Some felt they could take the knowledge they learned in class and apply it to their classroom environments. According to Ashton (1996), this is an area of concern, because many teachers do not feel equipped and leave the field of teaching. Therefore, programs that combat concerns about not feeling equipped by preparing students with the necessary skills to be effective teachers could increase the number of teachers who decide to stay in the K-12 education system. Each of these males expressed the desire to be a great teacher. They wanted students to see them not only as Black males but also as educated Black males who are knowledgeable about the subjects they teach. They all expressed how this opportunity would enhance the chances of more African American males valuing education.

Research Question 2: The Primary Factors that Influence African American Male Students’ Persistence in MAT Programs

The first research question highlighted the factors that motivated the six African American males to consider and enroll in MAT programs. The second research question focused on the influences that impacted African American males’ decisions to persist through their MAT programs after enrolling. Interestingly, the African American males discussed different factors that motivated them to persist through their respective MAT programs. Two different categories emerged from the participants: external and internal motivating factors. The external factors were divided into the sub areas of family members and non-family members. The internal factors were divided into the three sub categories of self-motivation, self-determination, and moving forward.
External factor of family members. A major theme of the study highlighted the value of parental involvement in creating a perception for young Black men that success is achievable by attaining a quality education. Within the family structures of the participants, there was significant value placed on education. The experiences of the participants aligned with Gutman’s (2000) belief that the family environment is especially important to the educational success of African American males because the home is where many ideals and values are acquired from birth. Gutman also discussed the importance of parents’ involvement with their children’s schooling as crucial to the children’s success. According to Fields-Smith’s (2005) empirical evidence, parental involvement in their children’s education has a positive correlation with student achievement. My study supports the findings of both Gutman and Fields-Smith regarding the importance of parents in influencing the education attainment of African American males.

External factor of non-family members. The encouragement and support from a mentor or positive role model was a significant influence in the educational success of the participants. According to Brown (2004), obtaining support from a teacher plays a significant role in creating a positive atmosphere in harnessing a passion for learning. Five out of six of the African American males in the study reported that a mentor affected them so that they had the strength to persevere throughout their MAT programs. These mentors instilled certain character traits that fostered developing the spirit not to give up. The type of mentorship varied for each participant and included teachers, classmates, and coaches.

These findings support Strayhorn’s (2009b) graduate persistence theory in which social connections between faculty members and students positively impact student persistence in a
given field of study. Despite the differences in mentorship (i.e. teacher, coaches, etc.), each mentor was a prominent figure in the participants’ lived experiences and contributed to their educational attainment due to the shared connection of values and beliefs.

**Internal factor of self-motivation.** As previously mentioned the African American male participants in the study highlighted self-motivation as a factor that positively impacted the ability to persist through the MAT program. According to Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992), self-motivation comes from the initiative to undertake or to continue a task or activity as driven by an external factor, meaning an external factor that causes an internal response within an individual. The idea of self-motivation aligns with Bandura’s (1991) analysis of motivation as playing a significant role in increasing self-efficacy as brought to life through inner thoughts that are based upon outward challenges.

People formulate likely outcomes based upon various possible scenarios of their actions in order to reach their future objectives (Bandura, 1993). Therefore, these men were able to visualize themselves as being effective teachers within the classroom. Each male tapped into his level of motivation and self-efficacy in order to persevere through challenging situations for the purpose of reaching his goals of success and to become the most effective teacher possible in the K-12 system.

**Internal factor of self-determination.** Another theme shared between the participants was self-determination. Self-determination comes from internal beliefs about the ability to accomplish a task and do it well (Bandura, 1993). This cognitive process occurs when an individual can see himself or herself accomplishing the task based upon previous knowledge from learned experiences in the future (Bandura, 1993).
Each of the males had different reasons as to why they were determined to complete the MAT degree. However, they all shared the one common goal to increase the number of African American male teachers in the pipeline by becoming effective teachers in the K-12 system. Each of the males discussed how he felt it was his responsibility to make a difference in the lives of students in the K-12 system. The participants expressed an internally motivated determination to make a difference in the African American male community.

**Internal factor of moving forward.** The final theme shared among the African American males was the idea of moving forward despite needing to overcome certain situations and challenges. Many of the males discussed the racial situations they experienced inside and outside of their classrooms and how they overcame these challenges by keeping their personal goal in mind. These challenges, as expressed by the participants, included various levels of racism, program dynamics, and communication issues. Even in the face of these challenges, the male students stayed focused on their individual goals and aspirations.

Bandura (1998) called this dimension of self efficacy the affective processes because it requires the ability to control actions when presented with threatening situations. These males could have reacted to the racial issues and fought back which could have caused them to drop out school and not complete their degrees. Because they were faced with similar situations earlier in their lives, their self efficacy for handling these situations was higher, and they had the ability to cope and rise above the threatening situations. They were motivated to achieve success by their individual definitions and to persist in their MAT programs.
Implications for Practice

The results from this study shed light on the reasons why African American males enroll in MAT programs and the reasons and influences that motivated them to persist in their respective degree programs. The results have implications for educators, practitioners, and policymakers attempting to promote success among African American males.

MAT programs should interview the African American males enrolled so they have the opportunity to tell their stories and to assist MAT programs at predominantly White institutions (PWI) of higher education in addressing the issues facing the African American males in MAT programs. The findings of this study, coupled with the literature on African American males, draws attention to three ways MAT programs can positively impact the representation of African Americans who express an interest in enrolling in MAT programs as well as positively influence the persistence of those enrolled in MAT programs. With my study’s results in hand, the aforementioned entities have power to impact the representation, retention, and persistence of African American males in MAT programs by incorporating outreach strategies, increasing diversity education through faculty support, and providing outside organizational support.

Program Outreach Strategies

One of the African American males in the study suggested that MAT programs explore the option of partnering with local middle schools and high schools to educate younger African American males on the value of getting a masters degree in a teaching field. This tactic may assist in changing perceptions about what it means to be a teacher. Smith et al. (2004) found that about 50% of the African American high school males they surveyed wanted to pursue a
career in teaching but “that lack of career awareness and lack of positive information regarding the profession” discourage African American males from enrolling into teaching and education programs. Therefore, creating partnerships with middle schools and high schools can become one avenue for increasing the number of interested African American males. Additionally, these partnerships may offer students the opportunity to begin developing and forming networks and expose them to resources essential for preparing them for college environments and ultimately enrollment in a graduate school.

Also, MAT programs at predominantly White institutions (PWI) may want to work with the K-12 systems in their service areas by marketing the program to teachers through staff meetings on the teachers’ campuses. They should invite current students enrolled in their MAT programs to speak to teachers about the impact of a MAT degree on enhancing their careers. If programs have African American males currently enrolled in their programs, by having them go out to schools, to present awareness and knowledge about the benefits of a graduate degree program could encourage other African American males to enroll.

Some of the males discussed how the desire to become a teacher began when they tutored their friends or teammates during their undergraduate programs. Thus, MAT programs could partner with tutoring programs and departments to present about the benefits of the degree during employee training and to discuss how tutoring skills easily transfer into the K-12 system.

Increasing Diversity Education Through Faculty Support

The males in the study shared the issues of racism that surfaced within their classroom environments. Issues revolving around feelings of having to be the voice for educating their
classmates about the characteristics of young Black boys, being isolated from group discussions by their peers, or having to prove to their classmates that the stereotypes placed on Black males are not true. Therefore, MAT programs may add a cultural component to the curriculum. The program faculty could invite multiple speakers of different races to talk with classes about effective strategies for addressing the needs of various student populations in order to reach them successfully. The students could divide up into groups during a class so that each could present on a culture about which they have very limited knowledge and provide evidence-based, effective strategies to address the needs of the population. Faculty could set up their currently enrolled students to visit teachers at schools with high populations of students of particular ethnicities which could alleviate some of the pressures to be spokespeople for all African American males during classes in order to increase their odds for degree completion.

It is essential that K-12 teachers understand they have a significant role in creating and fostering positive learning environments for students of color, especially African American males. Therefore, learning how to create a comfortable classroom environment in which open dialog on race and racism is an option for students. Such lessons need to be incorporated into MAT curriculum to benefit the faculty members and students. Open dialog allows for sharing information from the African American male perspective as well as from individuals who may represent different backgrounds. Additionally, creating this comfortable environment through open dialogue could allow African American male students to connect with their programs and fully invest themselves because they feel supported.

Finally, many of the males discussed the value of teachers during their high school and undergraduate educations; experiences with these teachers influenced their career choice to
teach. Therefore, institutions of higher education may want to include teacher-mentor relationships as part of their teaching program curricula. Professors could train future teachers to use lesson plans to strategize career development for putting emphasis on the value of being a teacher on the future of the education system and the nation.

Outside Organizational Support

Even though establishing support systems within MAT programs assist with the African American males’ persistence, helping them connect with outside cultural entities is just as important. At PWIs, African American males need mentors who look like them and culturally based organizations that include currently enrolled African American male students. Therefore, establishing, if one does not exist, or promoting an organization such as a Black Graduate Student Association may influence the retention of African American males in MAT programs. These types of organizations have the potential to impact the overall experiences of African American males positively by providing them with an outlet and support system. In addition, connecting Black males with other African American males in the education field who can serve as positive role models may encourage them to persist when times get rough.

Crockett et al. (2003) revealed that many African American males do not complete further education due to cost. The six participants in this study echoed the revelation by stating that without minority scholarships they would not be enrolled in MAT programs. Therefore, universities may want to educate undergraduate African American males about scholarships to support funding graduate school, particularly in the field of education. Universities also should provide currently enrolled African American males with information about scholarships for which they qualify by establishing a African American MAT alumni network to assist future
students with finances and provide additional scholarship money. Programs should encourage African Americans to join Kappa Delta Pi, an honor society for students majoring in an education-related field, and to apply for the scholarships offered by that specific organization.

Recommendations for Future Research

The goal of this study was to investigate the factors that motivate African American males to pursue postbaccalaureate education by enrolling in masters degree programs, particularly in education to teach in the K-12 system. Data were collected to answer two research questions. Several interesting findings resulted from the examination of the data. However, the study met with some barriers. One limitation is the sample only representing a minute portion of the population of African American males enrolled in MAT programs. Therefore, these findings cannot be applied to all African American males in MAT programs in the country. If I had interviewed more African American males from a larger number of MAT programs, the data might have revealed additional themes. I also only interviewed African American males at PWIs who were physically attending courses in classroom settings. Future researchers may want to include participants of online MAT programs and MAT programs at historically Black colleges and universities to compare and contrast the African American males’ experiences. Many of the males talked about issues of racism in the classroom, but if they are not physically in the classroom or surrounded by people that look like them do they still share those same experiences?

Another limitation of the study was the design of the study. The study was focused on the factors that pushed these males to enroll and persist; however, I was not able to pinpoint how and when self-motivation and determination were developed by the participants. Future
researchers could examine when, where, and how these traits are developed by African American males to aid in understanding the males’ levels of self-efficacy. Five out of the six males in the study had families and described their families (e.g., wives and children) as a motivational tool for them, but the one male who did not have a family, praised his grandparents for support. Future researchers may specifically examine how families affect self-efficacy levels in African American males as part of understanding why they persist.

As a limitation of the study, I interviewed the six males at one point in their lives and not longitudinally during the entire time they were enrolled in their MAT programs to see if they completed their degree. A longitudinal study could be conducted to examine African American males’ experiences from school acceptance and enrollment in the program to degree completion and may present richer information on the factors that enable African American males to persist. Also, if I had more time to implement this study, I would have sent out a general survey to all programs across the country to examine the experiences of African American males in MAT programs, asked for volunteers for additional data collection, and then followed up with recruits using interviews and focus groups. I believe this process could increase validity and generalizability.

Even though many of the African American males in the study acknowledged their families as primary factors for motivation, all six of them had attained degrees beyond the realms reached by any of their parents nor siblings. Future researchers could determine which conditions cause one sibling to succeed and another not to be as successful with education and what strategies are effective for supporting Black males’ educational attainment. Many of the males in the study discussed the challenges they faced within their classroom environments
from their other peers based upon subjects discussed throughout the class. Future researchers may want to examine the professional development histories of the professors to see what levels of diversity training have equipped them with the skills to run a classroom of diverse students in MAT programs effectively and openly. Another thing I recommend for future researchers is to determine at what point in the African American male’s life does he visualize himself as a teacher in the K-12 system.

Finally, future researchers should further explore the role of scholarships and financial assistance in the enrollment and persistence of African American males in MAT programs. The incorporation of psychosocial theories into this particular research area could shed light on the role of motivation, institutional commitment, and perceived social support on the achievements of African American males in MAT programs. Institutional support resources (such as the Black Graduate Student Association or Black Cultural Centers) tend to be available to current students, but when African American males are not provided financial opportunities to enter MAT programs, they lack access to these resources that are available only to current students. Students who do not have the financial means to enroll will lack opportunities to utilize specific institutional support resources.

Conclusion

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., (1963) said, “The ultimate test of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and moments of convenience, but where he stands in moments of challenge and moments of controversy” (p. 96). All six of these African American males were faced with adversity starting from a young age, and each stated that his experiences hugely impacted his personal development. Through each adverse situation, whether it was racial or
non-racial or internal or external, these six men relied on support from family and non-family members and on internal levels of self-efficacy to stay focused on their goals.

The literature discussed the importance of degree attainment and how having a degree beyond the bachelors level can positively assist individuals with attaining their future goals. The findings of this study add to the understanding of the attainment efforts toward successful educational achievement for African American male scholars. It is hoped that institutions of higher education, K-12 systems, and educational leaders will open their minds, hearts, and souls to the stories shared by these six young African American males in an effort to promote an understanding of the factors that assist African American males to enroll and persist in MAT programs. This understanding will positively impact the enrollment, retention, and persistence of African American males in the educational pipeline and hopefully increase the presence of African American males as teachers in K-12 classrooms.
APPENDIX A

LETTER TO DEPARTMENT CHAIR/PROGRAM COORDINATOR
Dear (Chair of the Department)

My name is Dantrayl Smith and I am a doctoral student in the higher education program at the University of North Texas and I am in the process of writing my dissertation. I am researching the experiences of current African American male master of arts in teaching degree seeking students. Given the underrepresentation of African American males teaching in the K-12 system, the purpose of this study is to understand the internal and external factors that motivated these African American males to pursue a masters degree in MAT. Additionally; this study seeks to understand the factors that facilitate their retention in the MAT program.

I am asking for your assistance with identifying individuals who meet the above criteria. If you could send me the emails of the current students in your program so I can forward them an invitation to participate within my study. Attached to this email is the invitation to participants I plan on sending which details the purpose and specifics regarding this study as well as my contact information for interested individuals. Also, I am more than happy to provide you with additional information regarding this study such as a copy of the demographic questionnaire and interview questions I plan to send out to the African American males in your program.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants may choose to exit the study at any time. The participants may also choose not to answer any questions in which they do not feel comfortable. Also I am willing to provide you with the results of my study if you desire them.

If additional information is needed, please let me know and I will provide it to you.

Thank you for your consideration,

Dantrayl Smith
APPENDIX B

LETTER TO THE PARTICIPANTS
Hello ________

My name is Dantray Smith, and I am an African American graduate (Doctoral) student in the Higher Education Student Affairs Program at the University of North Texas. Currently, I am working on my dissertation, which investigates the experiences of African American men in master of arts in teaching (MAT) programs. The purpose of this study is to explore the persistence and experiences of African American males pursuing a MAT degree in hopes of developing ways to increase the representation of African American males at the master level and within the K-12 educational system. You have been identified by your department head/program coordinator and others on your campus as a male whose voice can shed light on an area of study that least is known. I would love to interview you personally as part of the study. Your name will not be used in this study, and your identity will be kept confidential.

PLEASE respond to this email if you would not mind being interviewed in person or via Skype, at your convenience for about one hour, for this study. For participating in the interview you will receive a $25 gift card to Wal-Mart.

Thanks,

Dantray Smith, M.S.
University of Texas at Arlington
Maverick Activities Center (MAC), Suite 100AA
700 Nedderman Ave, Arlington, TX 76019
817-272-3213
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits, and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

**Title of Study:** The Experiences of African American Males in Master Curriculum and Instruction Programs.

**Investigator:** Dantrayl Smith, Doctoral Student at the University of North Texas.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to explore the persistence and experiences of African American males pursuing a master of arts in teaching degree in hopes of developing ways to increase the representation of African American males at the master level and within the K-12 educational system.

**Study Procedures:** The interviews will be approximately 45 to 60 minutes and will be guided by an interview protocol. The interview protocol will include semi-structured interviews with semi-structured interview questions.

**Foreseeable Risks:** There are no foreseeable risks involved in this study.

**Compensation for Participants:** For participating in the interview you will receive a $25 gift card to Wal-Mart.

**Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records:** The confidentiality of your individual information will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study. After the completion of this dissertation, the recorded interview data will be deleted.

**Review for the Protection of Participants:** This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-3940 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

I have read the consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I understand that my participation within this study is voluntary. I consent to participate in this study. I have been told that I can withdraw from this study at anytime and may choose not to answer specific questions. I have received or will receive a copy of this form for my records and future reference.

__________________________     __________________________     __________________________
Name                                               Signature                                         Date

**Researcher Contact Information:**
Dantrayl Smith, M.S.

__________________________
817-272-3213 (work)
__________________________
        (cell)
APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE
Welcome to the Questionnaire. This questionnaire is confidential and will not be shared. The questions in the survey are intended to identify characteristics and traits that have contributed to your educational success. If you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions, simply leave it blank.

1. Please enter your first and last name ________________________________

2. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female

3. What is your age?
   a. 23-33
   b. 34-44
   c. 45-55
   d. 56+

4. What city do you call home? ________________________________

5. What was your Bachelor degree field of study? ________________________________

6. When and how did you know that you wanted to obtain a masters degree or higher? Please explain: ____________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

7. Do you currently teach? (Y/N) ____ If so what subject? ______________________

8. Please enter the number of siblings– brothers and sisters you have.
   Brothers ____
   Sisters ____

9. How many older siblings do you have? ___

10. How many younger siblings do you have? ____

11. For each of your siblings, please give their birth order to you and the highest educational level each obtained. (For example, Older Sister – BA)

12. What is the highest level of education your father completed?
   a. No Formal Education
   b. Elementary
   c. Some Middle or High School
   d. High School Graduate
e. Some College
f. Associates Degree
g. Bachelors Degree
h. Some Post-Graduate
i. Masters Degree
j. Other Advanced Degrees __________________________________________

13. What is the highest level of education your mother completed?
   a. No Formal Education
   b. Elementary
c. Some Middle or High School
d. High School Graduate
e. Some College
f. Associates Degree
g. Bachelors Degree
h. Some Post-Graduate
i. Masters Degree
j. Other Advanced Degrees __________________________________________

14. How would you classify the neighborhood you lived in when you started school?
   a. Poor
   b. Middle Class
c. Upper Class
d. Other (please specify)______________________________________________

15. What do you believe was your greatest source of motivational support as you grew up?
   Briefly explain. ______________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________

16. What has been your greatest source of motivational support as an adult? Briefly explain.
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________

17. Do you believe that you have practiced good educational planning?
   a. Yes
   b. No
c. Other ________________________________

18. Of the following traits, which one do you think is the most important for educational attainment?
   a. Honesty
   b. Persistence
c. Shrewdness
d. Loyalty
e. Determination
f. Diplomacy
g. Leadership
h. Other (please specify) ____________________________________________

19. Do you believe that you have a high, medium, or low need for achievement? ______

20. Do you attribute your educational success to a teacher? (Y/N) ______

Note. Questions adapted from Richards (2007).
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. What did you receive your undergraduate in? Why?

2. Why did you choose to attend your current institution for your current degree of study?

3. What experiences in your life lead you to pursue a master of arts in teaching degree?

4. What challenges have you faced in your degree program?

5. What do you want to do once you complete your master of arts in teaching degree?

6. What role or roles do you feel African American males play in the K-12 classroom?

7. What characteristics make up a strong and proficient teacher?

8. Do you feel there is a low percentage of African American males in the master of arts in teaching degree program? If so why?

9. Do you have any strategies on how to increase the numbers?

10. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?
REFERENCES


Jones, S. (2011). *A long road to travel: Narratives of African American male pre-service educators’ journeys through a graduate teacher education program* (Doctoral


