

PERCEPTIONS OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE MENTORING PROGRAM
IN URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
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Instruction

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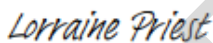
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ABSTRACT

African American females are a largely marginalized group in public school education. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore African American female students' perception of mentoring programs in an urban school district in South Carolina. Thus, 10 African American females, four mentors, and two mentorship program administrators were recruited for this semi-structured interview study. The exploratory case study design allowed the researcher to explore the perceptions of participants to obtain a rich database. Four common themes emerged from the data: Building relationships with mentors, peers, and teachers; Family involvement with mentor and mentee; Awareness of academic and social opportunities; and Building academic confidence with mentees. The findings revealed that mentoring programs in public high schools, specifically the mentors from these programs, have an impact on African American females' academic and social growth. Participants revealed having a strong relationship with their mentor was essential to their growth. The participants in this study faced many barriers that impacted their academic success as well as their social connection with others. The findings of this study also discovered that the relationship built with the mentors continued well after the mentoring program. The mentors and mentoring program created meaning for African American girls who faced different issues. The mentors were motivational factors and exposed students to different experiences and information that led to their success. To gain a better understanding of African American girls in education and how to address the issues they face, stakeholders should invest in mentoring programs and mentors to expose African American females, an underrepresented population, to support in academic experiences.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Aiden and Jaden. I have sacrificed so much to complete this process and you both will always and forever be my reasons to love, hope, and live. It is my hope that I have made you proud. You both inspire me to do better. I love you more than words can ever describe.

I also dedicate this work to my uncle, Phil Donaldson and my grandmother, Laura Kelly. I hope that I have made you both proud. I carry you in my hearts, my thoughts, and my being.

To my mother, father, brother, Aunt Sandra, and my godparents who have carried me, encouraged me, and prevented me from giving up on myself, this dissertation is a testament to your love and support.

Finally, this is dedicated to my husband, Brian, who has always seen the best in me when I never saw it in myself. You are the definition of love and a breath-taking reflection of God's love for me.

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PREVIEW

Chapter 1

Introduction

The stereotypes that plague African Americans have become so ingrained in social perception that low-income minority students are often targeted and labeled as problem students. As a result, public education was used to systematically ignore the needs of low-income minority students (Evans-Winters, 2011). To circumvent this issue, mentoring programs were created for students in South Carolina that encouraged mentorship and advocated relationships.

According to Thomas, Davidson, and McAdoo (2008), “despite the benefits of culturally relevant interventions, there is a scarcity of research investigating effectiveness and, even less, examining impact on promoting cultural assets among adolescents of color” (p. 283). Additional information is needed to understand the perception of African American female students to determine if their mentoring programs helped them academically and socially. This research is needed to validate the experience of African American females to help strengthen academic communities and promote policies that consider race, gender, and social class (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010).

Background of the Problem

Since the creation of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), efforts have been made to reform education for all students (Erickson & Gutiérrez, 2002). The NCLB Act demanded public schools meet expectations and accountability standards, which held schools on the state and district levels accountable for student performance on standardized tests (Krieg, 2011). The NCLB Act focused primarily on math and science proficiencies and, as a result, standardized assessments were created to determine if

students were meeting standards (Erickson & Gutiérrez, 2002). However, high stakes tests were detrimental to minority students because many teachers struggled to reach those students effectively and, as a result, students were often taught at the lowest cognitive levels (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Under NCLB, schools were given grades based on student performance and schools were ultimately held responsible for students' academic performance. Civil rights leaders believed that testing under NCLB continued to divide communities and did not provide educational equity (McGuinn, 2016). One of the major issues with NCLB was the political influence that dictated what was taught in classrooms. The political influence was overwhelmingly strong, and educators had very little say as to what could be included in the curriculum (Grissom, Nicholson-Crotty, & Harrington, 2014).

In 2015, President Obama signed Every Student Succeeds Act, but this act proved to be more aggressive with teacher evaluations, restructuring underperforming schools, and a greater focus on charter schools (McGinn, 2016). The reforms did not change or eliminate the achievement gap. The use of standardized testing and socioeconomic status magnified the achievement gap and ethnic gap between Caucasian and African Americans (Peterson, Rubie-Davies, Osborne, & Sibley, 2016; Stumm, 2017).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), there was no change in the achievement gap between Caucasian and Black 8th grade South Carolina students from 1998-2007. During the years 2011-2013, the National Center for Education Statistics reported a 1% increase in the gap between African American and Caucasian 8th-grade students in math. In 2014, South Carolina schools administered the South Carolina Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (SCPASS) to children in grades four to

eight (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015). The results of the 2014 SCPASS Assessment for sixth, seventh, and eighth grades showed a gap in education between African American students and Caucasian students. In the subjects of Science and English/Language Arts (ELA), African American students had the greatest gaps in achievement which did not improve from sixth to eighth grade. The achievement gap used to describe the gap between students academically, racially, and socially; however, it also illustrated the long-term effect of an unequal system (Allen, 2008). The gap that is rarely discussed, however, was the gender gap and how African American females perform academically and socially juxtaposed with African American males, White males, and White females.

Problem Statement

Despite a growing interest in African American male students and closing the academic achievement gap, little attention is given specifically to African American females (Evans-Winters, 2011). The achievement gap is highest amongst African American males with a 26-point difference in all subject areas on assessments by the National Assessments of Education Progress when compared to Caucasian students (Vanneman et al., 2009). Traditionally, research on African American females in education centers around pregnancy, aggressive behavior, hypersexuality and substance abuse with very little research on academic performance and experience (Young, Foster, & Hines, 2018). African American females are often overlooked and forgotten due to the concentration on closing the achievement gap for African American male students. African American girls have become marginalized in education, and may not devote maximum effort in class (Evans-Winters, 2011). To circumvent this, many African

American females have developed a rough exterior to assert themselves in a society which has largely marginalized them in academia (Lindsay-Dennis, Cummings, & McClendon, 2011). The process of creating appropriate mentoring programs for African American girls must focus on how to support and empower these girls (Harris, Hockaday, & McCall, 2018).

Mentors are needed to help promote healthy relationships and provide guidance to young girls who have failed in academia due to the lack of effective remedial assistance and emotional and social support (Kent, Kochan, & M. Green, 2013). Hurd, Sánchez, Zimmerman, and Caldwell (2012) described a mentor as someone who has more experience, helping someone with less experience. There are formal mentors, which are people assigned to students in a mentoring program, and natural mentors, people who have a natural connection and advise students (Hurd et al., 2012).

The specific problem is in public schools; African American female students have fallen behind academically and socially compared to their peers because of a lack of adequate assistance or emotional and social support (Harris et al., 2018; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011). According to Evans-Winters (2011), there has been little research on the factors that influence positive educational and social development amongst African American girls.

This study focused on the perceptions of African American females, mentors, and administrators to explore the unknown impact of mentoring programs on student's academic and social success. An exploratory case study approach involved ten African American females, four mentors, and two administrators as the best approach to an initial investigation as to how mentoring programs are perceived by a group that is marginalized

in education and society (Evans-Winters, 2011). Interviews were conducted on sixteen participants along with questionnaires and observations. In person interviews or telephone interviews, surveys, and observation field notes were collected to find common themes regarding the perception of mentoring programs on African American females' academic and social success. Triangulation was tested by cross-reference themes from the different data sources collected during the study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore African American female students' perception of mentoring programs in an urban school district in South Carolina. Exploring and understanding the perceptions of how mentoring programs impact the academic and social growth of African American females may help educators, parents, administrators, mentoring program administrators, and other stakeholders understand how to help these marginalized students and lead to higher graduation rates. Understanding the data from this study may lead stakeholders to provide mentors for African American girls to help foster their academic and social growth. Few studies are conducted on African American females in education. African American females are marginalized in public education, with the focus primarily on African American males and the achievement gap (Evans-Winters, 2011). African American females are also a part of a widening achievement gap and are disproportionately penalized for behavior compared to Caucasian counterparts (Smith & Harper, 2015).

The qualitative case study method was used to explore African American female students' perceptions regarding mentoring programs in an urban school district in South Carolina. The participants consisted of ten adults who were former African American

female students within the past 5 years. Additionally, participants included four mentors of current African American female students and two administrators from an urban mentoring program in SC who were interviewed face to face. Data saturation was achieved when no new information was yielded from participants.

Population and Sample

The population chosen for this study was urban high school African American females in the United States. The African American females in the sample were between the ages of 18-24 and spent at least two years in a mentoring program in high school. The mentors and administrators from the urban mentoring program were currently working for the program. In South Carolina, African American females represent approximately 41% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The participant sample was a purposeful sampling of 16 participants.

The participants chosen for this study were ten African American females who within the last five years participated in a mentoring program for at least two years during their high school career. Additionally, four current mentors and two administrators from an urban mentoring program in South Carolina were chosen for this study. The mentor and administrators selected for this study must currently work for the mentoring program and have at least two years working with students. Three data sources were used for this study that included interviews, observations, and questionnaires. A total of sixteen participants were interviewed and completed the questionnaire for this study. Additionally, interactions between the mentor and mentee were observed and behaviors noted in field study notes. The findings of this qualitative research cannot provide

statistical generalizations to the greater population of African American females because of the selected sample, size, and research design (Lindsay, 2010).

Significance of the Problem

Addressing the marginalization of African American females in education is critical to learning more about mentorship programs and how they affect the social/emotional state and retention rates of African American females in an urban school district in South Carolina. The objective of this qualitative case study was to explore African American female students' perceptions regarding mentoring programs in an urban school district in South Carolina. The information obtained from this study may be used to create more programs geared to African American females with a focus on building positive social and academic success. In education, African American females are generalized within the African American male experience (Evans-Winters, 2011). As a result, there is little information on how to support African American or Black females in education. The data obtained about Black students may be used to describe the experience of African American males; however, it is important for educators to comprehend the specific experiences of African American females both academically and socially. In many studies, the term, African American is not further specified as female or male and generalizations are made based on the study of African American males. The success of African American female students is not just a teacher and student issue. While a majority of the accountability focuses on classroom progress, all persons involved in the academic success of African American females are responsible for a student's success. To ensure African American female students are successful, all

stakeholders must work together to create learning environments where African American female students can thrive academically and socially (Evans-Winters, 2011).

Significance of the Study to Stakeholders

The specific problem is in public schools; African American female students have fallen behind academically and socially compared to their peers because of a lack of adequate assistance or emotional and social support (Harris et al., 2018; Lindsay-Dennis, et al., 2011). Information and studies about the perceptions of mentoring programs as relates to the academic and social success of African American females was the gap in the literature. Therefore, this study focused on the perceptions of African American females, mentors, and administrators to explore the unknown impact of mentoring programs on student's academic and social success. By exploring the perceptions of participants, information is now available to mentoring programs, public school leaders, and stakeholders to consider as they address the social and academic needs of African American females. Addressing the academic and social needs of African American female students not only benefits those students, but they benefit parents and teachers in supporting African American female students academically and socially thus curtailing some of the problems associated with this particular cohort. Additionally, the data from this study may impact the mentoring program curriculum bringing into account the effectiveness of the program curriculum and making modifications to specifically target the academic growth of African American female students.

Nature of the Study

The goal of qualitative research is to reveal holistic findings in social behaviors (Yin & Campbell, 2018). Qualitative research is exploratory and is used when

information is limited. Data from qualitative research are based on the phenomenon and social behaviors. Case studies are used to examine a unique problem and ask *why* and *how* questions (Yin & Campbell, 2018).

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is the focus of human behavior (Yin, 2018). Through qualitative research, the human experience can be understood through observation and interviews, thus allowing greater insight to participant's behavior or perception as it relates to a phenomenon. The qualitative method can provide an understanding of phenomena such as the perceptions of African American females, mentors, and administrators as it relates to how mentoring programs have impacted the social and academic growth of African American female students. A quantitative research study would change the nature of this study and require that numerical data be collected through the use of survey, questionnaires, and measurements which does not focus on the lived perceptions of participants (Yilmaz, 2013). A quantitative design is not appropriate for the study as it focuses on large populations with statistical measurements to prove a hypothesis or generalization (Goertzen, 2017; Yilmaz, 2013). However, this study explored the perception of participants to understand human behavior through interviews, thereby qualitative research is more appropriate. A qualitative methodology is appropriate.

This study required a deeper understanding of *how* and *why* the phenomenon exists which a case study can provide through the perceptions of participants (Yin, 2018). The focus of the study is a contemporary issue with an emphasis on the perception of participants; therefore, the case study design is appropriate (Yin, 2018). For this study, an

exploratory case study was conducted with the use of interviews, field observations, and questionnaires through SurveyMonkey regarding participant's perceptions of mentoring programs.

Case Study Design

An exploratory holistic single case design is appropriate for this study because the objective of this qualitative case study is to explore the perceptions of mentoring programs in an urban school district in South Carolina. The design is appropriate because a single unit of analysis is being explored (Yin, 2018). The data gathered in this study identified themes of perception based on the experience of the participants (Creswell & Plano, 2017). Case studies are studies in which the researcher examines a case or a series of cases over a period of time. According to Creswell and Plano (2017) case studies are used across disciplines from psychology to law and can be used in qualitative or quantitative studies. Case studies may be conducted to understand a bounded phenomenon and give an in-depth understanding of why the issue exists (Yazan, 2015). The answers from this study present leaders, parents, and other stakeholders the information needed to help African American female students succeed academically and socially. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore African American female students' perception of mentoring programs in an urban school district in South Carolina. The study was conducted to gain a more thorough understanding of how mentoring programs influence the social and academic outcomes of African American female students.

Research Questions

In a case study, *how* and *why* questions are used to generate an explanatory response to the question being asked (Creswell, 2017). The types of questions the research design answers depend on the type of case study being conducted. Generally, the questions are open, where there can be more than one opinion as to why the participant believes something has happened. This gives the researcher an opportunity to compare the data from the participants or all participants from different sources. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do African American female students describe the effectiveness of the mentoring program on their academic and social growth?
2. How do mentors and program administrators describe the influence of mentoring programs on the academic and social growth of African American female students?

Theoretical Framework

Three major areas form the theoretical framework of this study. The first area is constructivism, relating to the perception of participant's realities of experiences (Crotty, 1998). The second area is the Critical Race Theory, which describes how race affects the daily lives of people (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Parker, 2015). The third area is Black Feminism which was created by black women to combat issues specific to their specific experiences (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017). These theoretical areas were incorporated into this study by exploring the perceptions of participants who have had experience in mentoring programs.

Constructivism

Constructivism was used as the basis of this study because it proposes that truth and meaning are based on a person's perception of the realities of the world (Crotty, 1998). As a result, people construct their own realities as they move through experiences, thusly; no two realities are the same. The experiences with external factors such as society, government, and other people does not equate to multiple realities, but it requires cognitive thinking of how those external factors impact and change them as individuals (Crotty, 1998). A constructivist approach was used for this study to explore African American females, mentors, and administrators' perceptions of mentoring programs on the academic and social success of African American female students.

Critical Race Theory

Racism is a phenomenon that is ingrained in the American culture but ignored because of the uncomfortableness of the topic (Wadhwa, 2010). Critical Race Theory (CRT) focuses on racism and how it influences society. CRT concept is centered on the idea that racism is a normal occurrence in American society (Gillborn, 2006; Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). This type of racism is not the lynching or beatings of the civil rights era, but it is an institutionalized form of racism that is subtle and handicaps the equal rights and treatment of people of color (Wadhwa, 2010). This racism cripples people of color and continues to empower those of the dominant culture (Gillborn, 2006; Bogdan & Biklen, 2016; Wadhwa, 2010). Although policies and reforms can be changed and implemented, they do not change the moral compass of people. Ignoring racism has bigger implications than confronting it (Wadhwa, 2010).

This institutionalized racism is seen in classrooms across America. To combat this issue, culturally responsive teaching was introduced to teach reading comprehension to students of color by making connections to students' culture and identity. However, many teachers lack the ability or unwillingly delve into the curriculum to create opportunities for culturally responsive lessons (Litt, Martin, & Place, 2015). Others would argue that culturally responsive teaching is not necessary, and students are not motivated to learn; however, the inclusion of texts and lessons that are common to students of color boosts motivation and self-confidence and test scores (Tatum, 2009). The problem still persists as teachers are unwilling and/or unprepared to create culturally responsive lessons and the standards and curriculum are geared toward a Eurocentric educational content which ultimately impacts social and economic hierarchy (Ogbu, 2004).

Black Feminism

African American women have been inundated with being compared with Caucasian women socially, physically, politically and academically (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). The feminist movement for Caucasian women left some Black women feeling alienated and rejected. Black feminism began in the United States when some Caucasian and free and enslaved slaves created tactics to abolish slavery. Feminism did not include the experiences and struggles of Black women. During the abolitionist movement, Black women were sexually abused and blamed for the victimization. Black women dealt with racial slurs, segregation, and a lack of support from a portion of Caucasian feminists (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Black women recreated the feminist theory to include issues that were unique to the Black American experience (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017). Evans-Winters