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BRIDGING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP THROUGH EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS OF
DISADVANTAGED AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

A Dissertation Prospectus presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi

Anesha Carter

August 2022

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore student agency's impact on the lives of successful African American adult students who once identified as being disadvantaged. The opportunity gap, formerly recognized as the achievement gap, continues to negatively affect low socioeconomic status African American students with limited social and cultural capital resources. There are unlimited studies which identify factors that fuel the opportunity gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006). However, many of these studies neglect to incorporate the voices of the stakeholders in which social and economic disparities impact the greatest (Anderson, 2018). This qualitative phenomenological study aims to address this research gap through using semi structured interviews to analyze the perceptions of seven African American adult students who are matriculating through University of Mississippi's School of Education to discover how these students utilized agency or either components of agency to attain academic and/or professional success. The findings of this study were obtained through identifying and grouping thematic similarities and patterns which described how these students were able to navigate life and overcome "obstacles to their academic and professional success" (Kundu, 2018, p. 13). Thus, my research incorporates the voices of African Americans students to contribute to literature which explores how these students achieve success.

DEDICATION

With joy and honor, I dedicate this work to my loving family. To my parents, Albert and Dr. Delois Carter, I thank you for the many sacrifices made to grant me the support and guidance needed to obtain a successful life. I pray that the work that I have done and aim to do makes you proud. You have instilled many virtues and values within me, which I plan to pass on to present and future generations.

In addition, I dedicate this work to the many brown boys and girls who dream of attaining a better tomorrow. I want you to know it is possible as there are educators worldwide rooting and cheering you on. I am indeed one of your biggest cheerleaders.

Lastly, thank you to my friends who encouraged and supported me throughout this entire process. Thus far, this dissertation is one of my most significant accomplishments. Let's celebrate.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The persistent discourse on the educational achievement gap demonstrates the difficulty in providing adequate learning opportunities for all students in the United States (Flores, 2018). Social injustices, such as educational inequities within America's K-12 schools, cause barriers between successful outcomes and disadvantaged students—students whose families' social and economic circumstances cause hindrances to academic acceleration (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The impact of such barriers caused researchers to re-term the achievement gap as an opportunity gap because the lack of accessible resources such as social, cultural, and economic capital leads to excessive disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged students' life outcomes—references the percentage of students who: (1) enroll in accelerated high school courses, (2) enroll and graduate from college, and (3) obtain professional jobs (Carter & Welner, 2016; Flores, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006;).

Successful life outcomes are connected to upward mobility, which is highly associated with dominant procedural knowledge (cultural capital) and networking capacity (social capital). Cultural and social capital is easily accessible to educationally advantaged students—students who come from families with educational, social, and economic supportive backgrounds (Burger & Walk, 2016). However, students who lack these supports, which are often African American students, are subject to fewer resources and influences that help to propel their academic achievement. Research argues the lack of such support fuels substantial gaps between the “educational achievements of children of different social origins, with children of more highly

educated parents outperforming their counterparts from educationally less advantaged families” (Burger & Walk, 2016, p. 696). Working-class youth have difficulty establishing resourceful relationships with nonkin adult figures who can support their academic and professional success (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). However, middle-class family members have tendencies to align themselves with nonparental adult figures for social networking expansion that could potentially produce enhanced opportunities within their lives (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Studies on social structures’ impact on student learning note that repetitive cycles of social and cultural capital can impact students’ achievement and opportunities for better or worse (Burger & Walk, 2016). “Research on social stratification has established that parents pass down educational advantages or disadvantages to children in any country for which data exist” (Hertz et al. 2007, as cited in Burger & Walk, 2016, p. 696). For example, only six percent of individuals born into the lowest quintile can be “expected to rise out of poverty and make it into the top income quintile in their lifetimes” (Kundu, 2018, p. 29). Parents cannot pass down knowledge or networking lines to which they never gained access. Therefore, most students continue to operate within the level of social, cultural, and economic capital in which they were born. Thus, researchers argue one’s social and cultural capital reproduction is fueled by ongoing social structure forces (Burger & Walk, 2016; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

In addition, research reveals only 14% of low socioeconomic students obtain post-secondary degrees. These students come from homes with low income, occupation prestige, educational attainment, and social status (Kena et al., 2015). Yet, 60% of high socioeconomic students attain this level of education (Kena et al., 2015; Santiago et al., 2013). Therefore, middle and high socioeconomic status parents can offer better support (such as schooling options, and financial support) to their children, which can lead to enhanced academic

achievement and higher-level income occupations (Burger & Walk, 2016). Also, middle and high-class parents can provide their children with procedural knowledge and networking relationships to which they have access.

Significance of the Problem

Within Mississippi, only 28% of the African American population attain post-secondary degrees (United States Bureau of the Consensus, 2018). Of that 28%, women make up 18%, and men make up 10% (United States Census Bureau, 2018). In addition, the United States Census Bureau (2018) reveals the most common racial or ethnic group living below the poverty line in Mississippi are African Americans, as 31.8% of the population receives food stamps. The percentage of college attainment and poverty rates for African Americans within the state requires attention that seeks to identify and implement factors to better support the academic success and life outcomes of African American students who identify as disadvantaged. Degree attainment is essential to life success and upward mobility because most professional jobs require higher education or training before offering employment (Anderson, 2018). In addition, higher education helps African American students expand their social and cultural capital, which can be used to navigate various institutions and careers within the social world.

Secondly, there is a lack of education research that examines African American students' voices and experiences to identify specific factors that grant them support or hindrance during their academic journeys (Anderson, 2018). It is important to dissect the stories of former disadvantaged African American students who are now flourishing. These stories may lead to the discovery of strategies or solutions which may help to uplift and better support current students who face similar circumstances. As these stories reveal solutions to the opportunity gap, education restructuring may occur to facilitate the achievement of all students. Educational

restructuring refers to rebuilding activities to alternate fundamental assumptions, practices, and relationships to enhance student learning (Conley, 1997). Such is needed to provide educational equity for all students. Educational restructuring may open the door for enhanced opportunities and upward mobility for historically marginalized students such as African Americans.

Therefore, as educators take on the role of institutional agents and exercise their “capacity to go counter to the established social structure, and to alter the destinies of those located in the lower rungs of hierarchy” they may better support students who are not allocated sufficient resources needed for equitable opportunities (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1086).

Educational institutional agents, or change agents, are individuals who initiate, facilitate, implement, and support organizational changes to improve student outcomes (Fullan, 1993; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). These agents have a responsibility to aid students in overcoming disparities and barriers to promote their holistic growth (Fullan, 1993). This includes taking available resources (personal and educational) and empowering students with the tools to succeed beyond the secondary, and post-secondary levels. Thus, in the context of empowerment, institutional agents actively participate in the student learning process to help them significantly change their world (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Thirdly, limited research examines African American children's influence on their “educational performance” (Burger & Walk, 2016, p. 696). However, incorporating the voices of students creates space for students to become active influencers and investigators of their learning process. Thus, students should not be regarded as passive subjects of reproduction in educational inequalities (Calarco, 2014, as cited in Burger & Walk, 2016). Rather students are agents in determining their actions and influence their lives for positive long-term outcomes (Bandura, 2006, as cited in Burger & Walk, 2016). Therefore, as teachers and students engage in

the learning process as co-investigators rather than traditional teacher lecturing, an opportunity is presented for stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents, and students) to discover how to better support African American students for holistic achievement (Freire, 1972).

A plethora of literature addresses issues surrounding inequities within education such as outcome disparities between minorities and majority race students. Ladson-Billings (2006) states, “the paradox is that education research has devoted a significant amount of its enterprise toward the investigation of poor, African American, Latinx, American Indian, and Asian immigrant students, who represent an increasing number of the students in major metropolitan school districts” (p. 3). Researchers seem to study poor minority students “but rarely provide the kind of remedies that help them to solve their problems” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 3). Thus, this work aims to identify how agency can support African American students succeed as it explores the perceptions of adult school of education students and professional educators who once identified as disadvantaged.

Significance of Audience

Teachers and students are the primary beneficiaries of this study. As teachers become empowered with the knowledge and tools needed to implement inclusive practices they may reach and teach African American students holistically to facilitate growth and nurturing of their identities. For instance, teachers may discover ways to form better attachment bonds— a relationship that serves a dual function to provide a “safe haven, or a place of comfort, during times of threat and distress, and secure base” that encourages an individual to move forward and explore—with students (Mandelbaum, 2018, p. 61). Such relationships are considered a necessity for all human beings as they dictate an individual’s behavior for creating and maintaining safety. For instance, the safe haven, or secure base, is based on the availability and

responsiveness an individual's (or student's) caregiver, or attachment figure, demonstrates for his or her needs. These bonds can create a foundation that allows students and teachers to invest in a mutual relationship that allows teachers to learn about students and students to gain support from teachers as it pertains to their academic and life goals.

Therefore, African American disadvantaged students may benefit as this study aids stakeholders (educators, school leaders, school administrators, policymakers, and parents) in understanding what supports and motivates them as learners. The strategies identified in this study can address the opportunity gap as it relates to better supporting African American disadvantaged students. Lastly, readers have an opportunity to reflect on their inclusive practices and make better choices as they move forward.

Statement of Purpose

This study explores perceptions of adult African American students who once identified as disadvantaged to discover how agency is used to overcome obstacles to attain academic and professional success. Thus, all study participants were adult students that graduated from high school and sought to obtain higher education within a university setting.

As previously discussed, this study defines disadvantaged African American students as those who: (1) come from low-socioeconomic status households in which \$25,444 was the total annual income for a family with three or more members, (2) attended high schools in which 70% or more of the student body was composed of minority race students, (3) were first-generation college students, (4) and/or qualified for financial aid Pell Grants upon college enrollment.

The word *success* is frequently mentioned throughout the content of this work. Within this study, participants are considered successful if they are bachelor's degree-seeking students within two semesters of graduation or graduate-level degree-seeking students who have a

professional career within the field of education. For this study, the following positions qualify as professional careers within education: K-12 certified educator, K-12 school level administrator, or K-12 district-level administrator. I purposely explore agency's impact on the experiences of future and current African American college students because: (1) there is a need to examine how student agency can better support historically marginalized students such as African Americans within Mississippi; and (2) there is a lack of diversity within Mississippi's educator population. Therefore, there is a need to increase African American representation within the field of education. Thus, this study contextualizes agency's impact on a specific professionalized career field and gives insight into how agency can promote upward mobility within African American student populations as it relates to educational success.

Historically marginalized students are better engaged when they have access to instructional leaders who mirror their values, beliefs, norms, and physical identities (Cuyjet et al., 2016). However, due to the lack of teacher diversity and teacher shortage, many African American students do not experience any familiarity within schools due to cultural and racial differences. In 2017, white teachers made up 79% of the teacher population for K-12 public schools (National Education Center for Statistics, 2020). The cultural and social barriers between educators and their students prove to be detrimental to African American students' classroom engagement and achievement (Cuyjet et al., 2016).

Thus, the perceptions of the adult African American achievers within this study help stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents, and policymakers) to better support disadvantaged African American students academically and professionally. The achievers within this study should not be considered as rare commodities. Instead, these participants are beacons of hope, representing endless possibilities for other students who share similar life

circumstances. Through the exploration of these participants perceptions, researchers and educational stakeholders can learn how to reproduce similar success within future students.

This study references a portion of Kundu's (2020) agency and grit framework. I only focus on the part of Kundu's framework, which addresses agency. Limitations and skepticism surround grits' validity and effectivity across various social and cultural identities (Kwon, 2017). While Kundu's (2020) framework seeks to dismantle grit limitations through exploring perceptions of students from various marginalized backgrounds, the present study only focuses on the agency component of his work.

Referencing the work of Freire (1972) and Freire and Ramos (2014), Kundu's (2020) conceptualization of agency gives insight into a system that urges one to engage in critical thinking, collaboration, relationship building, self-reflection, self-awareness, and goal setting to reach desirable outcomes. All these core components of agency may be activated through the development of social and cultural capital within students' lives. Kundu (2020) defines agency as "a potential that individuals have to better their opportunities and life chances by overcoming their social limits" (Kundu, 2018, p. 53). Kundu's definition of agency is not only context-specific, but also incorporates the importance of acknowledging one's social position and structural obstacles so that a plan can be developed to reach better future outcomes. Students should not be expected to create and develop these plans individually but rather change agents and external support systems may enable them to become mobile despite societal constraints. Thus, through Kundu's (2020) work, I define agency for this study as a potential activated by resources, such as cultural and social capital, to produce opportunities and outcomes which override one's social limitations.

Research Questions

Although I only referenced a portion of Kundu's (2020) framework, my study aims to address three research questions similar to those within his study. Kundu's (2020) work discusses how agency and grit combine to overturn the social constraints which various marginalized low-income students face within academic and professional settings. However, my research questions are tailored to address disadvantaged African American students. The primary research question of this study is: How do socially and economically disadvantaged African American students who have managed to overcome significant obstacles describe and explain the strategies they utilized to succeed? As the primary research question is relatively broad, I address the following sub-questions which are connected to (a) social capital, (b) cultural capital, and (c and d) agency:

- a.) What factors foster help-seeking behavior for disadvantaged African American students to develop networks and systems of support?
- b.) What factors influence disadvantaged African American students to develop positive attitudes about themselves and how they value education?
- c.) What develops disadvantaged African American students' motivation towards goal attainment?
- d.) How do disadvantaged African American students describe themselves, and what traits seem associated with agency?

This study was conducted at a large university within the state of Mississippi. The university's School of Education has a total population of 1,414 students (The University of Mississippi, 2022). Of the total population, there are a total of 315 African American students (The University of Mississippi, 2022). Thus, African American students only make up 22. 14%

of the School of Education student population (The University of Mississippi, 2022). Through purposeful sampling, participants were recruited via email from this university's School of Education. Each participant self-identified his or herself as a former disadvantaged student by meeting one of the following requirements: (1) be an African American having come from a low-socioeconomic household with an annual income of \$25,444 or less for three or more family members, (2) be an African American graduate of a high school in which 70% or more of the student body is composed of minority race students, (3) be a first-generation African American college student or (4) be an African American student who qualified for financial aid Pell Grants upon undergraduate college enrollment (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

Upon determining whether or not they qualified as disadvantaged, participants also met one of the following criteria: (1) be an African American bachelor's degree-seeking School of Education student within two semesters of graduation or (2) be an African American School of Education graduate student, who has a professional career within the field of education. As this study aims to identify how agency contributes to the success of African American students, I purposely selected African American college students who have (1) attained secondary and post-secondary academic success and/or (2) a highly professionalized career in education. These attributes are indicators of participants' upward mobility transition.

For instance, undergraduate students in this study were deemed successful because they were able to complete high school and gain college admission to obtain a bachelor's degree despite their life's setbacks. In addition, these undergraduate students have transitioned to phase two of the teacher education program. Phase II requires students to pass the teacher certification examination prior to moving forward within the program. Thus, these participants are deemed successful as they have overcome one of the biggest challenges which prevents African

American teacher candidates from obtaining certification (Avent, 2020). In addition, these students are deemed successful as they were able to gain admission and successfully navigate an education program in which only 13.7% identifies as African Americans (The University of Mississippi, 2022). Therefore, these students were required to adapt to cultures outside of the norm as they navigated a system in which they are the minority.

In terms of graduate students, these participants have solidified their academic and professional success as they have secured professional careers in education and are currently working to obtain higher education which could lead to increased upward mobility. For instance, higher degrees will grant these participants the credentials needed for promotions and pay increases.

Key Terms

Throughout the second chapter of this dissertation, also known as the literature review, I discuss several key terms which are essential to this study's content. To ensure the reader has a clear understanding of all presented information, I compiled a list of the most frequently utilized terms within the upcoming chapter.

- Agency—"a potential that individuals have to better their opportunities and life chances by overcoming their social limits" to reach desired ends (Kundu, 2018, p. 53)
- Change agents— individuals that initiate, facilitate, implement, and support organizational changes within education to achieve better student outcomes (Fullan, 1993).
- Educational inequity—uneven distribution of school resources and opportunities, which often occurs between affluent and impoverished public schools (Anderson, 2018; Carter & Welner, 2016). Resources are referenced as qualified teachers, school funding, support services, technology, and teaching materials (Anderson, 2018; Carter & Welner, 2016).

- Educational restructuring—rebuilding activities to change fundamental assumptions, practices, and relationships to enhance student learning outcomes (Conley, 1997).
- Opportunity Gap—disparities in educational equity, such as unequal access to quality schools and other resources needed for every child to obtain academic success (Carter & Welner, 2016). The opportunity to learn is essential to each student’s achievement. Therefore, gaps in learning opportunities have led to gaps in student achievement (Carter & Welner, 2016).
- Self-efficacy—an individual’s belief in their capacity to successfully complete a given task as beliefs have yet to be operationalized through action (Bandura, 1982; Kundu, 2018; Kwon, 2017).

Overview of the Study

This dissertation includes a total of five chapters. Chapter I provide an introduction that discusses the problems surrounding the phenomenon as well as explain the central purpose of this study. Chapter II discusses an in-depth review of literature that focuses on specific aspects of the phenomenon. Specifically, this chapter incorporates the work of various researchers to lay a foundation that explains the impact that agency, when embedded with social and cultural capital, may have on the academic achievement and upward mobility of African American disadvantaged students. Chapter III explains the methodology used to conduct this study. For instance, this qualitative phenomenological study collected all data through semi-structured interviews. Chapter IV discusses the findings of all analyzed data. Lastly, chapter V discusses a comprehensive summary of this entire study. This summary includes implications and conclusions resulting from this study’s finding.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to: (1) gain an understanding of structural forces, such as social and cultural capital's, impact on education and upward mobility, and (2) provide a theoretical framework that examines the ways agency, when embedded with social and cultural capital, can support successful outcomes of disadvantaged African American students. To ensure my audience has a transparent understanding of how social structures can cause intersecting limitations to academic success and upward mobility, I embed an extensive review of the following literary components to lay a foundation that supports the importance of building agency within students. Therefore, this literature review was presented in the following order: (1) disadvantages encountered by African American students (2) differentiating structure and agency concepts in society and education (3) societal structures impact on student mobility (4) social and cultural capitals impact on education (5) developing social capital of disadvantaged students (6) culture deficient theories in education, (7) culture's impact on student identity, (8) social-emotional learning skills, (8) defining agency, (9) student agency, (10) conceptual framework (11) gaps within research, and (12) chapter summary.

Disadvantages Faced by African American Students

Social injustices within American schools cause barriers between African American students and life success. Disadvantaged both educationally, economically, and socially, many African American students lack the support needed to obtain academic success, higher education,

and upward financial mobility (Anderson, 2018). For example, African American students have yet to gain access to equal instructional resources, financial support, and highly accredited teachers due to school funding policies. Excess school funding is calculated through the tax brackets of the school community (Fraser, 1998). Therefore, schools in poverty do not receive as much funding as affluent schools. African American students who struggle economically are more likely to attend impoverished schools that lack highly qualified teachers, interventions, technology, and support staff. In Mississippi, 31.8% of the African American population identifies as impoverished.

Research has shown school funding and resources can have a dynamic effect on student achievement, as schools with insufficient resources tend to have lower levels of student achievement (Johnson et al., 2001). In addition to this claim, results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] consistently show gaps between African American and White students in math and reading (Anderson, 2018). This research indicates African American students do not receive the same educational foundation as their White counterparts upon high school completion.

Inequitable school structuring of this nature has occurred within Mississippi and throughout all American schools for decades (Ladson-Billings, 1997). Examples of such inequitable school structuring were founded upon racial segregation—systematic separation of people based on race— and Jim Crow laws— state and local laws that implemented racial segregation in southern parts of the United States—experienced by African American communities (Gutiérrez et al., 2020; Sharkey, 2013). These laws and policies are no longer implemented today. However, the damage caused by Jim Crow laws and segregation has created lasting educational debt and opportunity loss which is prevalent within income disparities,

generational neighborhood inequities, and educational attainment gaps seen between white and minoritized groups (Kundu, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) argue “the transfer of power can create spaces to practice social justice, or rather the even distribution of power, since it is generated through popular participation in a democratic process to serve the needs and expectations of minority members” (p. 161). However, the opportunity gap demonstrates that power transfers are not holistically being produced as African American students continue to rank lower in academics and annual income earnings in comparison to their White peers. Nearly two-thirds of all jobs require post-secondary education or training beyond high school (Anderson, 2018). Therefore, we see the underrepresentation of African Americans within many organizations, occupations, and positions of power within society as the cycle of socio-economic oppression and uneven power distribution continues to persist. These inequities reflect structural forces’ impact on African American students’ success and chances for upward mobility within today’s society.

Differentiating Structure and Agency Concepts in Society and Education

Social structure is defined as the social relations patterns of interdependence among individuals and their actions (López & Scott, 2000). Social structure is based on how these patterns form different configurations within society (López & Scott, 2000). Kundu (2020) defines social structures as the grouping of institutions where humans interact. In reference to a hierarchical nature, Stanton-Salazar (2011) describes social structure—at the micro, organizational, institutional, and community level as “the motor that propels all relationships, whether between individuals or groups in society” (p. 1084). As relationships form through social structures, resources are generated and optimized for mobility (Kundu, 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). While evaluating social structure’s impact on education, researchers frequently

scrutinize systems, such as class or income; institutions, such as schools; procedural knowledge and educational attainment, such as cultural capital; and relationships, such as networking capacity or social capital (Barker, 2003, Bourdieu, 1986; Kundu, 2020). These systems serve as a foundation in education's functionality because those with high-status power have access to and control resources within education. Therefore, there is a need to analyze how these systems can support or hinder African American students who did not inherit educational, economic, and/or social advantages from their parents.

Chin and Phillips (2004) argue agency is an individual's capacity to gain control over their lives despite their social structure positioning. Therefore, past researchers have implied agency emphasizes children's independence in exerting influence over their lives while within structured societal pathways (Bandura, 2001; Elder, 1994; Hilton & Elder, 2006, as cited in Kundu, 2018; Parker et al., 2012). This definition implies student success is simply a choice in which students decide. Yet, when students are the central focus, influence must be interdependent "within families and wider social environments" such as school settings (Burger & Walk, 2016, p. 698). For instance, authentic agency requires incorporating a balance that is reflective of "accepting dependence on others and their authority" and demonstrating a certain level of independence from their supporters (Eneau, 2012, as cited in Burger & Walk, 2016, p. 698). Therefore, students must have support systems, or rather external resources, such as caring teachers, mentors, leaders, or life coaches, to help develop their agency. Thus, "those who develop agency readily seek out advice and assistance from others with knowledge, connections, and experience about college, careers, and life in general" (Kundu, 2020, p. 11).

Previous researchers imply agency tends to develop within children's character rather than their social position (Chin & Phillips, 2004). However, if students are to be interdependent

upon others for agency's development and facilitation how do we ensure students who have limited social and cultural capital make appropriate attachment bonds with individuals to gain adequate support? Thus, holistic and equitable agency must acknowledge and address the obstacles and hardships social structures can elevate for disadvantaged students as well as emphasize help-seeking behavior and resources needed to attain better outcomes (Kundu, 2020).

Structure and agency concepts rely on contrasting premises. Yet, empirical research shows both concepts can propel or cause hindrance to student success (Martin et al., 2017; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). However, increasing academic achievement and upward mobility for African American disadvantaged students is more likely to occur when these students are (1) granted exposure to supportive structures and (2) agency is developed to maximize resources. Thus, these students need guidance and support to develop their agency as it is evident they do not always have access to resources such as high-status authority figures. Such support should foster systems that facilitate the development of students' social and cultural capital to enhance their opportunities.

As previously discussed, all environments are not homogeneously structured (Kundu, 2018). Therefore, it is important to teach students how to independently navigate their surroundings so they can learn to excel within any given environment. It is essential to prepare students to be self-reflective of their social positioning, intentional about choosing actions that align with and support their goals, and interactional within their environment. These processes can aid students in identifying their needs, seeking help, and creating networks (relationships) that support successful life outcomes (student achievement, degree attainment, and professional occupations) irrespective of their backgrounds and identities (Bandura, 2001; Titus & Roman, 2019).

Societal Structures Impact on Disadvantaged Student's Mobility

Mobility is one's ability to move up or down within societal systems. Societal structures are based on economic capital, social capital (such as one's networking capacity), and cultural capital (such as one's educational attainment, knowledge, skills, and values) (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The difficulty in attaining upward mobility increases with decreases in structural advantages such as parental support, quality education, mentorship, financial stability, and networking capacity. However, difficulty in attaining upward mobility decreases as structural advantages increase. For instance, research reveals that upper- and middle-class students typically have access to resources and knowledge, such as college requirements, college admission processes, and diverse social networks which lower-class students do not (Ciabattari, 2010). Therefore, high- and middle-class parents can utilize external sources outside of school institutions to propel their children's academic and life success. For example, upper-class and middle-class people can construct cosmopolitan networks which may provide opportunities for mentoring, internships, and career advancement for themselves and their children (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

In contrast, parents and students of low socioeconomic status primarily rely on school institutions and particularly teachers to "direct the child's educational experiences due to their lack of academically-oriented social and cultural resources" (Ciabattari, 2010, p. 119). As this torch is passed on to school agents, there is a need for teachers, administrators, support staff, and all other internal school agents to create gateways for students to gain the social and cultural capital needed to support their academic and professional goals. Without such attributes' these students are forced to learn to independently navigate the social world which can continue to lead to a stagnant cycle of social positioning, economic status, and limited cultural capital.

Issues surrounding student mobility date back many decades. For instance, Bowles and Gintis (1976) suggest schools function as reflective institutions which work to maintain existing class order. Attempting to address this issue Bourdieu (1977) argues that students not born into privileged families could attend formal schooling to gain the tools needed to overcome social structures and obtain upward mobility. However, the foundation and support needed to gain entry and access to post-secondary institutions is not always adequately provided to lower-status students. Therefore, it is important to understand how former disadvantaged students defied the odds and gained entry into post-secondary institutions. Yet, gaining college entry does not necessarily guarantee these students will graduate as minority students from low-income backgrounds may still have difficulty persisting in college due to their inability to “integrate into student support resources on campus” that cater to majority race students (Kundu, 2019, p. 678).

Within the 21st century, there is a high demand for students to gain post-secondary degrees as most professional jobs require employees to have a college education or at least some form of training beyond the high school level (Anderson, 2018). In addition, gaining this educational attainment can help to create bridges between students’ realities and goals as they gain qualifications which make them eligible for better-paying jobs and upward mobility. To attain upward mobility, one must conquer the attributes of American success, which is defined by the obtainment of (1) one or more post-secondary degrees, (2) employment that grants financial stability, and (3) the ability to grant societal contributions such as paying taxes and investing within social security (Kundu, 2018, 2020). Such success is deemed natural law to students who come from families in which success has been normalized as part of their identities (Cuyjet et al., 2016). However, low-status students typically come from homes in which degree attainment or occupational prestige did not occur. Therefore, during the most influential stages of

child development, low-status students do not always have a psychological concept of the ingredients needed for future success. In addition, environmental factors within poor communities such as high levels of lead in drinking water and lack of access to quality grocery stores can negatively impact the physical and mental health within a child's primary developmental stages, prior to entering poorly funded, low performing school (Kundu, 2020).

High levels of community poverty equate to fewer supplement dollars to be provided to impoverished schools (Fraser, 1998). For instance, tax dollars accrued from community members and establishments are utilized to help fund the needs of schools. Such school structuring ensures students only receive additional resources made available by their community (Fraser, 1998). Thus, social class and economic status can still be viewed as the drivers of student outcomes as these factors determine which schools will receive excess funding that is dependent upon the wealth of their communities (Fraser, 1998). Wealthier districts thrive on funds from the state, government, and high tax dollars granted from their flourishing communities. Additional funds grant school districts the ability to spend more dollars on high-quality teachers and support staff which enhances instructional quality. Therefore, one might argue American school structuring continues to violate social justice's redistribution principle—the even distribution of cultural capital and material goods to marginalized groups— as schools are not distributed equal goods in terms of funding (Lingard & Keddie, 2013).

Social and Cultural Capital Reproduction's Impact on Education

Social and cultural reproduction in education occurs as each generation inherits economic, social, and cultural capital which society values differently because of a hierarchical social system that promotes inequities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Doob, 2015; Kundu, 2018). Various researchers argue the pros and cons of social and cultural capital as different

conceptualizations of these theories have emerged. Social relationships, which are also known as a form of social capital, may be understood as networks of people and community resources (Yosso, 2005). Bourdieu (1977), the initial social capital theorist, argues social inequities exist due to society's biased conceptions of one's social and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Thus, individuals who possess valued capital have more advantages and privileges within society.

Bourdieu (1977) notes the knowledge of the upper and middle classes are considered valuable capital within society as they set the standard for acceptable norms. Supporting Bourdieu's (1986) concept, Patterson and Fosse (2015) and Kundu (2018) argue knowledge formed through valued social and cultural capital helps people navigate the world. This knowledge is important because it actively influences a person's ability to adapt to his or her surroundings (Kundu, 2018). Having such capital equips one with the foundational skills needed to succeed within various environments.

In education, Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory lays a foundation for analyzing forces and conditions that permit upper- and middle-class students multiple forms of capital while disadvantaged students navigate the system independently. Research surrounding social stratification—categorization-based factors such as race, wealth, income, race, education, social status, occupation, and power—posits students inherit educational advantages or disadvantages from their parents (Burger & Walk, 2016; Hertz et al., 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Therefore, students inherited social positions depict their rank within systematic hierarchical systems.

These hierarchical systems convey messages to institutional agents, such as educators, which guide specific rules for distributing resources to those in lower or more principal hierarchies (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Educators gravitate to or reward students within upper levels of these systems, who successfully exercise the proper discourse. As unconscious stakeholders (educators, policymakers, and legislators) engage within these bias structures, greater emphasis and support are granted to students who fit the discourse for success. Teacher expectations and disciplinary measures are influenced by students' class and race (Delpritt, 1995; Oakes, 2005; Rist, 1970). Teacher bias, which is fueled by race and class, can impact students' current and future academic journeys in terms of college attendance (Kundu, 2018). For instance, if students buy into the negative stigmas associated with their race and background, they may adopt imposter syndrome and feel like they do not belong at post-secondary institutions.

As negative aspects of school structures operate to problematize working class and minority youth's connection to institutional agents and resourceful networks, economically disadvantaged students fall between the cracks (Conchas, 2006; Ianni, 1989; Lareau, 2003; Prado, 2006, as cited in Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Supporting this claim, Boykin and Noguera (2011) argue opportunity gaps arise from "inequalities directly related to children's backgrounds and school practices that reinforce and often exacerbate inequity" (p. 186). In conjunction, Diamond (2006) argue disparities within racial achievement are fueled by (1) students of color lack of access to opportunities and (2) neglect low socioeconomic status students endure from school educators. Thus, the opportunity gap continues to permeate school institutions as teachers and principals remain inactive regarding mitigating racial exclusion in social networks, pedagogy, curriculum, extracurricular activities, and procedural knowledge (Carter, 2009; Flores, 2018).

Developing Disadvantaged Student's Social Capital

Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 248). In other words, social capital is access to supportive networks that are composed of individuals possessing credentials deemed as valuable within society. Social capital can be used to boost student success as they engage within “resourceful relationships and activities socially organized within a network of socialization agents, natural or informal mentors, pro-academic peers, and institutional agents distributed throughout the extended family, school, neighborhood, community, and society” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1069). Teachers can function as these agents to help to expand students' capital by serving as a bridge between them and mentors, community leaders, and influential high-status figures. Through these relationships, or networks, students can gain social and institutional support to enhance their “social development, academic performance, and preparation for adulthood” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1070).

As educators, teachers possess or have the capacity to possess relationships with same status and higher status individuals (college professors, other teachers, college peers, school administrators, etc). Therefore, teachers can share their connections with students to support their interests, goals, and development of procedural knowledge as it relates to their desired outcomes. According to Stanton-Salazar (2011), the class position of an individual predicts the social networks in which he or she is embedded. Therefore, most teachers have unlimited access to individuals within educational positions. In addition, teachers can help to bridge relationships between their students and goals (outside of education) through connecting students to applicable mentors, internship opportunities, and programs related to students' interests and desires.

However, in order for this networking process to work educators have to make a conscious effort to “advocate and distribute resources to those low-status students” who normally do not benefit from the school’s stock institutional resources (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1086). In addition, teachers and students must form relationships in which both parties are mutually invested in setting goals to support the student’s future. As previously discussed, social capital exists within education, however, the resources are systematically structured to benefit students who demonstrate valued discourse. Thus, African American disadvantaged students need teachers who embrace their backgrounds and relationships to nurture their development and support systems.

Culture Deficient Theories in Education

Cultural capital is a nonfinancial asset that promotes one’s social mobility through their acquired knowledge, behaviors, and skills (Bourdieu 1977; Kundu, 2020; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Every child born has some form of cultural capital. However, disparities within cultural capital’s value occurs due to racism embedded within culturally “deficit” thinking theories (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). Deficit thinking places poor academic performance fault on minority students and their families by implying these (1) “students enter school without normative cultural knowledge and skills, and (2) parents neither value nor support their children’s education” (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). Such concepts date back to the 1960s as scholars created various culture deficient theories which suggest children of color are victims of “pathological lifestyles” which negate the benefits of schooling (Duetsch, 1963, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 4). These notions gave stakeholders ground to argue certain students are a lost cause. Therefore, the historic education system continued to be implemented as theorists argued there was not a need for educational restructuring. However, The Coleman Report of 1966 emphasizes

the importance of integrated schools (Coleman et al., 1966). The report argues a combination of factors, such as student attendance, pupils' sense of control of the environment and their future, and backgrounds impact student success.

Decades later Ciabattari (2010) presented evidence showing disadvantaged parents indeed support and value their children's education. However, these parents often feel teachers are better equipped to lead their child's educational journey due to parents' lack of educational expertise and resources (Ciabattari, 2010). Secondly, individuals have different identities, backgrounds, and cultures. Thus, the social and cultural identities students form at home may be oppositional to the "specific and rigid types of academic identities needed for success in schools, which reward the dominant groups form of social and cultural capital" (Kundu, 2018, p. 34).

Rather than schools bridging cultural lines, students must either (1) strip themselves of their natural cultures (2) or either learn to adapt or code switch to demonstrate norms expected by school stakeholders (administrators, educators, counselors) to gain acceptance. Failure to gain access to higher levels of hierarchy may cause minority students to underachieve, become ostracized from excelling peers, and receive less support from institutional agents (Diamond, 2006; Ransaw & Majors, 2016). Such could lead to immobility and poor future outcomes for disadvantaged students.

"Deficient-based perspectives have a deleterious effect on student's academic and social-emotional outcomes, especially students apart of racial, economic, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, or gender group which are perceived negatively" (Steel, 2010, as cited in Zacarian & Silverstone, 2020, p. 76). Culture deficient theories of this nature neglect to acknowledge the strain structural forces can place on culture as they blame underachievement on students and their family's inability to "take advantage of America's opportunity system" (Kundu, 2018, p. 38). For

example, McWhorter (2000) implies low performers, specifically African American students, perceive themselves as victims. Thus, they become subject to a victimhood culture of blaming others for their circumstances. In addition, McWhorter (2000) suggests people of color self-sabotage rather than take advantage of presented opportunities. McWhorter's (2000) arguments find fault with oppressed individuals and neglect to explore holistic factors that can lead to poor outcomes. Thus, McWhorter (2000) neglects to recognize the fluidity within culture as it is shaped by one's environment and "circumstances" (Kundu, 2018, p. 39).

Harris (2011) presents a counterargument to McWhorter's (2000) theory by highlighting African Americans' historic determination to obtain an education. Harris (2011) emphasizes the importance of exploring dynamics such as structural forces, social capital, and cultural capital impact on an individual's identity and life perspectives. For instance, in educational settings, filtering negative perceptions about identities out of classrooms can enhance students' "ability to see" their own and others' potential as well as blur cultural lines that fuel class and race separation of students (Zacarian & Silverstone, 2020, p. 77). Lastly, filtering out such perceptions may help stakeholders such as educators, policymakers, and curriculum creators identify better ways to reach disadvantaged students and learn more about their specific interests and talents as it relates to their identities (Anderson, 2018).

Cultures' Impact on Students' Identities

Non-inclusive environments can send a message indicating the dominant group's culture holds more relevance than a non-dominant group's culture, which can negatively impact minority students' self-efficacy (Cuyjet et al., 2016). Thus, students may embody the norms of different cultures as they attempt to adapt to different environments. As students embody the norms of a different culture, they may lose a deep connection to their own culture (Cuyjet et al.,

2016). However, culturally inclusive environments can nurture students' native culture. For instance, Bernal (2001) argues Chicanas can draw strength from their ethnic identity when they speak their native language. In addition, Bernal (2001) argues teaching and learning of the home causes Chicanas to value their own cultures and sense of self. Such valuing allows them to resist assimilating with norms of the majority race (Bernal, 2001).

Critical factors such as social class, gender, family status, age, social awareness, culture, age, and spirituality shape student identities (Cuyjet et al., 2016). As students understand the social world, they seek to develop their identity. This process occurs as students transcend to adulthood. Zacarian and Silverstone (2020) state, "during the preteen and teen years, motivation becomes increasingly linked to peer relationships and the quest to explore one's identity. Children at these stages of development are increasingly drawn to learning with and from peers" (p. 66). Therefore, students need opportunities to experience different environments to explore multiple identities so they can successfully integrate within a diverse society.

With the guidance of teachers, students can explore various cultures and expand their capital through their learning experiences. For instance, instruction and pedagogy that is inclusive of students' backgrounds and cultures can help to bridge cultural gaps between minority and white students. Also, encouraging cultural inclusivity "helps students to resist the urge to assimilate, losing their culture by fully integrating into the dominant culture, and instead acculturate their native culture with the acquisition of some aspects of Anglo culture" (Cuyjet et al., 2016, p. 94). By merging cultures, institutions can expand classic dispositions associated with ethnic identity, including increased self-efficacy and self-esteem, which positively influence students' academic performance (Cuyjet et al., 2016). In addition, African American students can

specifically benefit from merging cultures as it may allow them to gain access to new knowledge and social capital needed to navigate foreign spaces.

Social-Emotional Development's Impact on Student Mobility

This section discusses how social-emotional learning skills may boost students' social capital, cultural capital, and psychological construction to support student agency development.

According to Schonert-Reich (2017):

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a process by which people acquire and effectively apply knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage their emotions, feel and show empathy for others, establish and achieve positive goals, develop and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions. (p. 139)

Positive social-emotional development lays a foundation for positive student behavior which may lead to enhancing their social skills needed for social capital and upward mobility (Jones et al., 2014; Schonert-Reich, 2017). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2016) identifies five interrelated competencies of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Developing and recognizing positive relationships is a key aspect of student success. These skills are essential to establishing effective collaborative skills which are needed to function successfully within networking groups and professional settings. Teachers must use their social-emotional skills to develop high-quality relationships with students (Jones et al., 2014). Positive teacher-student interactions allow students to gain the capacity to communicate their needs, take accountability for their actions, draft goals, and identify available resources for goal support. In addition, these skills are essential in building the social and cultural capital

embedded within agency as they are fundamental to making decisions geared towards obtaining goals (Kajamaa & Kumpulainen, 2019).

In addition, by building positive interactions with students, teachers can optimistically shape students' perceptions to gain students' trust. For instance, the way a teacher interacts with a student and "relays expectations can affect a student's self-perception" (Kundu, 2018, p. 46). Supporting this claim, Alderman and Green (2011) suggest students likely respond positively to teachers who display genuine care and concern for them. Therefore, students' responses are affected by the nature and structure of their relationships (Wentzel, 2004, as cited in Wentzel et al., 2018). Therefore, educators must provide a safe setting where all students are free from isolation and encouraged to participate in nurturing relationships.

Defining Agency

Historically, agency is associated with resistive and oppositional action. In Genovese's (1974) account slaves demonstrate resistance by building their own culture in music and religion, which gave them the capacity to produce separate identities from those of slave masters. Kelly's (1996) writings also demonstrate the agency of working-class African Americans as they resisted giving into systematic racism. These individuals "collectively organized" and sought to disrupt everyday norms which are forms of civil disobedience (Kundu, 2018, p. 49). Kelly's (1996) work shows agency can have a collective nature as individuals unite to promote better outcomes. However, structural forces which fuel education inequities cannot be resolved through only implementing resistance.

As time has progressed researchers have tailored various definitions of agency as it relates to the context of specific studies. Bandura (2001) argues human agency has four main components: intentionality, forethought, self-reflectiveness, and self-reactiveness. First, agency

references one's act to intentionally seek a better outcome. Next, agency includes forethought—one's "forward and directed planning" (Titus & Roman, 2019, p. 308). Third, agency incorporates self-reactiveness which involves agents "deliberate ability to make choices and activate plans" (Titus & Roman, 2019, p. 308). Lastly, agency includes a "self-reflective nature" that allows for self-examination of one's actions (Titus & Roman, 2019, pp. 308-309).

Chin and Phillips (2004) define agency as one's capacity to gain control over their life independent of his existing social structure. This definition emphasizes one's autonomy and individual will. However, when structural forces are taken into consideration, agency cannot be deemed an independent factor responsible for student success. For instance, Burger and Walker's (2016) study implies a child's agency is not an at-will trait as it cannot be independently activated to intervene in the process of structural determination or social constraint. Also, this study reveals that students can develop agency independent of their social positioning, such as their parent's level of education. However, students with more cultural possessions (such as procedural knowledge of the social world) are more likely to possess higher levels of agency (Klemenčič, 2015). In addition, this study reveals high levels of agency correlate with higher levels of academic achievement. Thus, developing student agency can indeed increase students' academic success. However, as previously discussed, to successfully develop agency within the lives of disadvantaged students support systems should be in place to enhance the expansion of their social and cultural capital.

Agency requires an individual to take action related to one's goals (Kundu, 2018). Some researchers imply self-efficacy—an individual's belief in their ability to complete a given task successfully—is not the foundation of agency but rather a component (Bandura, 1982; Kundu, 2018; Kwon, 2017). Yet, self-efficacy still serves as a vital subjective component of agency as it

emphasizes humans' motivation to control their environments and actions (Bandura, 2001). In other words, increased self-efficacy attributes behavior that leads to desired performance (Bandura 1977, 2001, 1982, 1986, 1997). However, researchers neglect to identify the behavior for actions that transform subjective beliefs into active agency (Kwon, 2017). For example, researchers have found positive correlations between students' self-efficacy and positive outcomes, such as achievement (Martin et al., 2017). However, self-efficacy has yet to address how internalized belief manifests into action-based "behavior," to operationalize agency (Kundu, 2018, p. 52).

Nagaoka et al. (2015) describe agency as one's ability to take an active role in their life choices instead of succumbing to inherited circumstances. Supporting Bandura (2001), Nagaoka et al. (2015) further explain that intentionality and forethought are essential to agency's process of deriving a course of action and adjusting as needed so that one's identity, knowledge, skills, competencies, values, and mindsets are incorporated. This traditional definition emphasizes the subjectivity of agency as it focuses on individuals' intentionality and forethought rather than facts and actions.

Such subjective discourse can be seen in Hiltin and Johnson's (2015) definition of agency: the belief one has in his ability to control his life. Hiltin and Johnson (2015) imply a multidimensional understanding of agency can occur through gaining an understanding of the modern life course as it involves perceiving one's capacity, life chances, and life expectations for future possibilities. Further, Hiltin and Johnson (2015) state, "a proper understanding of agency's potential power within the life course necessitates moving beyond domain-specific expectations" (p. 1431). Thus, Hiltin and Johnson's (2015) concept focuses on perceptions influence on future outcomes. For instance, these researchers imply authentic agency motivates students to look

beyond their current circumstances, to visualize, plan, and attain better future outcomes.

However, its subjective nature neglects to demonstrate the actions and resources (social and cultural capital) needed to manifest one's desired goals.

Hiltin and Johnson's (2015) theory is built upon the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), which attempts to "implement action in agency by categorizing agency into components which were empirically related" (Kundu, 2018, p. 56). Describing agency as an embedded process of interaction that occurs within individuals' social life, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue agency has a temporal nature and is informed by past aspects that are (1) future centered regarding the selection of alternative courses, yet (2) grounded in the present when viewed from an evaluative perspective. Even though this concept attempts to internalize the importance of attaining a better life course than one's current circumstances, it neglects to clarify the action and behavior processes needed to reach those better outcomes.

Kajamaa and Kumpulainen (2019) define agency as a "reframing process evidenced in young people's initiative and commitment to transform their activity" and its context for personal and/or academic ends (p. 268). As the importance of transformation is highlighted within this meaning, the authors have defined this definition as a transformative agency. This form of agency is "developed and is maintained in collective interaction over time when agentic actions gain their meaning, consequences, and continuity in the interplay between individuals and their collective" (Engestrom, 2007, as cited in Kajamaa & Kumpulainen, 2019, p. 267).

Such collective references the interaction and unity of various individuals aiming to attain a common goal of improved outcomes which in an educational context can be viewed as using social capital implementation to boost student achievement. For instance, Rainio (2008) states, "agency must be understood as a complex and contradictory process developed over time but

simultaneously grounded in local interactions, to the roles and positions available to students and teachers” (p. 116). This definition emphasizes how teachers can serve as actors to influence and guide student’s thinking, planning, and actions. Secondly, these researchers imply developing transformative agency within students may be essential to achieving personal and social change as this form of agency “takes initiatives to transform its actions” into desired outcomes (Virkkunen, 2006, as cited in Kajamm & Kumpulainen, 2019, p. 267).

Student Agency

Klemenčič, (2015) uses Bandura’s human agency framework as a foundation for defining student agency—the “quality of students’ self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment” (p. 11). More specifically, Klemenčič (2015) argues the process of student agency requires: (1) variable notions of agentic orientation, such as will, (2) students’ relativity to past, present, and future choices of actions and interactions, and (3) student’s agentic possibility such as their “perceived power to achieve intentional outcomes in a particular context of action and interaction, but also self-engagement of a critical reflexive kind” (p. 16). This definition embeds three important components for student agency development. First, it emphasizes the importance of students’ desire to succeed. Secondly, it focuses on the analysis of decision-making skills (which may be determined as problem-solving skills) and social positioning as these components determine the interactions students have with others. Lastly, it signifies the power of student perception which can be influenced by supportive teacher-student relationships. Thus, Klemenčič, (2015) suggests student agency is a process that requires the investment of multiple supportive parties for one’s academic and professional success.

Moses et al. (2020) define student agency as their capacity to exhibit choices in their learning which is informed by their “belief and careful consideration, self-regulation, and self-

reflection about the ability to control and take ownership of their own learning” (p. 214). Within their study, they reveal three main themes which can help educators support the development of students’ agency: pedagogical decisions, problem-solving, and student choice and voice.

Pedagogical decisions. In terms of pedagogical decisions, educators should make a conscious decision to implement a constructivist approach, where— the teachers serve as the facilitators of learning rather than the sole proprietor of knowledge (Moses et al., 2020). This requires teachers to guide student learning as they foster new knowledge through their existing knowledge. An approach of this nature may allow students to take ownership of their own learning as they are motivated to become active “investigators” in the learning process (Freire, 1972). Such can be achieved as educators implement culturally inclusive pedagogy and instructional practices in which students can find familiarity.

One-way educators can connect instruction to students’ lives is through incorporating real-world scenarios and problem-solving questions within assignments as it relates to the students’ cultures. This can create an environment that welcomes students to share their knowledge funds with peers and teachers and enable students to bridge their personal identity with academic content. Supporting this claim Berryman’s (2015) study reveals altering the pedagogies and power of relationships within classrooms allows students’ cultural values to enhance cognitive engagement and promotes subsequent achievement. In addition, incorporating students’ cultures and backgrounds within instruction allows students to actively discern their position within society. Social position identification, or self-reflection, should occur prior to goal formation so students, with the assistance of teachers, can develop a successful plan for goal attainment. Also, inclusive instruction can build students’ self-efficacy which influences their

perceptions about their ability to perform well and succeed academically. Academic success within K-12 settings is essential to post-secondary enrollment and completion

Secondly, educators can provide students with collaborative opportunities, such as group projects or partner assignments. These collaborative assignments give students the opportunity to engage in “thinking, discussing, theorizing, and synthesizing with peers” (Moses et al., 2020, p. 216). As students participate in group learning, they are empowered to self-reflect and revise their opinions and actions as they are positively influenced by the perceptions of their peers. In addition, collaborative assignments help facilitate the development of students’ social and emotional skills needed to develop healthy relationships and communication skills as they learn to work with others. The building of healthy relationships is essential to the interaction component of agency. Also, the ability to form healthy relationships is fundamental to social capital’s development.

Third, educators can share classroom authority, such as granting students some form of autonomy over their own learning. For instance, teachers may allow students to make decisions about which type of assessment they would like to complete for grades. Such decision-making allows students to become active agents within their own learning processes rather than passive learners (Klemenčič, 2015). In addition, the sharing of classroom authority allows students to demonstrate self-influence and self-initiative as they are put within decision-making opportunities.

Problem solving. Moses et al. (2020) suggest instilling problem-solving strategies within students is a key component of agency. As educators afford students space to develop problem-solving tools they are allowed to engage in thinking and processing skills that will allow them to identify and solve problems which could interfere with the attainment of their goals when

transitioning beyond K-12 institutions. Problem-solving can be linked to Freire's (1972) agency framework which emphasizes the importance of students realizing their social positioning, and then thinking critically to produce actions for desired outcomes (goals). As students learn to think critically and analyze situations, they can then create solutions to overcome issues. Also, problem-solving skills require students to examine their environment and circumstances to identify and locate resources that can provide them with support for goal attainment. Thus, through learning problem-solving strategies students are gaining life skills conducive to any environment within their futures.

Student voice and choice. Third Moses et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of educators providing students with voice and choice to foster student agency development. For example, offering students an outlet to share their opinions on school matters can provide students the opportunity to become active researchers rather than just recipients of knowledge. Gonzalez et al. (2017) support this claim as they emphasize students' voice has the potential to open space for historically marginalized students to serve in roles for school change and hybrid learning spaces. Authentic student voice and choice "requires the recognition of students as those with essential perspectives on learning and the creation of conditions under which the power and responsibility for educational practice and research are shared" (Cook-Sather, 2020, p. 183). Student voice fosters student agency and civic engagement development as it provides an opportunity for students to be included in decision-making processes which affect their learning and life outcomes.

In terms of post-secondary institutions, Titus and Roman's (2019) study reveals "learning support offered by academic departments who offer support with regard to academic and non-academic activities, encouraging interactions with other students, providing adequate learning

spaces and adequate supervision amongst others” may mediate students’ agency while also serving as a reliable predictor for student success (p. 311). This study implies higher education institutions “should ensure that adequate support mechanisms are in place for students in order to provide a unique space for the development of student agency” (Titus & Roman, 2019, p. 311). Such adequate support mechanisms reference opportunities for students and teachers to build positive interactions and relationships. The building of such relationships can also be deemed as a potential for expanding one’s social capital and cultural capital as students may expand their networks and gain more understanding of procedural knowledge needed to (1) navigate future career spaces, (2) set and obtain goals, and (3) expanded their networking capacity.

Teachers as Institutional Agents

Teachers can play an important role in the development of students’ agency as they serve as institutional agents in educational settings. An institutional agent is an “individual who occupies one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high status, either within a society or in an institution (or an organization)” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1075). In relation to African American disadvantaged students, educational institutional agents possess an elevated level of human, cultural, and social capital as these individuals typically occupy positions of status and authority and have access to highly valued resources (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). For instance, educators typically have social networking circles that classify as positional resources, or personal resources. Positional resources are linked to an advantageous position within hierarchically organized networks, organizations, institutions, or social systems; personal resources reference “the possession of individual actors who can use or transmit resources” autonomously (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1078). Accessible teachers, administrators, mentors, faculty members, and community leaders could serve as institutional agents who grant

institutional support—utilizing key resources, opportunities, privileges, and services to support the academic, social, and class mobility of disenfranchised students— to disadvantaged students to expand their social and cultural capital by sharing their networks with students to support their academic and professional goals.

Conceptual Framework

The previous discussion of agency’s transformation provides a foundation for agency’s true meaning within sociological and educational contexts. Abundant research surrounding student agency in K-12 institutions emphasizes the importance of pedagogy, collaboration, and student voice. However, there is a shortage of research that incorporates embedding social and cultural resources (expansion beyond the classroom setting) within student agency development. This form of agency may enhance the ways in which the social and cultural capital of students is expanded to provide students with greater networks beyond the classroom and post-secondary settings. Such support may facilitate greater support for African American disadvantaged students and help to bridge the opportunity gap. Therefore, I am adding to educational research that emphasizes the importance of restructuring education and support systems to facilitate student agency that is fueled by external and internal forms of capital. External social and cultural capital references the building of bridges between students and high-status individuals outside of K-12 institutions. I cannot take full credit for this creation as I built this study partially upon Kundu’s (2020) agency and grit interaction framework.

Kundu (2018) defines agency as “a potential that individuals have to better their opportunities and life chances by overcoming social limits” (p. 53). Kundu is among few scholars who reveals how agency can potentially manifest into action through the generation of student resources. Thus, Kundu’s (2018, 2020) work shapes my definition of agency; I define

agency as an active potential individuals use to produce enhanced opportunities and life success by implementing supportive resources to counter oppositional structural forces. Resembling Kundu's (2020) definition, I signify the importance of acknowledging societal structure's impact on students' opportunities and success while emphasizing students' ability to succeed through obtaining internal and external school support. Such support is important to the success of disadvantaged African American students because it may provide a solid foundation for these students to gain support to reach academic and professional success.

My primary research question is: How do socially and economically disadvantaged African American students who have managed to overcome significant obstacles describe and explain the strategies they utilized to succeed? Adding to the existing literature on achievement, educational outcomes, and specifically Kundu's (2020) agency and grit framework, I argue student agency can optimize African American student growth when embedded with social and cultural capital expansion enabled by educators. Within this section, I discuss how to activate agency for the holistic and optimal growth of African American disadvantaged students.

Student agency requires critical exploration and reflection of one's presented circumstances (Freire, 1972; Kundu, 2018). These processes may bring forth realities of an individual's circumstances and signify ways to maximize one's own capacity to alter their chances for better future outcomes. However, such exploration and reflection should not occur within school settings independently as students require guidance on how to seek and utilize resources that can support their desired outcomes. Instead, student agency should be supported by the social and cultural capital of educators, mentors, and community leaders to grant students a pool of resources for academic, social-emotional, and goal development.

“Agency, if supported by social and cultural resources can allow someone to form specific goals as they start to see themselves in a new and improved light” (Kundu, 2020, p. 60). Educational institutional agents and change agents can serve as social and cultural capital resources for student’s agency development as students learn to (1) identify their social positions, and (2) identify and think critically about how to utilize their available resources (institutional agents) to move upward (Freire, 1972). In addition, Freire and Ramos’ (2014) critical pedagogy framework argues teachers should prioritize increasing students’ praxis of action and reflection of one’s social position. Praxis references investigating an individual’s (1) thoughts about reality and (2) actions in regard to their past, present, and future (Klemenčič, 2015; Freire & Ramos, 2014). Student actions can be directed by those who have attained the students’ level of desired success or by those who understand society’s composure and can generate resources that support students’ interests, and long-term goals.

For example, community mentorship programs, internship programs, and pre-college programs offered by post-secondary institutions are ways to enhance students’ internal desire to succeed, networking capacity, exposure, and procedural knowledge for goal development and societal navigation skills. Teachers, who have a higher level of social and capital can help to bridge African American disadvantaged students and these opportunities for holistic growth. Thus, agency, social capital, and cultural capital are intertwined as they all “can help students think critically and subsequently form relevant goals” (Kundu, 2020, p. 139). For instance, agency prompts students with a desire to succeed but social capital and cultural capital fuel the students with human connections and procedural knowledge needed to turn students’ desires into a reality. Supporting this statement Klemenčič (2015) implies structure and agency are “intertwined in a way that structure is simultaneously exogenous and endogenous to agency” (p.

14). Since student agency can be negatively influenced by socio-structural obstacles, disadvantaged African American students must be granted sufficient support to address present inequities so their long-term educational achievement and life success can manifest (Klemenčič, 2015).

However, to develop this form of agency within students, teachers and students must become co-investigators while deciphering through systematic oppression to reach attainable solutions (Freire & Ramos, 2014). For instance, it is important to analyze and understand how systems within education work to prevent the upward mobility and success of historically marginalized individuals and groups. Supporting this statement, Freire and Ramos (2014) suggest as men and women take more active attitudes toward exploring their thematic, they expand their critical awareness and take ownership of their reality. This exploration allows students to become active agents within their learning while being guided by knowledgeable supporters. For instance, with the guidance of teachers, students can identify the areas impacted by structural forces in their lives (Kundu, 2018). This active reflection allows for students to discover their societal positioning and best choose actions for creating desired change in their lives (Kundu, 2018). These interactions and reflections (which should include action plans) should align with student's interests, and goals. In addition, Freire's (1972) framework supports the notion that interactions influence an individual's perceptions. Therefore, teacher-student interaction's impact on student perceptions is a key component of this dissertation as I examine how upward mobility is directed by the social and cultural capital my subjects gain through developing procedural knowledge valued by middle- and high-class members of society (Freire, 1972; Kundu, 2018).

Kundu (2020) implies, “young people with agency recognize that they may need financial, social, and emotional support to achieve their goals” (p. 11). Supporting this claim, Stanton-Salazar (2011) implies that resource-full relationships and socially organized activities must be distributed among adolescents so they can successfully overcome the challenges of society and the academic demands of schools. Such relationship expansion may help students to acquire new skills and knowledge needed for helping seeking, problem-solving, and social navigation. Also, “students who have more knowledge, better skills, and access to information can make better judgments regarding a particular socio-structural context of actions and better decisions on how to act to achieve desired outcomes” (Klemenčič, 2015, p. 18). Thus, expanding disadvantaged student’s knowledge and skills may enable them to take advantage of more opportunities that arise (Bandura, 2001).

As previously discussed, contemporary student agency researchers argue the importance of incorporating more inclusive pedagogy, problem-solving strategies, and students’ voice. These strategies facilitate student agency through laying a foundation for students to set advantageous goals, initiate action towards goals, and self-reflect for needed correction during the goal attainment process while expanding students’ capital at the classroom level.

However, these strategies do not fully address the obstacles in association with structural obstacles. For instance, even if African American students are granted more choice and control over the educational trajectories within school settings, they continue to be subjected to broad structural obstacles (Klemenčič, 2015). Thus, in addition to the implementation of inclusive pedagogy, problem-solving, and student voice/choice, students can benefit greatly by forming connections with others who have achieved a long-term goal that he or she seeks to accomplish. Also supporting this claim, Klemenčič (2015) states, “cultivating strong social networks and

developing cultural capital can strengthen agency in a particular situation as much as it can help identify interesting and fortuitous opportunities” (p. 18).

For example, if an impoverished African American student aspires to become a dentist his or her teacher may bridge a relationship between the student and a local dentist within the community so that the student can gain first-hand knowledge of dentistry practices. In addition, this relationship may expand the student’s social capital as he now personally knows someone within his desired field of practice, and it may expand the student’s cultural capital as the dentist may share protenant knowledge to help the student to develop a plan for attaining a career in dentistry. Also, these relationships may provide students with greater mentorship opportunities outside of their normal networking capacity. This form of social capital and cultural expansion is known as circle jumping—navigating from one network to another, signaling their gains in cultural capital along the way, as they tap into new social circles that increase their social capital (Kundu, 2020, p. 134). Circle jumping may afford disadvantaged students enhanced opportunities as they build relationships with people in diverse networks. In addition, this process may help students acquire new skills and procedural knowledge conducive to their set goals. For instance, teachers can serve as institutional agents who enable low-status visual correspondence between their goals and goal planning, to determine which resources are necessary for supporting their desired destinies (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

I am not insinuating that the cultural capital of disadvantaged students is deficient. Rather, I am emphasizing the importance of expanding these students’ capital so they can successfully navigate foreign spaces within society. As institutional agents create structural advantages for these students by helping students to expand their capital more opportunities may be made for students to gain academic achievement and upward mobility. Thus, I argue as

teachers help to develop student's agency through: (1) building positive relationships with students (which will boost student's social-emotional development), (2) aiding students in identifying their social positioning, interests, and talents, and (3) helping students choose better actions to support desired outcomes, teachers have the capacity to help students expand their social and cultural capital as it relates to students' goals.

I am not discrediting previous researchers' agency concepts. Rather, I am adding their research by attempting to combat structural forces disadvantaged students may face because of their inherited social positioning. If supported by advantageous structural forces, initial agency can boost the formation of one's goals and subsequent action towards achievement (Kundu, 2020).

African American disadvantaged students' institutional agents such as teachers, community leaders, and mentors can serve as a resource base. For instance, these change agents can help students to identify their personal interests and talents and then connect them to mentors and pathways which can nurture those talents and interests. Agency focuses on an individual's social position within society as it relates to their socioeconomic status and ability to navigate power constructs to obtain upward mobility (Kundu, 2020). Therefore, the framework I build upon seeks to incorporate the expansion of students' capital through agency development to generate an equitable support system for student achievement and life success.

Gaps within Research

There is limited research that explores how to expand students' social and cultural capital to support student agency. Kundu (2020) reveals how social and cultural can be incorporated to fuel student agency. However, his framework focuses on agency and grit interaction during the

process. Thus, this research adds new insight to educational and sociological research that focuses on closing the opportunity gap through the implementation of student agency.

Summary

Chapter II begins with a broad view as it examines the disadvantages faced by African American students. Next, the chapter discusses the impact social structures can have on the academic performance and upward mobility of African American disadvantaged students. Upon laying a basis for readers to understand the inner workings of social capital and cultural capital power constructs, the chapter discusses the dimensions of student agency. During this section, I explore institutional agents' impact in relation to supporting students' social and cultural development. The student agency discussion is followed by the conceptual framework of this study which focuses on part of Kundu's agency and grit framework. Lastly, I noted the gap within research as it relates to this study's topic. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary in which the readers are engaging now.

CHAPTER III: Methodology

Introduction

This study explores perceptions of African American students who once identified as disadvantaged to discover how agency was used to overcome obstacles to attain academic and professional success. As previously stated, many studies have identified factors that fuel the opportunity gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006). However, there are limited studies that incorporate the voices of African American students who have overcome social and economic inequities to reach academic and professional success (Anderson, 2018). Therefore, this dissertation analyzes the perceptions of successful African American members of society who were disadvantaged students (while within K-12 institutions) to identify and group thematic similarities which helped to guide them to desirable ends, such as overcoming “obstacles to their academic and professional success” (Kundu, 2018, p. 13). Thus, my research contributes to the literature that examines marginalized students’ experiences by incorporating their voices “to inform the very research that assesses them” (Kundu, 2018, p. 72).

Rationale for Research Approach

I strictly used one-on-one semi-structured interviews to capture the perceptions of my participants to conduct this qualitative study. Qualitative research is an inquiry process used to gain an understanding of a social or human problem through building a complex, holistic picture that is formed with words (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As my research welcomes the voices of former disadvantaged students, I explored the ways in which at-risk students can receive

maximum support to reduce the chance of academic and professional failure through implementing agency.

Qualitative research allowed me to analyze the words of each of my participants to gain an understanding of the journey that led them to successful outcomes. Supporting this justification, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) imply researchers employ qualitative research methods when seeking to uncover the meaning of a phenomenon through impacted participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, my study only incorporated data from participants who have experienced and overcome obstacles as disadvantaged African American students.

Underlying Philosophical Perspective

Qualitative researchers make sense of the underlying philosophical influences in their own way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Upon analyzing and connecting literature, I developed an interpretive outlook as I argue empirical “reality is socially constructed; that is, there is no single, observable reality” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). “Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). For instance, the multiple realities of my participants are connected as they are all former disadvantaged students who experienced educational inequities yet beat the odds by managing to attain academic and/or professional success.

Researchers using an interpretive form of inquiry do not find knowledge but rather they construct it. Upon gathering and analyzing the data collected from my participants’ experiences, my goal was to identify and interrupt strategies which may help disadvantaged African American students attain higher rates of academic and professional success through implementing agency. Thus, I approached this study from an interpretive stance as I sought to understand “the world in which individuals live and work” (Creswell, 2013, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9).

Subjective meanings “are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (Creswell, 2013, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). My participants had very broad meanings and perceptions of life due to their life experiences and social interactions. As I examined and drew connections between each of my participants’ experiences, I was able to gain an understanding of the dynamics which led them to successful outcomes.

Positionality

My lived experience of transitioning from a former disadvantaged student to a tenured certified educator and doctoral candidate serves as my motivation to conduct this project. I experienced upward academic and social mobility firsthand as I transitioned from a failing impoverished public school, became accepted into a STEM high school, obtained a degree from a four-year university, and secured a professional career. Additionally, neither of my parents were college completers upon my graduation from high school.

After college, I entered the education profession within a small rural school district within the Mississippi Delta. I noticed that many of the students lacked college exposure and procedural knowledge of the college admission and financial aid process. These students were full of potential; however, they lacked the supportive guidance needed to thrive in settings beyond K-12 institutions. Observing the struggles of my former students led me to reflect on how my life outcome could have been different if my sister had not granted me the support needed to change high schools and gain acceptance into a four-year college. In addition, as I expanded my own cultural and social capital through obtaining a bachelor’s degree, I was able to support my mother in journey to obtain higher education. She earned her bachelors, masters, and

doctoral degree. She was motivated to return to school after I completed my undergraduate studies. I supported her by granting her access to academic resources and serving as her personal writing editor. Thus, I have seen first-hand and experienced how supportive resources can help one to excel academically.

As an African American woman, I connected with my participants on a deeper level as I shared commonalities with my participants in terms of background, academic, and professional experiences. Such connections may be contested as an issue as theorists believe researchers must occupy a removed position to ensure transparency within data interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, to ensure transparency I thoroughly explored and set aside my own experiences prior to interviewing subjects, which is known as *epoché* (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Also, during the interview process, I refrained from discussing my similarities with participants. Rather, I reflected upon interviewee responses after interview completion as Freire (1972) emphasized the importance of understanding others' social positioning through engaging within reflective practices.

Research Design

“Phenomenology is a twentieth-century school of philosophy associated with a type of qualitative research” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25). Due to the scope of my study, which I will thoroughly discuss later in this chapter, I will conduct a phenomenological research design. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain phenomenology research designs as the “study of people’s conscious experience(s) of their lifeworld” (p. 25). Such experiences reference peoples’ “everyday life and social actions” (Schram, 2003, p. 71, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One element of this focused on the way factors, such as social capital will influence goal setting and accomplishment as it relates to developing student agency (Kundu, 2020).

Secondly, phenomenology designs are based on the “essence of shared experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26). I explored the experiences of my participants as I “bracketed, analyzed, and compared” the factors which led to their successful academic and professional outcomes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26). While conducting this step, I employed horizontalization which is “the process of laying out all data for examination and treating the data as having equal weight; that is, all pieces of data have equal value at the initial data analysis stage” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). This process allowed me to organize the data into “clusters or themes” which will contribute to the findings of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). I discuss this step in further detail later in this chapter.

In addition, this research seeks to identify how types of social and cultural capital can encourage students to adopt positive attitudes about themselves and education as they “develop critical thinking skills to recognize and subsequently overcome the structural barriers in their lives” (Kundu, 2018, p. 73). I identified the ways participants developed, conceptualized, and implemented agency over the course of their journeys to ensure they reach their desired achievement to reveal how institutional agents (teachers, professors, school guidance counselors, administrators, parents, and students) can develop agency of students so they can learn to navigate any environment in which they enter. This goal correlated with the phenomenology research design as it sought to analyze and compare people’s experiences to identify the essence of a specific phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As I previously stated in this dissertation, this study referenced a portion of Kundu’s (2020) work. Kundu (2020) developed the agency-grit interaction conceptual framework by implementing inductive reasoning research within his mix-methods study. Therefore, our studies differed within this capacity as I implemented a phenomenology research design, which was

strictly qualitative. It is also important to note Kundu's (2020) research contributed to demonstrating "how to apply agency and grit in future investigations of the behavioral traits and support systems that facilitate achievement" (Kundu, 2018, p. 72). However, my study only focused on the development of student agency within the lives of participants who once identified as being disadvantaged.

Secondly, I used research questions that are similar to those that guided Kundu's (2020) work. These questions were able to gather the inner workings of how agency's development occurs within students as they explored students' social capital, cultural capital, backgrounds, goals, and plans for goal attainment. Lastly, it is important to note I view agency as a tool which can lead to the expansion of one's social, cultural, and economic capital needed to "navigate institutions and social settings" to gain access to upward mobility (Kundu, 2018 p. 78).

Research Questions

The primary research question of this dissertation was: How do socially and economically disadvantaged African American students who have managed to overcome significant obstacles describe and explain the strategies they utilized to succeed? As the primary research question is extremely broad, I addressed this question by seeking answers to the following four sub-questions:

- a.) What factors foster help-seeking behavior for disadvantaged African American students to develop networks and systems of support?
- b.) What factors influence disadvantaged African American students to develop positive attitudes about themselves and how they value education?
- c.) What develops disadvantaged African American students' motivation towards goals?

- d.) How do disadvantaged African American students describe themselves, and what traits seem associated with agency?

Overview of Participant Selection

At a large university in the state of Mississippi, I conducted purposeful sampling to recruit African American student participants who identified as being disadvantaged while in secondary K-12 institutions. As previously noted, this study identifies disadvantaged African American students as those who: (1) come from low-income households with an annual income of \$25,444 or less for three or more family members, (2) attended high schools in which 70% or more of the student body is composed of minority race students, (3) were first-generation college students, or (4) qualified for financial aid Pell Grants upon initial college enrollment for undergraduate studies. Purposeful sampling is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). Thus, to gather a pool of participants who match this study’s definition of success I only selected participants who met at least one or more of the following criteria: (1) school of education bachelor’s degree-seeking students within two semesters of graduation, and (2) school of education graduate students who have secured a professional occupation within the field of education. Examples of professional occupations within the field of education included certified teachers, school-level administrators, and school district-level administrators. I specifically selected school of education student participants because I believed this research could help to widen the teacher pipeline as I analyzed participants’ experiences which led and retained them within the field of education. In addition, data from this study may help K-12 educators recruit African American students for the field of education as this study analyzes the perceptions of education majors.

Institutional Review Board

Prior to participant recruitment and data collection, I obtained approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). All studies conducted at this university receive IRB approval to ensure studies occur in an ethical, safe, and secure fashion. As part of IRB approval, I obtained CITI certification on research with human subjects. Therefore, I possessed the knowledge needed to conduct an ethical, and safe study. See appendices A-E to review pertinent information regarding IRB approval.

Recruitment

All potential participants were recruited via email which included a description of my project and its purpose. Ten students from the university's school of education received this recruitment description through their school email address. However, only seven participants consented to participate. I wanted to focus on a smaller population so I could grasp a deeper understanding of each participant's life circumstances and the dynamics which led them to their current state in life. It is important to note that qualitative data does not not require the number of participants to exceed one. Rather qualitative designs urge researchers to recruit participants until saturation has been reached. Thus, this study's saturation occurred when continued data collection produced no new information or insights into the phenomenon being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The email description to recruit participants explained that all participation was voluntary and could have been terminated at any time. Those interested in participation selected and completed the Qualtrics form link, which was attached to the recruitment email. This link included a form for participants to agree to consent and data release for this study. Next, participants proceeded to schedule their online Zoom interview session, using an electronic link

attached to their consent form. This electronic link took participants to a Doodle poll which allowed them to pick a specific time and date to participate in virtual interviews. The next day, I followed up with each of my participants to confirm their selected day and time of the virtual interview. Lastly, I emailed participants a Zoom link to conduct the virtual interview.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary method of data collection for this study took place through semi-structured interviews which were conducted via Zoom technology. With the verbal consent of participants, each interview was audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim. (Participants signed the consent form which included all these details prior to conducting the interview.) To be sure participants were aware of participation and the interview process, I reiterated this information right before interviews were conducted. To ensure each participant's identity was kept anonymous, participants were assigned a pseudonym. Therefore, all names mentioned within the findings cannot be traced to this study's participants.

I completed field notes throughout each interview to capture the body language, energy, and setting of each participant. Each interview transcript was evaluated using a *thematic analysis*—“a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in data”—which is translated into themes (Clarke & Braun, 2006, p. 79). Also, it is important to note thematic analysis provided the flexibility to include an inductive or a deductive approach during the process. Inductive techniques occur when researchers emerge codes and themes from the data (Meriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, deductive techniques involve analyzing data for codes and themes which exist in prior research or literature (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Yet, both techniques could have been utilized within this study as “inductive and deductive codes are not mutually exclusive, and in many studies, the strategic combination happens through multiple readings for

each kind of coding” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 249). However, Kundu’s (2018; 2020) study followed inductive approaches for his work.

Coding Process

I utilized the thematic analysis process to conduct all data interpretation for this study. Coding started immediately after my first interview was conducted. Transcripts were obtained through Zoom technology. During the virtual interviews, Zoom technology transcribed the words of the interviewer and interviewee to form a full transcript. However, Zoom transcripts were not fully accurate. In order to ensure accuracy, I reviewed the transcripts by listening to audio recordings and revising any inaccuracies within the transcripts. I read through each transcription and wrote an analytic memo about each interview immediately afterward. I conducted this step to familiarize myself with the data as I summarized the main concepts within each interview. Also, this allowed me to identify connections between each interview.

Secondly, I re-read transcriptions and identified an initial set of codes to assess agency’s activity in the stories of my participants. I kept an open mind as I explored the data and create codes which addressed “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that could be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). This inductive process ensured that I did not overlook valuable data which could have contributed to understanding and addressing the phenomenon.

As I coded data from interviews, I “clustered” the data into potential themes which summarized the open codes into patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 209). This helped to narrow and shape the data into a form that could be used for mapping. However, prior to conducting mapping, I reviewed each theme as I searched for congruence and incongruence between the extracted codes and all gathered data (Clarke & Braun, 2006). During this stage, themes were

categorized as “responsive to the purpose of the research” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 212). Next, I created a thematic map which was used to present the themes, codes, and relationships found within the data. During the next step, I defined each overarching theme to associate it with the proper experience as it relates to a specific sector presented within the phenomenon. This report included each identified theme relevant to participants’ experiences and statements. Each theme was listed and discussed within the report revealed within Chapter four of this dissertation. I drew a connection between the findings, research questions, and literature presented within this study.

Summary

This chapter began by presenting an introduction and the purpose of the study. Next, I discussed the study’s methodological approach as it explained why a phenomenological approach best suited this study’s design and research questions. Fourth, the chapter highlighted the process for participant recruitment, data collection, and thematic data analysis. Fifth, this chapter aimed to promote transparency of the study as it discussed the potential limitations associated with this study. Finally, the last section of this chapter concluded with a summarization that emphasized the main points of discussion.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Chapter four presents findings from analysis of data collected from this study's participants. To begin, a review of this study's purpose and guiding research questions are presented. Next, an overview of participants' demographics and characteristics is provided. Third, themes, which were formed through data reduction and connection, are presented based on participant data. Each theme is associated with at least one of the research questions this study aims to address. Lastly, this chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore student agency's impact on the lives of successful African American students who once identified as being disadvantaged. The following research question and sub-questions guided this study:

How do socially and economically disadvantaged African American students who have managed to overcome significant obstacles describe and explain the strategies they utilized to succeed?

- a.) What factors foster help-seeking behavior for disadvantaged African American students to develop networks and systems of support?
- b.) What factors influence disadvantaged African American students to develop positive attitudes about themselves and how they value education?
- c.) What develops disadvantaged African American students' motivation towards goals?

- d.) How do disadvantaged African American students describe themselves, and what traits seem associated with agency?

Research Participants

Participants were recruited for the study via email using purposeful sampling methods. A total of 10 African American school of education students were recruited for this study. However, only seven eligible participants consented to participate in this study. Of those seven participants, three participants were undergraduate students and four were graduate students who have professional careers within the field of education. Male students made up 29% (2 graduate students) of the participant population, and female students made up 71% (3 undergraduate and 2 graduate students) of the participant population. Two undergraduate participants are enrolled in the bachelor of arts elementary education program, one undergraduate participant is enrolled in the secondary education bachelor program, three graduate participants are enrolled in the educational leadership Ed. D program, and one graduate participant is enrolled in the educational leadership specialist program. Three participants were between 18 -25 years of age, and four participants were between 30-55 years of age. All participants identified as African American. Hour-long semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom technology with each participant. Each participant provided a signed IRB-approved consent form and data release form via Qualtrics prior to the interview. All participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identities (see Table 1).

Table 1

Description of Research Participants

Name	Classification	Yrs. Of Experience	Profile
Taylor	Undergraduate	0	Taylor is an African American female majoring in elementary education. She comes from a low socioeconomic household. Upon college entrance, she qualified for Pell Grant funding through the university's financial aid assistance program.
Brittany	Undergraduate	0	Brittany is an African American female majoring in elementary education. She comes from a low socioeconomic household. Upon college entrance, she qualified for Pell Grant funding through the university's financial aid assistance program.
Ashley	Undergraduate	0	Ashley is an African American female majoring in secondary education. She graduated from a high school which has a predominantly black student population. In addition, she comes from a low socio-economic background.
Nick	Graduate	13	Nick is an African American male pursuing a doctoral degree in educational leadership. He graduated from a high school which has a predominantly black student population. He is a first-generation college graduate. He comes from a low socioeconomic household.
John	Graduate	10	John is an African American male pursuing a doctoral degree in educational leadership. He comes from a low socioeconomic and single-parent household. Upon college entrance, he qualified for Pell Grant funding.
Symphony	Graduate	25	Symphony is an African American female pursuing a doctoral degree in educational leadership. She comes from a low socioeconomic household.
Alisa	Graduate	8	Alisa is an African American female pursuing a specialist degree in educational leadership. She is a first-generation college graduate who came from a low socio-status household.

Research Findings

Participants were asked ten questions during virtual semi-structure interviews. Upon analyzing participant responses, I employed Braun and Clark's thematic analysis process to perform open coding. A total of 18 codes were generated during open coding. These codes highlighted relevant data from the raw information provided in participants' interviews. The raw data comprising the initial codes (which are coded extracts) and representative coded extracts are provided using participants' words to support generated analysis.

Using an iterative and recursive process, data reduction occurred, and themes and patterns, were produced in alignment with the present phenomenon. Thus, similar codes were combined to form themes that addressed the research questions of this study. Next, a map of these themes and subthemes were formed and evaluated to define and identify patterns and relationships among patterns found within the data. Upon finding these patterns and relationships, overarching themes were defined and named. It is important to note that each theme tells a story.

Through this process of thematic analysis, six major themes emerged describing participants experiences of academic and professional success. These themes were: (1) the development of social capital, (2) institutional agents' impact, (3) emphasizing educational value, (4) experiencing accomplishment, (5) desire to impact positive change, and (6) determination. A summary of the themes and research question association is reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Overview of Research Questions and Themes

Research Question	Theme(s)
(1.) Experiences developing networks and support systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of social capital - Institutional agent's impact
(2.) Experiences of self-positive attitudes and valuing education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emphasizing educational value - Experiencing accomplishments
(3.) Experiences of motivation for goal attainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Desire to impact positive change
(4.) Experiences of self-reflection and active agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Determination

Themes about Experiences Developing Networks and Support Systems

Research question one asked “What factors foster help-seeking behavior for disadvantaged African American students to develop networks and systems of support?” After conducting an iterative and recursive process of manual open coding, and pattern analysis, two themes emerged that revealed participants’ experiences of expanding networking capacity and support for goals. These themes include (1) the development of social capital and (2) institutional agents’ impact. Each theme produced subthemes that captured the essence of participants’ experiences. A detailed explanation of themes and subthemes is explained within the upcoming narrative section. A summary of these themes and subthemes for Research Question 1 is reported in Table 3.

Table 3

Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 1 and Sample Representation

Themes	Subthemes	N
Development of social capital	Benefits of forming relationships	6
Institutional agents impact	Supportive attachment figures	6
	Talent identification and nurture	4

Development of social capital. The theme development of social capital derived from the responses participants provided to interview questions. Participants were asked about their experiences in terms of seeking and receiving support for goal setting and goal attainment while facing challenges attached to their identities. Interview questions one and two asked each participant about goal development. Connected to this pattern, question three specifically asked each participant “Who helps you to strive to reach your goals?” These questions were asked to

gain an understanding participant's social networks and support systems. All seven participants described having goals of exceling within the career field of education. However, six out of seven participants described their ability to create supportive relationships ignited them to expand their social circles to garner support their goals. Thus, participants described gaining support for goal attainment through building relationships with knowledgeable people. A detail explanation of some participants stories regarding developing networks and support systems was discussed with in upcoming sections.

As I analyzed participants experiences of social capital development details about gaining support systems emerged. These details revealed there are benefits to having and expanding social capital. Such benefits can create opportunities and access to enhanced resources. For example, upon interviewing Taylor, she said, "I decided to hang out and talk to people within the school of education. I ended up talking myself into a full a scholarship program for teachers." She reflected on how her "gift of gab" encouraged her to interact with knowledgeable stakeholders who granted her access to an opportunity that provided a debt free education. She explained that university offered quite a few resources for African American and other marginalized students. However, there is a disconnect between offering these resources and actually marketing their availability to those who need them. Through analyzing Taylor's perception, I determined developing relationships are needed to implement and create social capital. Social capital requires the ability to interact and communicate with others.

Coinciding with Taylor's experience, participant Ashley described gaining support for goals by "getting to know more people who know more than me about things, networking, and building friendships." She reminisced about previous interactions in a way that caused me, as the researcher, to visualize how she actively engaged in conversations with others. Descriptions

implied she felt comfortable engaging in dialogue with unfamiliar people to gain resourceful information. Using specific examples, she explained how interacting with her roommate gave her information about a program which now pays her tuition and housing as well as grants her a monthly stipend. Gaining such knowledge while expanding her social circles demonstrated how she utilized social capital and cultural capital to provide herself supportive resources. For instance, she implied she would have not received this opportunity if she did not engage within that conversation with her roommate. This led her to explain how collaborating with goal-oriented peers encouraged her to continue to seek support for her goals and offer support to peers who need support for their goals.

This was a common explanation described by four participants of this study. For instance, upon interviewing Symphony, she also described gaining support for goal attainment as she collaborated with peers within collegiate settings. Symphony explained, “Having the opportunity to academically collaborate and work with other African American students has made a positive difference in my success.” She specifically emphasized how working with her peers to complete instructional assignments motivated her to continue through to program completion as her peers serve as a resource base for her academic success.

Supporting the power of peer collaboration, John too highlighted the benefits of journeying through education with the support of a cohort. He said, “we are like a family, and we share ideas and discuss different academic ideas with each other.” John implied having a peer support group in place at the graduate level eases the stress associated with attaining higher education.

Institutional agents impact. The second theme that emerged from analyzing participants experiences in terms of seeking support for goal attainment was institutional agent’s impact. This

theme produced two subthemes: supportive attachment figures and talent identification and nurture.

While responding interview questions three: “Who helps you to strive to reach your goals?” and interview question four: “Where do you seek support to reach your goals? And how did you learn about or find those resources?” six participants described nurturing relationships with teachers, mentors, and community leaders. Participants felt these agents created safe and welcoming environments for students. In addition, participants’ experiences indicated they were supported socially, and emotionally for cognitive development that supported their ability to build healthy relationships.

For instance, upon interviewing John he implied his desire for higher education stemmed from the positive impact his teachers had on his life. He explained, “It was my coaches, my teachers, and my administrators that poured into me through athletics and some other things. Because of that, I was able to get out, go to college, and get a degree.” Nick’s description highlighted how positive relationships with institutional agents can create support for setting individual goals as well as it revealed the influence institutional agents can have on student lives. Upon reflecting upon his home life, Nick revealed he came from a single parent household in which his mom single handedly raised nine children. His family’s financial resources were scarce, and his mom lacked higher education. Therefore, he credited much of his academic success to the support he received from teachers and mentors while transitioning throughout K-12 education. In alignment with John’s experience, Taylor’s interview revealed she too encountered positive relationships with her K-12 teachers. Taylor stated:

My teachers in high school gave me the space and opportunity to not only just be a learner, but a human who makes mistakes. They were there to listen to me and tell me everything was going to be okay. They would even advocate on my behalf to my parents.

She went on to describe the nurturing and affirming learning environment her teachers facilitated by implementing inclusive practices such as making all students feel welcomed and knowledgeable. Such descriptions implied teachers helped her to develop her social emotional skills needed to build healthy relationship and expand social capital. This implication was recognized within several other participants experiences as they described how their institutional agents positively impacted their lives. For instance, Ashley said, “In the twelfth grade, I had an amazing teacher who actually cared. She had us write down how we felt about our days. She took the time to read our statements and give a response.” Engaging in reflective activities gave this participant time to process her emotions and strengthened her communication skills as she engaged in dialogue that exercised her social and emotional learning skills. As previously stated, reflective strategies help to build skills needed for developing positive relationships. In addition, such activities allowed students to identify problems and seek help for solutions as they engaged in conversations with authority figures.

The graduate participants perceptions, these participants too revealed how higher education institutional agents can offer support for academic acceleration and goal attainment through building relationships supportive of students social emotional psych. For instance, upon interviewing Symphony revealed she was extremely nervous about pursuing her doctoral degree due to struggling with the admission process. However, her stresses were eased as “her professors made her feel comfortable.” She described how engaging within a positive interview process with her professors eased her stress. Specifically, she said, “For the first time in higher

education I felt as if I was really wanted as a student. They were able to gain my trust and make me feel that I was going to be successful.”

Supporting this subtheme, Ashley also revealed benefited socially and emotionally from forming positive relationships with institutional agents. She said, “I remember feeling like I didn’t deserve a scholarship, but my professor comforted me by saying there is no reason to get psyched out and everything is ok.” She received this award for her academic performance. However, imposter syndrome caused her to feel she was undeserving of the award. Her teacher affirmed her by letting her know she was indeed worthy of her accomplishment.

Regarding subtheme two of institutional agents, four participants described how one or more of their mentors or teachers identified and nurtured of their natural talents. For instance, these participants described experiences in which their teachers identified their strengths and actively practiced developing those skills for the growth of the student. Thus, participants were able to set goals for themselves upon identifying and developing their talents. A detailed explanation of participants stories regarding talent identification and nurturing is discussed in an upcoming section.

Upon discussing goal setting and development, Taylor explained how her building administrators identified and nurtured her gift for public speaking. She said, “My principal and other administrators loved to put me in front of people during school programs. I have done a lot of public speaking at my old high school.” The participant then implied she discovered her gift to talk in front of people.

Three participants revealed their leadership talents were identified and nurtured by administrators and/or colleagues while teaching. For instance, John said, “My superintendent, who was originally my building level principal, hired me as an assistant principal. I can go ask

him for support. In addition, he enrolled me in the Missile leadership program to better prepare me for administrator roles.” John’s experience not only credits institutional agents for nurturing talent, but also supports the notion of social capital’s benefits as he received a promotion from his former principal and colleague. In alignment with the previously discussed experienced, Symphony described her former administrators as identifiers of her leadership skills. She said, “My former principals encouraged me to do more than just be in the classroom. They saw something in me, and they pushed me towards administration.”

In conclusion, each participant’s experiences varied in relation to the themes developing social capital and institutional agent’s impact. However, the majority of their perspectives revealed they benefited forming positive relationships with others. Such relationships offered participants social capital, cultural capital, access to opportunities, or either social emotional support needed to strive towards academic success and goal attainment.

Themes about Developing Positive Attitudes about Self and Education

Within this study, research question (2) explored the development of positive attitudes about oneself and their education as participants reflected on overcoming challenges faced while being disadvantaged. I did not mention the word “educational value” or attitudes within the interview questions. However, I referenced the words “positive difference in academic and professional success” within interview question six to gain an understanding of the people, experiences, and/or environment that may have influenced participant’s self-perception and value of education.

After conducting an iterative and recursive process of manual coding and pattern analysis, two themes emerged that revealed participants’ experiences of developing positive attitudes about themselves and how they value education. These themes include: (1) emphasizing

educational value, and (2) experiencing first-hand accomplishment while in educational settings.

A summary of these themes and subthemes for Research Question 2 is reported in table 4.

Table 4

Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 2 and Sample Representation

Themes (3 & 4)	Subthemes	N
Emphasizing education’s value	Parental influence	6
	Positive educational experiences	6
Experiences of accomplishment		6

Emphasizing education’s value. Two themes emerged from interview data in terms of influencing disadvantaged students’ positive attitudes about themselves and their education: emphasizing education’s value and experiences of accomplishment. Of the two themes emphasizing educational value was the most prevalent. Two subthemes captured the experiences of participants’ journey to valuing education: (1) parental influence and (2) positive educational experiences.

When discussing factors that influenced disadvantaged African American students to have positive attitudes about themselves and their education, six participants credited their parents for influencing them to associate value with education. These participants revealed their parents emphasized education’s importance by frequently explaining how it could benefit their future outcomes. This theme held extreme significance as three of six participants’ parents failed to acquire any form of post-secondary education. However, their parents still encouraged them to obtain higher education.

Upon answering interview questions five: “Describe your upbringing. What were some of your most significant influences growing up that contributed to who you are today?” six participants described experiences which credited their academic and professional success to their parents’ influence. For instance, Symphony said:

My mother and father were sticklers on education. Education is the key to your success. Education is the only way that you are going to make it in this world. Education is the only way that you will be self-sufficient and independent.

She reminisced on how her parents worked extremely hard throughout her childhood to make ends meet for her and her siblings. This participant implied she was determined to learn the knowledge needed to teach within a classroom setting as her parents revealed how gaining such knowledge could benefit her life. While reflecting over her childhood, this participant also described how her mom spent many afternoons helping her to complete homework assignments to ensure she would stay on top of her schoolwork.

Taylor’s reflections about her background shared of commonalities with those of Symphony’s. For example, she also had parents who emphasized the importance of valuing education. She stated, “My parents spent a lot of time with me reading and writing. Those were our things to do. My parents are the obvious proprietors of me wanting to go to college.” Taylor, also described times in which her parents would require her to engage within educational activities such as learning to read maps, reading the bible, and spending time at the local library so that she could expand her knowledge. Within the role of a researcher, I was able to conceptualize that education was not just verbally discussed but rather it was put into action as some of participants parents actively engaged within the teaching and learning processes with their children. However, as I continued to dissect participants stories, it was evident that not all

participants' parents had the educational capacity to support student's learning. However, they did continuously monitor their child's academic progress and had talks with them to ensure they stayed the course in terms of excelling academically. For instance, Alisa stated, "Even though my mom did not attain a bachelor's degree that did not stop her from motivating me to get my education." Alisa described instances in which she struggled significantly throughout her undergraduate journey. However, her mom offered her motivation talks which encouraged her to continue her education. Thus, Alisa recognized that her mom still highly valued education as she consistently influenced her to obtain higher education.

The second subtheme that emerged from emphasizing educational value was positive educational experiences. Six participants described having positive educational experiences in and outside school institutions. These participants were acknowledged and provided an opportunity to be included in activities which positively boosted their views on education. Participants' experiences indicate that such inclusivity may allow disadvantaged students to visualize and experience a form of self-success that can make education desirable at the K-12 and post-secondary level. For instance, upon interviewing Nick stated, "My track coach shared a whole bunch of stories about Jackson State University. This influenced me to go there. He took me on college tours and spent time with me beyond what he had to do as a teacher." As Nick describe this positive experience, it became clear this form of teacher-student engagement allowed him to build healthy relationships and associated value with education.

Coinciding with Nick's experience, Symphony also described how her doctoral program gave her "the confidence to speak up and out". She stated this program allowed "her voice to being heard." Again, this participant's positive educational experience signifies the importance of implementing inclusivity as her positive experience was linked to being included. Echoing this

same notion, Ashley stated, “I have enjoyed being at this university, and it has been such a positive experience. Being able to work with professors and feeling apart has been great.”

Experiences of accomplishment. Interview question 9 stated, “Tell me about any periods of time or particular moments which you feel have been very important in supporting or hindering your academic success.” Data revealed specifically six out of seven participants described experiencing educational task accomplishment as attitude boosters. These experiences required students to engage in knowledge and/or skill learning. Upon testing their abilities to master a presented task or skill, these participants gained higher confidence as they experienced some form of success. This was the most consistent theme among participants who came from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Ashley indicated her self-confidence and motivation increased as she was acknowledged and selected for high status positions. For instance, she stated, “I was chosen to page for one of the state’s senators my junior year of high school. That really helped me to find more motivation as well as confidence in myself.” This position was very competitive as students from all across the state of Mississippi wanted this opportunity. Therefore, competing and winning this position caused Ashley to be more confident within her ability to succeed. Based on this experience, I came to the conclusion that experiencing success caused participants to recognize their value.

Upon interviewing Brittney, she described a similar experience of building self-confidence through acts of achievement. Specifically, Brittney stated, “When I became certified it was a big highlight in my life because I actually put my mind to something, and I was able to achieve it”. Brittney explained how such accomplishment led her to believe she was capable of accomplishing more difficult tasks since she experienced success with certification.

Aligned with this concept, were the experiences of graduate level participants Nick and Symphony. Upon their interviews, they too described past educational accomplishments as ignitors of high confidence and self-motivation. Nick described struggling to obtain teacher certification upon entering in the field of education. However, he did not cease in attempting to earn his teacher license which in return encouraged him to continue his education.

Nick states, “Upon taking my praxis three or four times I passed it. When I did pass my praxis, I was able to go into the Master of Art Teaching program to secure a certified license which encouraged me to keep going to obtain an administrator license.

Supporting this same concept Symphony described experiences in which her confidence to return to school was increased after she attained an advanced degree. She stated, “after completing my master’s, I saw that I could get my doctorate. So, I just kind of jumped into the program. I said if I can get a master’s I can get a doctorate.” Based on this participants experience, I was able to develop a connection between accomplishing success and increasing self-confidence for setting goals and goal attainment.

Themes about Motivation for Goal Attainment

In combination with social capital and cultural capital, student agency also involves individuals’ willingness to set and preserve towards their goals (Kundu, 2020). In order to understand how disadvantaged students continue to implement their agency in the face of obstacles, participants were asked specifically “How they overcame hindrances within their academic and/or professional journeys?” This question was designed to gain information on factors that motivated participants to persist toward goal attainment as it aligns directly with research question three of this study: What develops disadvantaged African American student’s motivations towards goal attainment? This information allowed me, as the researcher, to gain an

understanding of the journey between participants’ circumstances and set goals as it revealed how participants functioned within specific environments, experiences, and networking capacities.

After conducting an iterative and recursive process of manual coding, and pattern analysis, one theme emerged that revealed the participant’s experiences for gaining motivation to achieve goals: desiring to impact positive change. This theme produced three sub-themes that captured the motivational inspirations of specific participants: fostering change, student voice, and strong work ethic (see table 5).

Table 5

Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 3 and Sample Representation

Theme (5)	Subtheme	N
Desire to impact positive change	Fostering change	7
	Student voice	3
	Examples of strong work ethic	3

Desire to impact positive change. The first subtheme, fostering change, was described across all participants’ experiences within various capacities. However, all participants’ experiences echoed a desire to create a positive impact within their personal, professional, and/or student’s lives. Data from participants indicated the desire to impact change is linked to (1) self-reflection of one’s social position (or environmental position) and (2) goal setting so that one can generate better opportunities for himself or others. Participants engaged within these steps prior to striving to reach success.

For example, upon discussing motivation for overcoming obstacles, Nick described desiring to foster change within the K-12 settings. Coming from a disadvantaged background, he

implied he is conscious of the hinderances many students face within education. He wants to help overturn those changes by being a resource. Specifically, Nick stated, “I chose the field of education to give back to young men and women. I decided to transition beyond the classroom so I could make a greater impact within an entire building rather than just the classroom.” Nick’s description revealed that he is aware of the limited power teachers have due to classroom confinement. Thus, his motivation for higher education stems from desiring to positively impact education from a higher hierarchical level as it may produce greater results.

John also expressed a desire to foster change within K-12 settings as he stated:

I understand the importance of seeing black teachers and administrators within schools.

My role is to be there, educate all students, and create an inclusive culture for learning.

That is part of the driving force for being an administrator. Our kids need to see that they can attain success outside of what they see on television.

John reflected on how he wanted to be a positive image for all students yet specifically African American students. This researcher connected this statement to fact that disadvantaged African American students rarely (1) receive adequate exposure and (2) get the chance connect their identities to successful people of authority. Thus, John desires to change this narrative as he serves as an example of attainable African American success story.

In addition, Symphony described a desire to foster change within K-12 schools as her goal is to “develop teachers and administrators to become more effective in educational settings.”

In regard to initiating positive change within one’s personal life, Brittney described desiring upward mobility in terms of her future environment. Brittney states, “I grew up in what they call the ghetto, and I just knew I can’t stay here for the rest of my life.” Thus, her

motivation for goal attainment stems from her desire to escape her impoverished upbringing and acclimate to a better living environment. In alliance with this concept for creating a better personal life, Symphony was driven by the desire to better support her daughter. Symphony stated, “I have a seven-year-old daughter who motivates me to continue to get a higher degree. I don’t want to disappoint her. I must continue my education so I can give her the best.”

In terms of subtheme two, it is important to note that three out of seven participants (Symphony, Alisa, Ashley) revealed a desire to implement student voice while planning to make a positive impact. Participants described experiences in which their voices were not welcomed. However, they implied their voice activates power that could initiate desirable changes within institutional settings. As referenced in the literature, students’ voice occurs when students are allowed to verbalize their opinions and choices within a group setting (Moses et al., 2020).

For instance, Ashley stated she wanted to implement voice and choice for herself as well as students upon becoming a certified educator. Upon deciding to become a teacher she reflected on how she wanted to improve the system. Ashley stated:

I began thinking about everything I would have done as a teacher that some of my teachers didn’t do or communicate. My teachers didn’t communicate well with me so I decided that I wanted to be a teacher so I can run my classroom the way it should be run. I want to talk to students the way they deserve to be talked to.

Ashley’s reflection made her aware of the future outcomes she wanted to see within her life and the lives of her students. This is a direct component of agency as one must first self-reflect and then create a goal to attain better future outcomes. Symphony desires to follow a similar path as she stated:

When I was in school you didn't speak up or say how you felt. This program has given me the ability to have a voice. I am being heard. As an administrator and educator, it's part of our responsibility to create confidence factors within our students. I want to build confidence in students and let them know your voice is just as important as someone else's.

Lastly, Alisa's vision of implementing voice and choice differs as she desires to empower colleagues by implementing this strategy. Alisa stated, "I work with colleagues who felt their voices are not heard. I want to speak for those teachers who don't really feel their opinions are well received."

The third subtheme that emerged is strong work ethic. In terms of strong work ethic, three participants describe their parents' or grandparents' work ethic as motivation to pursue their goals. These participants internalized their influencer's ability to work hard and reproduced it as a personal quality of their own. For instance, John stated:

I watched my mom work hard, go to night classes, attain her bachelor's and master's, and later on her specialist. If she had not kept fighting to get her education life would have been even more difficult for us. She is one of the biggest positive impacts in my life.

In a similar vein, Symphony stated:

I remember my dad getting up at four o'clock in the morning and it was still dark outside. He was headed to work. That motivated me. I said if he can get up that early and go to work, then I can sit in a classroom and gain the knowledge to teach.

Themes about Self Reflection and Agency Traits

Research question four states, "How do disadvantaged African American students describe themselves, and what traits seem associated with agency?" A number of interview

questions were aimed at probing the way participants view themselves and how they implement characteristics of student agency. As mentioned in the literature review, I define student agency as an active potential individuals use to produce enhanced opportunities and life success by overcoming inherited social limitations with supportive resources. While discussing the consistency of participants' academic and/or professional journeys one main theme emerged: Determination.

Determination. Data revealed all participants described themselves as highly determined throughout their academic and/or professional journeys. Such determination was described through participants' willingness to become independent learners to gain procedural knowledge needed for academic and/or professional support. Specifically, five participants described having to become independent learners to gain the knowledge needed to successfully navigate the academics of collegiate settings. Two participants (John, and Brittney) exemplified their determination by sharing experiences of taking initiative and asking for goal-supportive resources. Therefore, these participants engaged in problem-solving skills and social capital expansion to develop support. A detail explanation of participants stories regarding participants self-reflection and agency is discussed with in upcoming sections.

Alisa revealed her determination by engaging within independent learning activities to gain support for goal attainment. This participant expressed that her high school failed to prepare her for the true challenges associated with attaining post-secondary education. In terms of highest-grade point average, she ranked number three within her class. However, there was a huge disconnect between her being able to excel within high school versus college. Yet, she did not give up on her goal of becoming a certified teacher. Alisa stated:

High school didn't prepare me for college. I feel like I prepared myself for college. For example, I had to teach myself to apply for grants and scholarships. I didn't have the academic tools needed for college academics. I doubted myself. But my intentions were never to stop my education.

Taylor describes encountering a similar experience upon transitioning into higher education. She graduated as the salutatorian of her class. However, upon entering college she struggled academically. Yet, she was determined to succeed so she engaged within independent learning to support her academics as she navigated through the beginning years of her undergraduate schooling. For example, she stated:

When I first enrolled in college, I realized that my school district did not prepare me for anything like on a collegiate level. All the learning and work I did in school did not prepare me for college..... if I didn't do a lot of reading on my own or go to the library on my own. I wouldn't have been able to get the resources I needed.

Two participants exemplified their determination to succeed by expanding their social capital to gain access to others who could provide them with support and opportunities. For example, John desired to be an administrator within his school district. He had the administrator certification endorsement needed for administrator hiring requirements. However, he needed help with securing a position. Thus, John connected with others that helped him to secure an administrator position. John stated, "I asked my building level principal how he can provide me with opportunities to grow?" Upon asking, his principal enrolled him within a leadership training program. In addition, he hired him for his first administrator position. Thus, this participant benefitted directly from his social capital as it helped him to secure a promotion within his career

field. This experience revealed that it is good to directly ask those who have access to resources for help.

Summary

Chapter four of this dissertation begins with an introduction that restates the purpose of this study. Next, the study discusses the demographics of the participants. Within this section, participant characteristics are identified in terms of their pseudonym, school classification, years of teaching experience, and profile. Third, this chapter discusses the results of participants' semi-structured interviews. This section includes an analysis of themes that emerged from participants' oral responses. These themes were formulated by conducting thematic analysis. Lastly, this chapter discusses a summary of chapter four in which the readers are participating now.

CHAPTER V: SIGNIFICANCE, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this research is to explore student agency's impact on the lives of successful African American adult students who once identified as disadvantaged. This qualitative study addressed the following research question and sub-questions:

How do socially and economically disadvantaged African American students who have managed to overcome significant obstacles describe and explain the strategies they utilized to succeed?

- a.) What factors foster help-seeking behavior for disadvantaged African American students to develop networks and systems of support?
- b.) What factors influence disadvantaged African American students to develop positive attitudes about themselves and how they value education?
- c.) What develops disadvantaged African American students' motivation towards goals?
- d.) How do disadvantaged African American students describe themselves, and what traits seem associated with agency?

Through an interpretive perspective, I engaged in phenomenological semi-structured interviews with a total of seven African American participants who are currently school of education students at a large university in the state of Mississippi. The purpose of these interviews was to explore their perspectives on how they implemented agency to overcome their obstacles to attain academic success and upward mobility. I audio and video recorded each interview and then transcribed each transcript line by line to understand participants' perceptions

about their academic and professional success journeys. This section of the research study is a discussion of the significance of the findings from participants' responses, implications for future practice and research, and lastly a conclusion to this study.

In this study, I used interviews as an opportunity to gain a deep understanding of how African American students perceive factors that: (1) grant them networking opportunities for goal support, (2) influence attitudes about themselves and how they value education positively, (3) grant them motivation to attain their goals, and (4) determine how they describe themselves and their agency. As an interpretivist, I sought to discover the truths and personal beliefs about advancing forward academically and professionally from the perspectives of African American participants. I assumed the findings of this study were a result of the participant's own experiences as each participant met the criteria for self-identifying as formerly disadvantaged. Each participant described his or her personal experiences uniquely as they presented their stories through their individual lenses. Through these perspectives, I found differences and commonalities among participants' journeys to achieving academic success and upward mobility.

Commonalities

I found all seven participants sought motivation to set and attain goals from the desire to impact change within their personal and/or professional lives. Thus, all participants engaged in self-reflection and set a goal to solidify improvement for the future. For instance, five out of seven participants desired to positively impact the education system to produce environments that granted more support to students as well as teachers. The other two participants identified their social position and desired upward mobility in terms of environmental space and overall life success. Thus, through their lived experiences participants engaged in self-reflection, set goals,

and created a plan to reach goal attainment. The results found within this study align with the work of Freire (1972) as he emphasized the importance of engaging in self-reflection prior to settings goals. He implies that self-reflection allows students to identify their social positioning so they can map out pathways conducive to their desired outcomes (Freire, 1972; Freire & Ramos, 2014).

Connected to participants' desire to impact positive change, participants' high level of determination was another significant finding of this study. As mentioned earlier, participants were asked questions to explore their perceptions about overcoming their life's obstacles. All participants described experiences that reflected their ability to persevere regardless of their circumstances. Such perseverance revealed participants were stewards of independent learning who desired cultural capital. For instance, these participants learned to navigate collegiate settings to gain access to resources that supported their academic and professional journeys. Results of this study support Kundu's (2020) research which implies cultural capital resources are needed to support disadvantaged student's agency development and academic journeys. The participants in my study sought to gain cultural capital to overturn gaps within their knowledge that hindered them from reaching their goals.

In addition, data from this study revealed the importance of gaining problem-solving and relationship-building skills within K-12 settings. These skills afforded students to gain access to social circles that helped them to attain their desired goals. Specifically, six participants described being able to gain support as they built relationships with others who had procedural knowledge they did not have. Secondly, these findings are in alignment with Moses et al. (2020) work which implies problem-solving skills are a key component of student agency. Problem-

solving skills and critical thinking skills support student success by equipping students with tools to identify problems and create solutions (Moses et al., 2020).

In terms of developing social capital, this study's findings are in alignment with Klemenčič's (2015) research which states, "cultivating strong social networks and developing cultural capital can strengthen agency in a particular situation as much as it can help identify interesting and fortuitous opportunities" (p. 18). Supporting this argument, the results of this study also align with Kundu's (2020) and Bandura's (2001) research which suggest social capital can afford individuals to have access to networking circles that can enhance their academic and professional opportunities as they engage in conversations with others who may have connections and channels to opportunities that are normally out of their reach. As previously mentioned, six participants described gaining support for goal attainment through creating networks with others who possessed access to knowledge and resources that they did not have. As participants felt comfortable, they were able to open up and determine their talents and grow with help of authoritative supporters.

Another notable finding of this study was institutional agents' impact. Six participants described having nurturing relationships with institutional agents or mentors that provided safe and welcoming environments. These participants described these relationships as foundations for creating an environment conducive to holistic learning as students were educated mentally, socially, and emotionally. These findings are in alignment with Stanton-Salazar's (2011) work suggesting that institutional agents are a primary component of boosting student agency because they have the ability to influence students' educational and professional journey in a negative or positive capacity.

The last notable finding of this study was parental influence and positive educational experiences impact on student's attitudes about themselves and how they value education. Almost all participants described their parents as advocators for valuing education. In addition, this finding supports, Ciabattari's (2010) and Kundu's (2020) research which argues disadvantaged students have parents who value education. However, they lack the knowledge and social capital needed to support their children's educational journeys. Connected to this theme was the number of participants who described educational experiences as an (1) influence for creating a positive self-image and (2) increaser of their value in education. Specifically, six participants identified educational experiences within their lives that nurtured their desire for education or boosted their confidence. Thus, participants described these experiences as making education (or learning) a desirable experience for them. This finding is in alignment with Klemenčič (2015) research which implies the power of student perception can be influenced by supportive teacher-student relationships.

Differences within Results

Two interesting sub-themes emerged among a few members of the participant population: (1) institutional agent's subtheme talent identification and nurture, and (2) desire to impact change's subtheme examples of work ethic.

In terms of talent identification and nurture, four participants described experiences in which institutional agents or mentors took the responsibility of identifying their talent/skills and nurturing it to grow. These experiences produced confidence in participants' abilities and encouraged them to set either professional or personal goals for themselves. In addition, three participants reported internalizing the work ethic of close family members provided them with motivation to set academic and professional goals for themselves.

Since a total of seven participants were studied, I question whether or not this finding would produce different results in a larger pool of participants. Part of the reason why this study's sample size is relatively small was due to limited amount of African American school of education undergraduate majors. For instance, in 2021 African American students made up only 13.7% of undergraduate teacher education programs population at The University of Mississippi (The University of Mississippi, 2022). The number of African American teacher education enrollments is far more alarming than the states collegiate attainment rates (28%) for African American students (United States Bureau of the Consensus, 2018). As low African American representation continues to persist within undergraduate education programs, this study only included two undergraduate participants which both identified as female. However, I do believe the data produced by this theme is accurate as the data reached saturation.

The majority of the participant pool was composed of African American graduate students as they made up 57% of participants. However, this number is expected since the university's graduate school of education has an increasingly high number of African American adult students. For instance, African Americans made up 56% of the School of Education's educational leadership program in 2021 (The University of Mississippi, 2022). The increase of African American school of education graduate student enrollment could be due to the university's graduate student inclusivity scholarship. It offers minority students up to 75% tuition waiver. Secondly, graduate students have a history of experiencing some form of academic and professional success. Thus, these students may be more prone to enroll within higher education programs as they possess the resources that support goal attainment.

Implications for Practice

The knowledge gained from this study may inform teachers, educational administrators, and educational practitioners of ways to better support disadvantaged African American students in terms of (1) building positive student-teacher relationships, (2) creating opportunities for positive experiences that nurture students' talents and skills, (3) expanding students social capital, and (4) expanding students and parents cultural capital as it relates to procedural knowledge needed to navigate collegiate institutions. All of these categories, which support student agency development, can be addressed by institutional agents within K-12 and collegiate settings.

Building positive relationships. Data from this study indicates fostering positive teacher-student relationships creates a capacity for students to not only gain essential social and emotional skills needed for life navigation, but also expand student's capacity to build social networks and circles. These skills taught participants how to engage in conversations that granted them access to networks and opportunities that support their goals. Secondly, these positive relationships created a safe emotional environment for students to feel included and safe to be holistic learners.

One way to build positive teacher-student relationships is by incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy within classroom instruction. As students are presented instruction connected to their identities, they are more likely to engage within conversations that could provide his or her teachers insight on their life perspectives. Such dialogue could also lay the basis for teachers and students to become acquainted on a healthy social-emotional level as they engage within instruction that incorporates student inclusivity. Secondly, incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy can expand positive student to student interactions as they are able to learn from and

about their peers. Lastly, incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy can also boost students' self-efficacy as students are able to engage within instruction that is relevant to their individual backgrounds (Cuyjet et al., 2016). Such engagement can reveal how students cultures represent importance within real life society.

In addition, hosting professional development sessions to train educators how to incorporate inclusive classroom practices for marginalized students can also help to initiate positive teacher-student relationships. For instance, in order to holistically educate students, educators must be trained on how to connect with students who have cultural identities different from their own. As teachers gain such tools, they can better develop students' social emotional skills which are needed to build positive relationships and expand social capital.

Positive educational experiences. Secondly, data from this study implies creating opportunities for positive educational experiences can (1) build students' self-confidence, (2) cause students to self-reflect on their current social position, and (3) cause students to draft a plan for goal attainment that produces a better life outcome. For instance, as teachers help students to identify talents and skills, they can be nurtured to prompt students to develop goals for themselves.

One way teachers can create positive educational experiences is by discovering students' interests, and talents and incorporating them within educational activities. For example, institutional agents can require students to complete interest inventories at the beginning of the school year. These interest inventories should reveal which career paths align with student's interests. Based on that data, teachers could host career fairs in which students can ask different individuals within various fields questions as it relates to becoming successful within his or her field. Such experiences will allow students to connect with individuals who have acquired

success, and they can gain cultural knowledge on the tools needed to excel within a particular career field. Lastly, such experiences may offer exposure to students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds with limited social and cultural capital. Such exposure should start at the earliest age possible to ensure students have ample understanding of various career options as well as have time to identify how such options align with their personal talents and gifts.

In addition, granting students exposure to higher education institutions can also create positive educational experiences. For instance, schools can collaborate with local universities and community colleges to take students on college tours so students may experience collegiate settings in person. More specifically, I believe that African American disadvantaged students could benefit even more if they were provided an opportunity to explore a historically black colleges or universities (HBCUs) as research reveals student self-efficacy is increased when one can associate success with those who look like them (Cuyjet et al., 2016). The state of Mississippi has a total of six HBCUs: Alcorn State University, Jackson State University, Coahoma Community College, Mississippi Valley State University, Rust College, and Tougaloo College. School districts in the state of Mississippi can collaborate with the colleges to: (1) ensure inclusivity is implemented by exposing students to higher education options other than predominately white institutions, and (2) boost college enrollments for African American students. These strategies may help to increase post-secondary graduation rates of African American in Mississippi's

Expanding social capital. Thirdly, data from this study indicates expanding students' social capital provides them with supportive tools needed to enhance their academic and professional success. As previously stated, as students gain access to networks, they can create support for themselves regardless of their environment. These skills are important to student

success as they navigate within and beyond K-12 settings. Such capital can open the door for opportunities and resources that students do not have access to. In addition, this information can be used to foster goal attainment.

One way to expand students' social capital is by bridging the gap between schools and local communities. Students can expand their social capital resources by gaining access to resources within their communities. For instance, local entrepreneurs, lawyers, doctors, professors, and cosmetologists could consistently work with the school to create opportunities for students to engage within job shadowing, and internships. Such interactions will allow students to build relationships with individuals outside of their daily lives. In addition, these relationships could potentially offer students access to various opportunities and resources as they are now connected to people who have obtained a level of success greater than that of the student. Being connected to successful mentors could also encourage students to associate greater value with education and increase their chances of attending college as they see that success occurs by obtaining education.

In addition, teachers can help to develop students' social capital by serving as the facilitator within learning rather than conducting instruction via traditional lecturing methods. For instance, when educators serve as instructional facilitators students are able to lead their own learning processes and engage within in-depth peer to peer conversations. Such learning can allow students to enhance their social emotional skills needed for healthy conversations. In addition, this form of learning can allow students to build relationships with each other (that can be used for networking) as they are actively learning from each other while collaborating.

Cultural capital expansion. Lastly, data suggests institutional agents can expand the cultural capital of students and their parents to support goal attainment. Institutional agents can

share their knowledge to bridge the gap between disadvantaged students and parents to help them secure better opportunities. Several participants within this study explain experiences in which their institutional agents provided them with help in terms of scholarship applications, letters of recommendation, and collegiate advice that supported (and continues to support) their academic and professional journeys. In the same sense, participants who were forced to become self-learners expressed a desire to have more information as it related to resources that could have granted them greater support during their academic journeys. Thus, as the students and parents are given this information, it can be utilized in a productive manner to support better outcomes.

For instance, one way to expand students and parents' cultural capital is by hosting after school meetings that provide parents and students training on college admission processes, scholarship opportunities, financial aid assistance, and academic remediation options. Parents should not be forced to rely on the expertise of teachers for their child's educational support. Rather, sessions should occur in which parents and their children have an opportunity to gain knowledge that can help to support their K-12 and post-secondary education journeys. As such knowledge is transmitted, parents can then use these tools to better support their children irrespective of their backgrounds.

Limitations

There are two possible limitations associated with the findings of this study: participant demographics, and the role of the researcher. First, due to the contexts of the study, participants were only allowed to participate if they were education majors within two semesters of graduation (undergraduate students) or graduate-level degree-seeking students. Such purposeful sampling prevented participants within other academic fields from participating. However, such

purposeful sampling was intentional as this study specifically focuses on uplifting African American students who identified as disadvantaged.

Lastly, the role of the researcher could be viewed as a limitation as I may have inaccurately influenced the analysis and discussion of this study's results. As previously stated, I once identified as a disadvantaged student. However, I included a number of participant's quotes to provide transparency and accuracy of data analysis. This approach was taken to provide the audience with the opportunity to form their own conclusions about the validity of the research's results.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, I suggest expanding study participation to minority groups other than African Americans. Other groups could include those who identify as Hispanic, Native Americans, biracial, or any historically marginalized groups. Expanding this study's population pool could allow me or other researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that impact disadvantaged students from various backgrounds rather than just those who identify as African American.

In addition, another suggestion for future research includes implementing this study within colleges and/or universities within other geographic regions. As previously mentioned, this study was conducted at a large university within the state of Mississippi. Conducting this study within other geographic regions could yield varying results as participants' experiences and perspectives may change due to living within different environments.

The last recommendation is to expand the participant pool to include adult students who are majoring in programs other than education. This study was conducted using purposeful sampling to include disadvantaged African American students who are enrolled in the school of

education programs. However, participants majoring in various disciplines may yield results different from the ones produced by the study. This information could provide K-12 public schools and collegiate institutions with information to better support historically marginalized students in terms of social capital, cultural capital, and resource attainment. Data from this study, may only support disadvantaged African American students in reaching goal attainment.

Conclusion

Disadvantaged African American students have a large capacity for success that can be nurtured as their agency is developed and supported. Agency development occurs as students develop resources such as social capital and cultural capital. Social capital allows students to create relationships and networks with others who may be able to offer them access to opportunities or resources that they do not have access to independently. Cultural capital development should occur within students to give them knowledge that supports their goals. It is also important to note that these capitals are intertwined so that one fuels the other. For instance, as individuals gain access to social circles, they automatically can expand their knowledge as they connect with others who can provide them with greater opportunities. In comparison, when students gain procedural knowledge, such as cultural capital, they are made aware of which social circles to gain access to for expanded opportunities as well as support for goal attainment. Therefore, social and cultural capital both help students navigate foreign environments as they migrate beyond K-12 institutions. When social capital and cultural capital are combined, they can facilitate the resources students need to elevate their agency and goal attainment.

Data from participants revealed institutional agents within K – 12 and collegiate settings can help students to expand their social and cultural capital as they grant students access to their personal social and cultural capital resources. This expansion can occur as teachers and students

build positive relationships that foster holistic student growth. However, it is important to note that these tools should consistently be developed and implemented as they can be utilized with various settings and stages throughout the course of one's life.

For example, this study revealed undergraduate African students typically require significantly higher social and cultural capital support as they transition into post-secondary education. For instance, when these students leave their K-12 support systems, they must have the tools (or rather agency) to navigate foreign spaces irrespective of their backgrounds. These tools will allow students to 1.) identify problems they face, and 2.) create solutions for problems as they continue to expand their procedural knowledge (cultural capital) and social networks (social capital). Such tools can continue to be developed as these students build relationships with peers and institutional agents (teachers, mentors, colleagues). In addition, participants have revealed understanding the benefits of social and cultural capital has encouraged them to nurture these skills as they can help to secure enhanced life opportunities.

The graduate level participants of this study, who worked full time, revealed there is not an expiration date on academic nor professional success as these participants' ages ranged from 30 to 55. In addition, these participants revealed institutional agents (specifically mentors) can continue to positively impact one's life beyond bachelor degree completion. For instance, three out of four of these participants (75%) credited mentors for inspiring them to seek advanced degrees beyond that of the bachelor level. Thus, these participants mentors continued to emphasize the benefits of higher education even though they had obtained bachelor degrees. In addition, these adult students demonstrated the importance agency has as they continued to set higher goals for themselves as they transitioned throughout life. Thus, one's agency development

should continue to occur throughout the course of one's life as he continues to grow and strive for higher levels of success.

In conclusion, it was evident that participants (1) desired to succeed and (2) implemented agency fueled by social and cultural capital resources to reach success. Participants realized the importance of both elements prior to leaving K-12 institutions as their agency development occurred within these settings. Thus, the role educational stakeholders play in student agency development cannot be minimized. Rather, institutional agents should be developed to identify students' talents, build positive student-teacher relationships, and foster agency development within students as soon as possible as it may help them reach better life outcomes. Implementing such strategies can help to boost student achievement rates and Mississippi's graduation rates for African American students as it is evident these students desire to succeed. However, they need additional support so they can acquire higher education and professional success.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A



Invitation to Participate

I am inviting African American students from the University of Mississippi's school of education (UMSOE), who previously identified as disadvantaged, to participate in a study that explores the impact that agency can have on academic success and upward mobility. The term disadvantaged student references students whose families' social and/or economic circumstances cause hindrances to their academic success. The injustice embedded within society's social construction fuels the opportunity gap and contributes to an ongoing cycle of disadvantages that make negative contributions to a specific population of students. Despite the odds, some students have managed to surpass their circumstances to attain academic success and upward mobility. Thus, this study aims to explore the perspectives of those students who have overcome their circumstances to reach success.

Data from this study may help to reduce the opportunity gap and boost the success of future African American students.

For the purpose of this study, participants qualify as disadvantaged by meeting one or more of the following requirements: (1) come from low-income households in which the total annual income was \$25,444 for a family of three or more, (2) be an African American graduate of a high school in which 70% or more of the student body was composed of minority race students, (3) be a first-generation African American college student or (4) be an African American student who qualified for financial aid Pell Grants upon undergraduate enrollment.

In addition, participants must meet at least one or more of the following criteria: (1) be a bachelor's degree-seeking student within two semesters of graduation or (2) be a graduate-level degree-seeking who has a professional career within the field of education. For this study, the following positions qualify as a professional career within education: K-12 certified educator, K-12 school level administrator, and/or K-12 district-level administrator.

This research was reviewed by the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participation in the study involves taking part in a one-hour recorded semi-structured interview. The interviews will be facilitated by a University of Mississippi doctoral student who serves as the primary investigator for this study.

Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation may include recalling difficult or challenging experiences or feelings related to your academic success or upward mobility. Some of the benefits of your participation may include sharing positive experiences or feelings related to your academic or professional success and the opportunity to contribute to

research that may better support disadvantaged students within K-12 schools and post-secondary settings.

Lastly, participation in the study is voluntary. Participants will not be identified in any presentation or publication produced as a result of this study. Rather, all participants will be granted an alias name to protect their confidentiality. It is important to note participants may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. Please click here (or copy and paste the link into a url box)

https://uofmississippi.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_b9DRITMCievzIVY

to volunteer to participate.

APPENDIX B

Study Title: Bridging the Opportunity Gap Through Exploring the Perceptions of Disadvantaged

African American Students

Investigator

Anesha Carter, M. Ed.
Department of Leadership & Counselor
Education
120 Guyton Hall
The University of Mississippi
(662) 609-7478

Advisor

Dr. Jill Cabrera Davis, Ph.D.
Department of Leadership & Counselor
Education
120 Guyton Hall
The University of Mississippi
(662) 915-7069

INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING ONLY IF YOU ARE COLLECTING DATA EXCLUSIVELY FROM ADULTS By checking this box I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

Description

This study explores perceptions of African American students who once identified as disadvantaged to discover how agency was used to overcome obstacles to attain academic and professional success. To participate in this study participants must meet at least one or more of the following criteria: (1) be a University of Mississippi School of Education (UMSOE) bachelor's degree-seeking student within two semesters of graduation or (2) be a (UMSOE) graduate student who has a professional career within the field of education. For this study, the following positions qualify as a professional career within education: K-12 certified educator, K-12 school level administrator, or K-12 district-level administrator. In addition, each participant will self-identify his or herself as a former disadvantaged student by meeting one of the following requirements: (1) be an African American from low-income household in which the annual income was \$25,444 or less for a family with three or more members, (2) be an African American graduate of a high school in which 70% or more of the student body is composed of minority race students, (3) be a first-generation African American college student or (4) be an African American student who qualified for financial aid Pell Grants upon undergraduate college enrollment. During virtual semi-structured interviews, the researcher would like to ask participants eleven questions about their experiences in terms of their life obstacles, goals, and academic/professional success.

Cost and Payments:

It will take participants approximately one hour to participate in a virtual interview conducted via Zoom technology.

Risks and Benefits

Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation may include recalling difficult or challenging experiences or feelings related to your academic success or upward mobility.

Confidentiality

Participants will not be identified or associated with quoted comments in any presentations or publications resulting from this study. All information will be kept confidential as participants will be granted an alias name to ensure all question responses remain anonymous.

In addition, recordings and transcripts from the interviews will be stored in password-protected files available to members of the research team, and all files will be destroyed within three years of the completion of the study.

Right to Withdraw

You do not have to take part in this study, and you may stop participation at any time. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, all you have to do is to tell the primary researcher. Participation revocation can occur during the interview, or by letter, or by telephone (contact information listed above). Please note you may also skip any questions you prefer not to answer during the interview.

IRB Approval

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, then decide if you want to be in the study or not.

Statement of Consent

I have read and understand the above information. By completing the survey/interview I consent to participate in the study.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Printed name of Participant

Appendix C

Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Bridging the Opportunity Gap Through Exploring the Perceptions of Disadvantaged African American Students

Investigator

Anesha Carter Student, M.S.
Leadership & Counselor Education
120 Guyton Hall
University of Mississippi
University, MS 38677
(662) 609- 7478
alcarter@go.olemiss.edu

Faculty Sponsor

Dr. Jill Cabera Davis, Ph.D.
Leadership & Counselor Education
120 Guyton Hall
University of Mississippi
University, MS 38677
(662) 915- 7069
jdcabrer@olemiss.edu

Key Information for You to Consider

- **Purpose** This study explores perceptions of African American students who once identified as disadvantaged to discover how agency was used to overcome obstacles to attain academic and professional success. To participate within this study participants must meet at least one or more of the following criteria: (1) be a School of Education (SOE) bachelor's degree-seeking student within two semesters of graduation or (2) be a School of Education (SOE) graduate-level student who has a professional career within the field of education. For this study, the following positions qualify as a professional career within education: K-12 certified educator, K-12 school level administrator, or K-12 district-level administrator. In addition, each participant will self-identify his or herself as a former disadvantaged student by meeting one of the following requirements: (1) be an African American who came from low-income households with an annual income was \$25,444 or less for a family of three or more, (2) be an African American graduate of a high school in which 70% or more of the student body is composed of minority race students, (3) be a first-generation African American college student and/or (4) be an African American student who qualified for financial aid Pell Grants upon undergraduate college enrollment. (Note: Participants classified as undergraduate students must be within two semesters of graduation and expected to complete their program of study by August 2022 or December 2022.)
- **Duration.** It is expected that your participation will last approximately one hour.
- **Activities.** You will be asked to participate in a virtual interview (via zoom) in which you will be invited to respond to a series of eleven questions and perhaps additional follow up questions.

- **Why you might not want to participate.** Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation may include triggering mental trauma associated with recalling difficult or challenging experiences or feelings related to your academic success or upward mobility.
- **Why you might want to participate.** Some of the benefits that may be expected include personal satisfaction from contributing to research that may better support disadvantaged students within K-12 and post-secondary settings.

By checking this box, I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

What you will do for this study

1. You will be asked to respond to a series of eleven scripted questions and may be asked to respond to additional follow-up questions about factors you feel have been important to your academic success and upward mobility.
2. There are no special procedures for this study
3. The hour-long virtual interview will be conducted by a doctoral student at the University of Mississippi via zoom.
4. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed through Zoom technology. Both recordings and transcripts of all interviews will be stored in password-protected files available only to members of the research team.

Videotaping / Audiotaping

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed solely for purposes of reviewing the information shared. Neither the recordings nor the transcripts will be shared outside of the research committee.

Possible risks from your participation

Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation may include recalling difficult or challenging experiences or feelings related to your academic success or upward mobility.

Benefits from your participation

Some of the benefits that may be expected include personal satisfaction from contributing to research that may better support disadvantaged students within K-12 and post-secondary settings.

Incentives

Participants will not be awarded monetary incentives for participating within this study.

Confidentiality

Participants will not be identified or associated with quoted comments in any presentations or publications resulting from this study. All information will be kept confidential as participants will be granted an alias name to ensure all question responses remain anonymous.

In addition, recordings and transcripts from the interviews will be stored in password protected files available to members of the research team, and all files will be destroyed within three years of the completion of the study.

Members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) – the committee responsible for reviewing the ethics of, approving, and monitoring all research with humans – have authority to access all records. However, the IRB will request identifiers only when necessary. We will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone else without your written consent unless required by law.

Right to Withdraw

You do not have to volunteer for this study, and there is no penalty if you refuse. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, just tell the interviewer. Whether or not you participate or withdraw will not affect your current or future relationship with the Department of Counselor and Leadership Education, School of Education, or with the University, and it will not cause you to lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

The researchers may terminate your participation in the study without regard to your consent and for any reason, such as protecting your safety and protecting the integrity of the research data.

IRB Approval

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, then decide if you want to be in the study or not.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have been given a copy of this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions, and I have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Furthermore, I also affirm that the interviewer explained the study to me and told me about the study’s risks as well as my right to refuse to participate and to withdraw.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed name of Participant

Appendix D

Interview Questions

Study Title: Bridging the Opportunity Gap Through Exploring the Perceptions of Disadvantaged

African American Students

Introduction Statement to be made by the primary researcher prior to each interview:

Hello, I appreciate your participation in this study. This interview will explore your life's experiences in terms of overcoming adversity to attain academic success and/or upward mobility. As communicated via consent and data release form, this interview will be audio and video recorded using Zoom technology. You have the option to refuse participation at any time during the interview without any penalty. Please be completely transparent when responding to questions as there are no right or wrong answers. To maintain your confidentiality, I will not utilize your name in any presentations or publications resulting from this study. Rather, I will assign you a pseudonym, so data remains unconnected to your identity. If you do not have any further questions or concerns, I will now start the interview.

1. Please tell me your major, anticipated graduation date, and goals upon graduation.
2. How did you come to have these goals?
3. Is there anyone who helps you strive to reach your goals?
4. Where do you seek support to reach your goals? And how did you learn about or find those resource(s)?
5. Describe your upbringing. What were some of your most significant influences growing up that contributed to who you are today?
6. Please describe the characteristics, environment, experiences, or people that have made a positive difference in your academic success and/or professional success. (Follow up focusing on the SOE department, or high school support)
7. Please describe the characteristics, environment, experiences, or people that have made it more difficult for you to be academically and/or professionally successful?
8. How did you overcome those difficulties?
9. Tell me about any periods of time or particular moments which you feel have been very important in supporting or hindering your academic success? (Follow up probe for explanations such as life circumstances, position within one's environment such as U of M SOE).
10. Do you feel that either the factors supporting your success or the factors hindering your success have been related in any way to your background which includes social positioning, socioeconomic status, or social networking capacity?
11. Thinking about the factors and experiences you have shared with us, do you have any recommendations for your department, the school or UM on how it might help improve the experiences and support of students who identify as disadvantaged students?

Appendix E

Definition of Themes

Thematic Category	Definition	Participant Excerpts
Development of Social Capital	developing networking circles or relationships that grant access to opportunities which support an individual's goals.	“Getting to know more people who know more about things, through networking, and friendships has supported me a lot.” (Participant: Ashley)
Institutional Agents Impact	Impact which occurs through individuals who hold one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high status within societal or institutional settings (Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Such agents have the capacity to make educational experiences supportive or non-supportive as they use discretion to supply resources which could influence student learning and success.	“It was my coaches, my teachers, and my administrators that poured into me through athletics and some other things. Because of that, I was able to get out, go to college, and get a degree.” (Participant: Nick)
Emphasizing Educational Value	occurs as student’s influencers (teachers, parents, mentors) demonstrate how education is associated with beneficial value	“My mother and father were sticklers on education. Education is the key to your success. Education is the only way that you are going to make it in this world. Education is the only way that you will be self-sufficient and independent.” (Participant: Symphony)
Experiencing Accomplishment	An increase in confidence or self-efficacy which occurs due to educational or personal accomplishment	“When I became certified it was a big highlight in my life because I actually put my mind to something, and I was able to achieve it.” (Participants: Brittney)

Desire to Impact Positive Change	student's internal desire to create a positive change within their personal or professional life	"I understand the importance of seeing black teachers and administrators within schools. So my role is to be there, educate all students, and yet create an inclusive culture for learning. That is part of the driving force for being an administrator. Our kids need to see that they can attain success outside of what they see on television." (Participant: John)
Determination	a force that drives students to obtain goals despite obstacles	"High school didn't prepare me for college. I feel like I prepared myself for college. For example, I had to teach myself to apply for grants and scholarships. I didn't have the academic tools needed for college academics..... I doubted myself. But my intentions were never to stop my education." (Participant: Alisa)

VITA

Anesha Carter

EDUCATION

2022

Doctor of Philosophy, Educational Leadership K-12, University of Mississippi

2018

Master of Education, Educational Leadership K-12, Mississippi College

2012

Bachelor of Arts, English, University of Mississippi

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

2016 - 2022

Special Education Teacher, South Panola School District

2015 - 2016

Special Education Teacher, Tate County School District

2013 - 2015

Special Education Teacher, Quitman County School District

PROFESSIONAL CREDENTIALS

K-12 Mild to Moderate Disabilities, Mississippi License

7-12 English, Mississippi License

7-12 Social Studies, Mississippi License

Administrator, Career Level, Mississippi License

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Mississippi Association of Educators Administrators (MAE)