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## A Case Study of School-Based Leaders' Perspectives of High School Dropouts

John J. Brown Jr.  
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A Case Study of School-Based Leaders' Perspectives of High School Dropouts

by

John J. Brown, Jr.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies  
College of Education  
University of South Florida

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## Dedication

I dedicate this volume to my family. Mrs. Anna Bell Allen Brown, a beautiful, kind, loving, determined woman who instilled within me the notion that I could achieve any goal that I was willing to work for. If she were alive today nothing would have touched her soul more than my reaching this milestone. Her constant encouragement ignited a restlessness within me that did not allow me to rest at any previous station in life. Providing me with life's basic lessons, she insisted I go to Sunday school and church. She was a perfect example of a God fearing, praying woman. She impressed upon me the importance of my future and, at some point in my life, her dreams for me became my own. Her words became the fuel that sustained me throughout my life journey. My achievements have been because of her, I am at this point because of her. It is with her spirit that I have encouraged and continue to encourage others as they transverse life's difficult terrain.

To family members whose stars will shine much brighter: Julia Bethel, John III, Luci and Jeff; Vaun, and Xavier; my soon to be born granddaughter for John III and Rebecca; Darrell, Kim, Traci, Unique, Ebony, Reneesha, DJ, Meleke, Mahogany, and Latifah; Tytiona, Alyse, and Ronnie, Jr.; Yasmin, Oscar, Jr., and Lola Zen Frances; Byran, Jr., and Johnae Evonia; Desiree, Desmond, Shumba and Baveon; Brandaesia; AMiracle and Kennedy; and all other family members, this milestone is a beacon for each of you.

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## A Case Study of School-Based Leaders' Perspectives on Dropouts

John J. Brown, Jr.

### ABSTRACT

School districts are failing to educate all of America's children. Dropout statistics reveal that almost 7,000 students leave our nation's schools everyday. At this rate 1.2 million students will not graduate on time with their prospective classes. The majority of American male students of African descent are dropping out instead of completing high school. When compared to that of their white peers, the dropout rate of American male students of African descent is significantly higher and the graduation rate much lower.

This research examines high school dropouts from the perspectives of school-based leaders in a high school located in a city in a large southern school district. Structured interviews, transcribed with member-checks, were conducted with eight school-based leaders. The data in this qualitative study were used to examine their perspectives of American male students of African descent dropping out of their high school. The researcher maintained a reflective research journal to enhance the data analysis. The study found that the perspectives of the eight school-based leaders were influenced by their past histories with these students; their personal and acquired knowledge of these students, their families, and their communities. They were largely uniformed of the dropout rate and their previous history with these students had an impact on their present level of support to these students.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

Nationwide, school districts are failing to meet their primary responsibility for educating all of America's children. Almost 7,000 students leave our nation's schools everyday. At this rate, 1.2 million students will not graduate with their prospective classes on time. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2008) estimated that if the student dropouts from the class of 2008 had stayed in school and graduated, 319 billion dollars would be added to the nation's economy over the lifetime of these non-graduates. The Alliance warns that if the number of dropouts are not reduced over the next decade, 12 million students will be added to the dropout rolls costing the nation's economy one trillion dollars (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008).

On a macro level, the U.S ranks 18<sup>th</sup> worldwide in high school graduation rates and 15<sup>th</sup> in college graduation rates; this means that America is no longer the world leader when it comes to educating our children (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008; Mckinsey & Company, 2009). On a micro level, when students dropout of school, their leaving present serious educational and social problems within American society in a variety of ways.

The domestic impact of students dropping out of schools costs state and local governments billions of dollars in public assistance, unemployment benefits, lost revenue and rehabilitation efforts (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Wulsin, 2008; Christle, Jolivette, &

Nelson, 2007; National Education Association, 2006; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Rumberger, 1983; Rumberger, 1987). Citizen tax dollars subsidize both the cost of medical treatment provided to uninsured dropouts and those costs incurred when dropouts commit crimes and engage in criminal activity. Public coffers also absorb the costs related to incarcerating those dropouts who turn to lives of crime and are apprehended, prosecuted, adjudicated, and subsequently placed in juvenile facilities or are convicted in courts of record and sentenced to serve time in adult prisons.

Dropouts present specific challenges for school districts that are responsible for ensuring that they receive a quality education (Swanson, 2008). Society also experiences the impact of these students leaving early as they forfeit many of the opportunities they would have had available to them as graduates with high school diplomas. Their desirability in the job market, having an opportunity to make a positive impact in their community, and a chance for post-secondary education all but vanishes when students leave high school before completion (Patterson, Hale, & Stressman, 2007).

### *Purpose of the Study*

This study described the perspectives of eight school-based leaders regarding American male students of African descent; why they drop out of high school; and the role these school-based leaders play in preventing these students from dropping out of high school.

### *Research Questions*

The relevance of the design and construction of the research question are critical to the research as they are the scaffolding for the investigation and the cornerstone for the data analysis. It is through the research question(s) that the researcher finds out exactly what he/she wants to know (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, pg.31). The researcher is cautioned, however, to take care in developing research questions as these questions not only drive the research, they determine the type of instrument the researcher uses, the data analysis techniques, and ultimately determine the success or failure of the research (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006).

The research questions that guided this study allowed me to present the voices of the school-based leaders regarding: (a) their perspectives of American male students of African descent; (b) why these students drop out of high school; and (b) what efforts they have to prevent these students from dropping out of school.

The questions that guided this research were:

1. What are school-based leaders' perceptions of American male students of African descent and why they drop out of high school?
2. Are the school-based leaders aware of the dropout rate of American male students of African descent? What efforts are being made to address these students dropping out of high school?
3. What role has school base leaders played in preventing American male students of African descent from dropping out of school?

4. What is needed to keep American male students of African descent in school until graduation?

*Significance of the Study*

Researchers have focused on dropping out of high school from the perspectives of those American male students of African decent, who have dropped out of schools (Barzee, 2008; Brown, 2003; Caton, 2005; Clark, 2004; James-Brown, 1995; Lewis, 1982; Redditt, 2005, Rumberger, 1987; Satchel, 2006; Simpson, 2005; Spurrier, 2005; White-Johnson, 1996). By presenting the school-based leaders' perspectives regarding American male students of African descent dropping out of school, this research examined an important issue that impacts these students and society in general from the perspective of those who set policy and guide our schools. To that end, the goal of this research was to provide a clearer understanding of American male students of African descent dropping out of school from the perspective of school-based leaders. By describing how school-based leaders' perceived American male students of African descent, why they dropped out of high school and the role they play in dropout prevention, this research presented those voices of leadership in a high school regarding this critical issue. Giving voice to the school-based leaders not only allowed them to share their perspectives of American male students of African descent and their dropping out of school, they were able to espouse the efforts they made to address dropout prevention in their school. The knowledge gained from this research will advance the

information base, improve practice and inform policy regarding American male students of African descent as will be discussed in chapter five.

*Definition of Terms*

**10 Book Club** - A program I developed as the assistant principal at the alternative school that increased the number of books that participating students read during a specific time frame. Teachers selected 10 books that students read, discussed and wrote reports. I met with the students at the beginning of the reading cycle and again at the end to give them encouragement and individual portraits.

**Alternative school** – An educational setting/program outside of the traditional school setting that provides for the educational needs of those children who are placed in the program.

**American male students of African descent** – The students in this category as those traditionally referred to in the literature as *African American* or *Black*. A complete explanation is offered in Chapter Two.

**Critical Race Theory** – Derrick Bell developed the theory in the 1970's but Kimberly Crenshaw is credited with coining the name Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the 1980's. The theory represents a racial analysis, intervention and critique of traditional civil rights theory and Critical Legal Theory. The basic premises are that race and racism are endemic to the American normative order and a pillar of American institutional and community life (Mutua, 2006, p.2).

**Dropout** - A child under the age of 17 who, because he no longer attends his school of record, was removed from the school's roll and is no longer counted as an active student and no longer attends his school of record. As a result, he has been removed from the school's roll and is no longer counted as an active student.

**Perspective** – A socially derived construct which includes values, beliefs, and behaviors (Janesick, 2004). It is a way of looking at situations or facts and making judgments based on those values or beliefs.

**Racism** – Intentional or unintentional culturally sanctioned beliefs that defend the advantages Whites have as a result of the subordinated position of racial minorities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 55).

**School-Based Leaders** – For this study, school-based leaders are defined as those persons in the high school who are responsible for the school's daily operation, orderly functioning, policy creation and implementation and are in roles that impact students dropping out of school. School-based leaders in this study included: the school's administrators and guidance counselors

**Social Justice** – In this research, it refers to the extent that the school-based leaders are making efforts to create a school climate where all students receive equitable and fair treatment without regard for their race, sex, gender, or national orientation.

### *Statement of the Problem*

The high student dropout rate in the U.S. has been well documented in the literature (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Wulsin, 2008; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson,

2000; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2008; Rumberger, 1983; Rumberger 1987; Swanson, 2008; Swanson, 2009). But inside the problem of children dropping out of schools is an even greater problem for the nation and the school systems responsible for educating all of America's children. That evasive challenge has been to address the dropout rates of American male students of African descent who have the highest dropout rate among all the student populations in this country (Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson, 2004; UCLA, 2005).

National dropout statistics reveal that a majority of American male students of African descent drop out instead of completing high school. When compared with their White peers, the dropout rate of American male students of African descent is significantly higher and the graduation rate is much lower (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Orfield, 2004; Roderick, 1993; Swanson, 2004; Weis, Farrar, & Petrie, 1989). In 2001, American male students of African descent had a nationwide high school graduation rate of 42.8 percent while their White male counterparts had a graduation rate of 70 percent (Nealy, 2008). This represents a 27.2 percentage gap between the two groups of students.

Dropping out of high school can have serious consequences for those students who journey on that rocky road. One million American male students of African descent enrolled in public schools in the states of New York, Florida, and Georgia are twice as likely not to graduate with their class on time (Holzman, 2006; The Schott Foundation, 2008). When these students venture into society, without a high school diploma, they are unprepared to meet the myriad of challenges that await them (Patterson, Hale &

Stressman, 2007). The futures for these non-graduates are plagued with individual, economic and social tragedy (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Rumberger, 1983). The data predict that many of these children are destined to have some form of contact with the justice system, at some point in their lives, as those males who are less educated are 5 to 8 times more likely to become incarcerated than college graduates (McKinney & Company, 2009).

### *The Incarceration Link*

The United States leads the world in prison incarcerations (Carroll, 2008) and American males of African descent, many of whom are high school dropouts, disproportionately fill the prison populations, have the highest unemployment, are the most unmarried or divorced, and lead the statistics of those living in poverty. Although American males of African descent are six percent of the U.S. population, they account for 70 percent of the total prison population (Nealy, 2008). Fifty-two percent of all American males of African descent in their thirties, with prison records, have also dropped out of school at some point in their lives (Orfield, 2004). The unemployed dropout is six to ten times more likely to be involved in criminal activities than those youth of the same age who are employed (Kranick & Hargis, 1998). The high school dropout is eight times as likely to end up in jail or on probation as the youth who stayed in school and earned a high school diploma (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Schoenlein, 2004). Many of these high school dropouts find themselves on merry-go-rounds that revolve in and out of the criminal justice system.

While the average state spends \$23,876 a year to incarcerate these youth, the average state spends \$8,701 for a K-12 education and the average college tuition is \$10,674 a year (Carroll, 2008). These figures suggest that that a cost saving could be realized by educating these students instead of incarcerating them which is a more expensive alternative. When the American male students of African descent drop out and escape the incarceration link, adequate supports may not be available that allow them to provide for a family and become a productive member of society.

### *The Economic Link*

The economic impact of dropping out of school extends well beyond just the students and their families. At the national, state, and local levels, billions of dollars are spent annually addressing those issues that are a direct result of students dropping out of school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008; UCLA: The Civil Rights Project, 2005; Weis, Farrar, & Petrie, 1989). Many high school dropouts are incapable of earning enough money to provide the essentials that guarantee the economic health of their families. In 2000, the average income for a high school dropout was \$12,400 and \$21,000 for a high school graduate, an income gap of \$8,600 (Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2007). In 2005, the average income for the high school dropout was \$17,299 and \$26,933 for the high school graduate, an income gap of \$9,634 (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Despite the increase in the average dollars earned (from \$12,400 to \$17,299) over the five year period, when compared to the increase of the earning power of the high school graduate (from \$21,000 to \$26,933), the income gap widened by \$1,034.

The average incomes of high school dropouts fell farther behind the incomes of the high school graduates over the five year period.

Pottinger (1997) examined the economic impact that American males of African descent high school dropouts had on the community of Benton Heights, Michigan. She found that each dropout lost about \$200,000 over his lifetime and the group had a subsequent \$715.6 million dollar impact on the economy of that community (Pottinger, 1997).

Although the dropout is at an economic disadvantage compared to the high school graduate, the American males of African descent who drop out of school fare even worst. The obstacles they face may not only have a negative impact on their individual hope for survival on their own, but they severely cripple any hope of the dropouts adequately providing for a family. Limited are the viable expectations for those dropouts who are financially unable to sustain families but find themselves with families and existing below the poverty level. Are those children in the families of dropouts likely to fare any better than their parent who themselves dropped out of school?

### *Children of Dropouts*

For many students, dropping out of school is a family tradition because the children of dropouts are likely to follow in their parents' footsteps (Gallagher, 2002). The dropout's progeny is likely to have poor academic performance, attend poor schools, maintain the same attitudes toward school as their parents, and thus they will likely to drop out themselves (Orfield, 2004). This point should not be ignored because if the

dropouts and their children are written off by society, they will find ways to survive even if these coping skills place them in direct conflict with societal rules and values. Given the high numbers of dropouts and their potential impact upon society, should the public plan to address the issue sooner rather than later?

### *Public Awareness and Response*

Despite the critical nature of the problem of the American male student of African descent dropping out of school, the overall public has remained largely apathetic, as there is no nationwide outcry to solve the problem. Nationally, limited pressures are exerted on school districts to acknowledge this crisis and provide solutions to the problem.

According to Orfield (2004), the public is not alarmed due to the misleading data and the inaccurate reporting of high dropout and low graduation rates for American male students of African descent. This keeps the issue under the public radar and while the problem is both an educational and civil rights crisis it has not occupied a high enough position on the civil rights agenda because the related published data have not suggested this problem is of significant urgency (Orfield, 2004). Even though the dropout rate of American male students of African descent is identified as a “civil rights issue”, it seems to elicit a very different kind of response from both the people and the government of this country. The overall response to the “civil right crisis” of the high dropout and low graduation rate for American males of African descent has been without the same urgency that fueled the 1960’s “civil rights” movement when citizens marched, picketed, and petitioned the government to do something about it.

The public's willingness to petition and demand that adequate resources be allotted for planning and programs to attack the dropout problem seems to fall short as evidenced by the data which show that the dropout rate of American male students of African descent continues to rise year after year, at rates much higher than any their peer groups (Patterson, Hale, & Stressman, 2007). This is especially true for the state of Florida whose low graduation and high dropout rates of American males of African descent makes it one of the national leaders in those two categories.

#### *Scope of the Problem in Florida*

In 2002, the states in the southern region of the U.S. (West Virginia, D.C., Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia, Texas, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Florida, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Virginia) had the lowest graduation rates in the country. While the combined average graduation rate for all students was 64.5 percent, it was 55.3 percent for American students of African descent. Of the five most southern states (North Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and Florida) Florida had the lowest graduation rate (38.3 percent) for American male students of African descent. Researchers reported that there was a high correlation between racial and socio-economical segregated schools and very low graduation rates (UCLA, 2005).

Florida's dropout rate of American male students of African descent is disproportionately high in relation to the overall student population. While more American male students of African descent attend schools in Florida than any other state,

their graduation rate is lower than the national average (Holzman, 2006). In the 2003-2004 school year, Florida had an enrollment of 320,962 American male students of African descent. In that same year, the graduation rate for American male students of African descent was 31 percent but the graduation rate for white male students was 54 percent, a gap of 23 percent (Holzman, 2006). Data show that American male students of African descent enrolled in Florida, New York and Georgia public schools are twice as likely not to graduate with their class (Holzman, 2006; The Schott Foundation, 2008).

During the 2002 school year, Hillsborough County enrolled 20,080 American male students of African descent and had 4,105 out of school suspensions. During that same year, 41,605 white males were enrolled and had 3,560 out of school suspensions. Also in that same year, 25 American male students of African descent students were expelled and 30 White male students were expelled. Given the amount of time that students spend away from school due to suspensions and expulsions may be reflected in the high dropout and low graduation rates. When students are not in school they are unable to take advantage of learning opportunities offered by the school.

In Hillsborough County in the 2003-2004 school year, while the American male students of African descent population was 21,702; the American male student of African descent graduation rate was 34 percent; the white male graduation rate was 57 percent, a gap of 23 percent (Holzman 2006). Although in the 2003-2004 school year, Hillsborough County had a three percentage point advantage over the state of Florida for graduation rates for both American male students of African descent and white male

students (the state's graduation rate for the 2003-2004 school year was 54 percent for whites and 31 percent for American males of African descent; Hillsborough County's graduation rates were 57 percent for whites and 34 percent for American males of African descent), the gap between both groups at the local and state levels were identical at 23 percent.

Samuels (2008) noted that a class action suit filed against Palm Beach County, Florida claimed that the county's low graduation rate violated the Florida Constitution. One of the issues of the class action suit, Samuels indicated, was that the methods the districts used to calculate graduation rates often do not provide accurate information. According to Samuels (2008), for the 2005-2006 school year, the district reported a graduation rate of 69.3 percent but when a leading expert calculated the graduation rate using a different method, the actual graduation rate for the county was 58.1 percent. The lawsuit sought to require the district to accurately define and improve the graduation rates for minority and students from low-income households (Samuels, 2008).

#### *Depth of the Academic Problem*

Bailey and Paisley (2004) found that American male students of African descents' poor academic and social performance can be linked to the "lack of role models, low self-esteem, hopelessness, productivity dysfunction, and low expectations by the school, communities, and society at large". They reported that although educators, researchers, and community leaders have discussed the poor performances and failures of these students, with a few exceptions, little meaningful efforts have been made toward

addressing the core issues at a point where it would do the most good (Bailey & Paisley, 2004).

A disproportionate number of American male students of African descent are expelled, suspended, regulated to special educational programs at larger numbers than their white peers (Foster, 1995). Political, economic, and sociological factors within schools are responsible for schools failing to promote and educate students because educators handicap their school systems as a result of what little they know about American students of African descent's development and socialization. This lack of knowledge is one reason some school personnel fear American males of African descent and demonize them as a result of this fear (Murrell, 1994).

Background alone fails to adequately prepare middle-class educators to work with children of color. Without additional training to cope with the misconceptions that often exists within their cultural context, middle-class white teachers may be ineffective working with American male students of African descent (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Murrell, 1994; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). White teachers may not understand behavior and banter that is normal for these children and the result is that they may misinterpret it for what they perceive as hostility and aggression and they may act/react based on these misinterpreted perceptions. According to Cooper (2003), the probability is high that American male student of African descent will experience predominately white teachers during the course of their academic careers yet little is known about the effectiveness of these white teachers teaching American male students of African descent in the public

school setting. Frankenberg (2006) echoed that although most of the teachers are white, they have not had an educational history that was racially diverse (Frankenberg, 2006).

*The Problem of System Policies and Practices*

Despite district pressures to raise standardized test scores and keep the dropout rates low to ensure that students graduate, there is evidence that suggests that school-based practices are responsible for the high dropout rate (Danielson, 2002). The practices of tracking, overcrowded classrooms, mislabeling of minority students, and high expulsion rates have added to the disproportionate dropout rate of minority students (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; McKenzie & Scheurick, 2004; Weis et al., 1989). These practices seem to elevate the system's needs and the student's individual educational needs appear to be of secondary concern.

Being treated impersonally, unfairly, and the recipient of harsher discipline can leave a lasting impact on the impressionable minds of any student but clearly has had negative consequences for American male children of African descent. Because many of these students are savvier than given credit by educators, they can easily see through the games played on them within the school system. While their reactions are threatening to some within the school setting, it offers them some degree of protection at a basic level. While their actions may be a means of self protection, it comes across to some in the school as being challenging, threatening and aggressive.

### *A Personal Perspective*

In November 1996, I became the first assistant principal at an alternative school that was housed within a newly built 350-bed Level 8 juvenile facility that was operated by a for profit corporation. In Florida, Level 10 is the highest designation for juvenile facilities. Juveniles placed in Level 10 facilities are adjudicated for serious offenses or crimes; have displayed habitual criminal behavior; have displayed habitual severe behavioral problems in lower level facilities; and/or displayed behavior deemed unmanageable (escape risk or habitual rule violations) in lower level facilities. A Level 8 facility is one step below maximum security which is Level 10. When the facility first opened, our population consisted of juveniles transferred from other facilities in the state. Many of these youth were “problems” that other facilities were more than willing to remove from their populations.

School records revealed that many of the students had been dropouts, push-outs, or had been completely disengaged from the public school system prior to their being charged with an offense(s), subsequent commitment, and placement at the facility. The students’ school records showed prior histories of school failures, behavioral problems, and poor attendance when they did attend school. In my role as assistant principal, I actively engaged the students during school hours and in the dormitories (housing units) before and after school hours and on weekends.

During their stay at the facility, many of the children improved their school related behavioral/performance and made some academic progress at the school. Thus, I

saw students who were very different from those who were described in the school records sent that from their communities. For some of the students, the academic difference I saw in them was as stark as night and day. In fact, many eagerly involved themselves in the educational and other special programs offered by the school. These were some of the same students who had been reluctant to or failed to participate in the schools in their communities. Many of the students earned their diploma from the school and we held graduation ceremonies and invited their parents and family members. I had a student who requested that I take pictures of him in his cap and gown. He wanted to send a picture to his family but he wanted an additional picture to send to his high school guidance counselor who told him he would never graduate.

I developed and maintained several programs that provided academic and personal incentives and challenges to the students. The programs encouraged students to improve and sustain their academic performance. Some of the students realized an increase in their reading level when they participated in the 10 Book Club; some were rewarded for displaying exemplary behavior within the school and their living spaces; some were tutored after school and on the weekends and given additional reading practice and the opportunity to participate in poetry appreciation and practice public speaking. What I saw, in many instances, were students who were no different from other students in their age group. One of the obvious differences was that the children in the Level 8 facility were confined in a structured environment with specific behavioral and academic expectations. In that type of setting I applied the rules to all of the children

equally. Other differences were the class size and that there were youth workers who were responsible for movement of their group of students throughout the school day. My experience as assistant principal at the school was that most children displayed appropriate behavior and complied with the rules and expectations when staff were firm, fair and applied the rules consistently with all students.

As assistant principal, frequently I observed classrooms and assisted teachers in addressing issues they had with their students. I found that the teachers who: (a) actively engaged their students in class; (b) talked to instead of at or down to their students; (c) had high expectations for their students; (d) prepared for and creatively presented their lessons; (e) were culturally sensitive and respected all of their students both in and out of class; (f) did not show fear of the students in the classroom; (g) took time to respond to the students and answered their questions; (h) participated in other aspects of the program with their students; and (i) generally showed authenticity with the students had few problems that they were unable to address with their students in their classrooms. I rarely received complaints from students about these teachers. In fact, on many occasions, students made certain that I was aware of their thoughts and feelings regarding the effectiveness of these teachers. They wanted me to know their positive feelings toward these teachers and how these teachers had made a difference in their academic performances and their personal lives. Many students were very protective of these teachers and the physical condition of these teacher's classrooms.

On the other hand, some teachers did have problems with their students making academic progress and displaying negative behavior in their classrooms. From my personal observations, some of these teachers' issues were manifested in their own attitudes, behaviors and actions toward the students. These teachers' attitudes and behavior toward the students prevented their connecting with some of the students and as a result, they were sometimes targets of student attacks that were aimed at paying them back for some perceived injustice. These types of incidents were infrequent occurrences and were confined to certain teachers and not others. On one occasion a teacher had his electric pencil sharpener filled with water. On others, teachers had graffiti drawn on their doors and in their rooms and there were other times when some teachers had items stolen from them or their classes.

During my seven year tenure as the assistant principal at the alternative school, I worked under four different principals, all of whom had many years of administrative experience in the public school system prior to their being appointed principal at the alternative school. Each principal was unique regarding their role as principal and their thinking/behavior toward the faculty, the staff and the students. The first principal was a retired superintendent of a school system and had relocated from a northern state specifically for the job. The second principal had run a successful vocational program prior to his accepting the job. The third principal had been an administrator in a public school system for many years and had retired prior to his accepting the job. The fourth principal had been an administrator with a public school system for years and was in the

district office prior to accepting the job as principal of the school. After working very closely with these principals, I discovered that their perspectives were a result of their training, experience, personal and professional values, knowledge, and skill levels. These perspectives were manifested through their attitudes and behaviors toward the faculty, the educational program, the students, and the facility.

At the same time I worked as the assistant principal, I enrolled in a Master of Education program that required my completing an internship in two public schools. I selected a high school and a middle school to complete the requirement. The internship afforded me the chance to view the role of the educational administrator through the lenses of two principals in two different levels in public schools.

My seven year tenure as assistant principal at the Level 8 facility and the time I spent as an intern in two public schools provided me the unique opportunity to closely observe six different principals navigating the principalship from six very different perspectives. My experiences made it very clear that a school-based leader's perspective is critical to the operation and functioning of a school. The school's climate, policies, procedures and practices, the enforcement of the rules and regulations, the faculty's attitudes and behaviors, and the students' responsiveness to the school's administration were all impacted by each of the six principals and their perspectives regarding the role of the principal. In their roles, principals exert control over every aspect of the school and their footprint is found at all levels of the school's operation.

Despite the knowledge gained from observing and working with these principals, there were areas that I do not think were explored adequately. One was their thinking regarding teacher training and development issues and the other was their personal perspectives of the students at the facility or in the community. The majority of students in population were Americans males of African descent and from my observations, each of the principals had very a different understanding and comfort level in working with the students and staff. It was also obvious that my perspective was very different from each of the principals. Having earned a master's degree in social work and working toward earning a master's degree in education, my vantage point incorporated a combination of both disciplines but tilted toward social work. I developed a realization that although a school performs better when the administrators uses the team approach, the control inherent in the principal's position made them ultimately responsible and accountable for every aspect of the school's operation. This includes staff (who goes and who stays), grades and testing, discipline, grade placements and numerous decisions that impact staff and the overall operation of the school.

When I began thinking about the topic I would research, I was certain of two things. First, I wanted to investigate the impact of school based leaders on a real problem that related to these boys whose behavior in the community was so much different in my school. My experience with the principals, with whom I worked, was that they could make a difference when they wanted to make the difference. Second, I wanted to make

some aspect of American males students of African descent the focus because they seemed so much different than their school records suggested.

### *Theoretical Frame - Critical Race Theory*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the theoretical frame that guides this study. According to DeCuir & Dixon, since Ladson-Billings and Tate introduced CRT to education in 1995 it has emerged as a powerful theoretical and analytical framework within educational research (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Researchers note that CRT is an accepted tool that assists educators in understanding how race and racism impact upon educational practices. CRT is viewed as a framework for examining how race and racism impact structures, processes and discourse within the context of teacher education while seeking to transform society by identifying, analyzing and eliminating subtle and overt forms of racism in education (Smith, Yosso & Solórzano, 2007).

Critical Race Theory scholars provide insight for explaining, not only, how race can be a factor effecting the dropout rate of American males of African descent, but also, how and why these students are treated as they are in U.S. schools.

In this inquiry, the focus is the third theme of CRT, a commitment to social justice. Using this social justice theme I discuss the school-based leaders' beliefs about American male students of African descent; what reasons they believe are responsible for their dropping out of their school and what efforts have they made to prevent these

children dropping out of their school. My belief is tied to my thinking that school-based leaders' perceptions drive their actions toward dropout and dropout prevention in their schools.

#### *Study Framework – Case Study*

Through case study researchers are able to intensively study, holistic describe and analyze a phenomena as it exists in the natural setting (Mason & Bramble, 1997; Merriam, 1998). In the case study, the key concern is gaining an understanding of the phenomena of interest from the participant's perspective; this method allows the researcher to obtain the emic or insider's perspective of the situation and the meaning it has for the subjects of the inquiry (Merriam, 1998).

As a qualitative approach, case study research explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998), through detailed, in-depth data collection (Creswell, 2007; Sprinthall, Schmutte, & Sirois, 1991) involving multiples sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). Miles and Huberman (1994), describes a case as a phenomenon that occurs in a bounded system (a specified social and physical setting); a unit of analysis that can be one or more cases (p.26).

A case study can be a methodology (Creswell, 2007; Lacy, 1993), a type of design in qualitative research, an object of study, or a product of the research (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). It is seen as either a process of analysis (Merriam, 1998;

Patton, 2002; Sprinthall, Schmutte, & Sirois, 1991) or the product of analysis (Creswell, 2007) and in some instances a case study can be both (Patton, 2002). As an analysis process, it represents a specified manner in which data are collected, organized, and analyzed. When the information is collected in a comprehensive, systematic and in depth manner for each case of interest, the analysis process results in a product that is the case study (Patton, 2002, p. 447). Case study examines phenomena as they exist in their natural settings (Mason & Bramble, 1997); but what makes the case study different from other types of qualitative research is the direct policy implications relating to the case study method. In the case study method, researchers are obligated to draw pointed conclusions from the case study and either explicitly or implicitly make recommendations that will alter policy and/or practice (Lacy, 1993, p. 143).

The insights gained from the case study can not only directly influence present policy and practice; it can have an impact on future research. In terms of overall intent, case study describes, interprets, evaluates some phenomena or builds theory (Merriam, 1998). This qualitative research uses case study to describe how key school-based leaders perceive American male students of African descent; why they are dropping out of high school; their school's role in dropout prevention; and what they are doing to challenge these students from exiting school early and unprepared for life void of a high school education.

### *Assumptions of the Case Study Method*

Pring (2000) notes that certain philosophical assumptions guide the case study method that are relevant to both the method and researcher. According to Pring, these assumptions are:

- the researcher should begin the inquiry with an open mind and allow the data to speak for themselves;
- because of the intensity of the focus on the particular case(s) it may not permit generalizability to other case(s) although the rich, thick graphic descriptions may seem similar in other situations;
- questions emerge about the objectivity and validity of the research claims.

Objectivity is challenged because it cannot be truthfully asserted that the researcher's presence had no effect upon the case(s). Pring notes that the language/voice of the participants must be used to describe their situation otherwise it would not be their situation that is being investigated (Pring, 2000). In other words, the reality of the inquiry has to be the reality as it is defined by the participants.

### *Researcher Assumptions*

My assumptions regarding this research reflect my training as a social worker; my seven years experiences as an educational administrator of an alternative school within a 350 bed Level 8 juvenile facility; from the various positions in my 24 years in state government where I worked in the central office of a state child serving agency; as a manager, coordinator and officer in a court setting; and in a juvenile institution. Also, my

earned master degrees in both social work and education; my demonstrated profession competence; and my personal and professional insights provide me treasures of experiences and knowledge from which to draw thoughts, ideas and opinions. The following assumptions guided my thinking as I conducted this research study:

- there are explanations for the high dropout and low graduation rates of American males of African descent can be explained by research.
- some portion of the high dropout and low graduation rates for American male students are reflective of systemic issues outside of their or their family's control.
- school based-leaders can impact all facets of the school including policies, practices and procedures that impact the dropout and graduation rates of American male students of African descent.
- race influences the high dropout rate of American male students of African descent in U.S. schools.

### *Study Limitations*

The analysis, interpretation and recommendations of this research are specific to the school-based leaders of the school in the study and can not necessarily generalized district wide, statewide or nationally as the perspectives are those of the study's participants. The data from this study was collected from interviews with school-based leaders. Self reporting and self reported information can present problems in data collection and may be inaccurate for a number of reasons. The interviewee may have left out information or may have not revealed information that they believed might negatively

reflect upon them or their school. Information may have been enhanced or diminished as the school-based leaders may not have been willing to reveal information that might cast disparity on them or their positions within the school.

Because of the voluntary nature of the participation for this study, not all of the identified school based leaders volunteered to participate in the research. The staff were given the option to participate when the research abstract was presented, by the principal, during a faculty meeting. As a result, nine individuals volunteered, however, when the interviews began one person decided to decline involvement in the study. It is uncertain if the participation of all of the school-based leaders would have enhanced the data collected. My guess is that it would have to some degree as the person who declined to participate was mentioned during the interviews as being involved with at-risk students.

As an American male of African descent my objectivity could have been impacted by my intimate knowledge of the community of Americans of African descent. Without a clear understanding of how I, as a researcher, could bias the research effort in the areas of data collection and data analysis, the imprint of my biases could possibly influence the data collection and analysis. Growing up as an American male of African descent in a segregated community and spending my professional life working with similar children and families, my experiences give me a unique understanding of issues related to American males of African descent. On the other hand, my being an American male of African descent could have limited the responses of the participants if they have problems/issues with me because of my race/sex or any of my other personal

characteristics. As a result steps were taken to address researcher bias that will be discussed in chapter three.

### *Ethical Issues*

When I began the research I identified several ethical concerns I thought might have an impact on the study. First, I thought that my passion for the subject may be a potential issue that could play a significant role in all facets of the study from the formulation of the concept, to the data collection, analysis, and write-up. Therefore, I recognized and acknowledged this as having a potential impact on the research. To lessen the impact I: (a) maintained a journal that documented my thoughts and feelings as I conducted the interviews; (b) I member checked the data in all but two of the transcripts; (d) I discussed my concerns with my committee chair on a regular basis.

Confidentiality of the data was another area that I thought about prior to the data collection and I devised a coding system. However, this system created problems that I will go into in Chapter 3. I initially had concerns about what to do with information that may be revealed in the interviews that would be of an explosive or extremely sensitive nature. I talked about this with committee members and it was decided that if, during the interviews this type of information would surface, then I would discuss it with the committee and get direction as to the best way to handle it. I saw my role as maintaining the integrity of the research by following the rules as set forth to maintain confidentiality of the responses of the school-based leaders.

### *Chapter Summary*

The goal of educational equity for all children is not being met because school systems are not educating all of the America's children (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

American male students of African descent are fairing worst as they are leaving and not graduating from our nation's high schools at higher rates than their peer groups. The reverberations of these students dropping out of schools are measured in terms of the billions of dollars spent by national, state, and local governments to provide social services for the dropouts and protection for the communities. When American males of African descent drop out of the high school their futures are uncertain as they enter society unprepared to meet the many challenges they will face. Among the plethora of issues awaiting them, those who are less educated usually lead unhealthy life styles accentuated by high incidents of smoking and obesity (McKinsey & Company, 2009). What lies ahead for this group of Americans is the potential for economic hardships (unemployment, low wages, living in poverty); contact with the justice system (lives of crime, incarceration); dependency on public assistance; divorce; and fathering children who will follow in their footsteps.

The public's overall response to this crisis is varied (Swanson, 2009). In some instances, legal remedies were pursued to force school districts to improve the graduation rates for minorities as school districts have not effectively addressed the problem and the dropout rates of American male students of African descent continue to increase yearly. School practices such as tracking, over-crowded classrooms, mislabeling and expelling

American male students of African descent impact the dropout rate of these students who are also more likely to be labeled mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed more than any other student group (Children's Defense Fund, 2005).

The high dropout rate is evidence of the failure of public schools to educate children (Wolk, 2009). To address this, school-based leaders must show willingness or ability to take initiatives toward finding solutions to ensure the success of any school program (Kammoun, 1991). Because school-based leaders are responsible for all aspects of their school's operation, their perspectives greatly impact the policies, procedures, and practices that are put in place during their tenure. The perspectives that the school-based leaders bring to the job are reflective of their training; education; ability; depth of personal and professional experiences; and their personal and professional value systems.

Through case study methods, this research will describe the perspectives of school-based leaders regarding American male students of African descent; their dropping out of school; their role in dropout prevention; and what efforts they are making to challenge these students exiting school early.

### *Organization of the Study*

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature. The chapter begins with an explanation of the organization of the chapter followed by the reason for using *American male students of African descent* instead of *African American* to describe the student population in the study. This is followed by a discussion of the evolution of the term dropout and various definitions of a dropout that are found in the literature. I then provide

an overview of the literature relating to American male students of African descent who dropout of high schools. I discuss several studies regarding these students and their dropping out of high school. Next, I talk about the efforts that are being made to address the issue at the federal, state and local government levels and it will explore what is being done in various communities across the country. A discussion follows of schools' impact on drop outs. An overview of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is given and Chapter 2 ends with a summary of the literature regarding dropouts.

Chapter 3 begins with an introduction, followed by a chapter overview and a discussion of the study's methodology. A discussion is provided regarding the nature of the qualitative study and how the case study approach relates to the research. I then offer a description of the research design and my reason for selecting this topic, followed by a discussion of the site selection rationale and data collecting procedures. The interview protocol is presented. This section concludes with a chapter summary.

After the introduction in Chapter 4, the data is presented as they relate to the research questions. The data is presented in the voice of the school-based leaders. I conclude with a chapter summary.

After the introduction and purpose of the study, Chapter 5, offers an overview of the research; a discussion of why students drop out of school and the framework of the research. Next, an interpretation of the findings as they relate to the research questions is given followed by recommendations in various areas. I discuss various recommendations ending with an epilogue.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

#### *Introduction*

This chapter begins with the purpose of the study followed by a discussion of the evolution of the concept of the dropout. I then provide my reason for the preference of *Americans of African descent* over *African-Americans*. Next I offer a discussion of the various definitions of dropout that are found in the literature. An overview of the literature regarding American male students of African descent dropouts is followed by what researchers' say the dropouts report are the reasons they drop out of school. I then provide a discussion of the explanations found in the literature for American male students of African descent dropping out of school. These categories are: (a) behavioral; (b) sociological; (c) political; and (d) cultural. In the next section, I discuss the impact of schools and school-based leaders on American males of African descent dropping out of school. This is followed by a review of Critical Race Theory and its importance to this study. The literature review concludes with a chapter summary.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

This study described the perspectives of eight school-based leaders regarding American male students of African descent; why they drop out of high school; and the role these school-based leaders play in preventing these students from dropping out of high school.

### *Why American Male Students of African Descent*

In this research and in general discourse, I prefer to use “*Americans of African descent*” to refer to those who the literature and society, in general, refer to as “*African American*” or “*Black*”. I do so after much thought. In his discussion regarding the labeling of former slaves and the name progressions of those former slaves throughout the years, Ghee (1990) argued successfully for changing the name designation from Black to African-American. His argument was accepted and “African-American” became the accepted designation for a people who had undergone various name designations through the years. As he developed his argument, Ghee (1990) used the designation “Americans of African descent” as he walked the reader through the various name changes that the former slaves underwent. While researching the literature for this study I found that almost all of the articles referred to this population of children as African-Americans dropouts. Although this is the accepted name designation, it seems that “Americans of African descent” more accurately describes these Americans with African ancestry.

In the past few years, after having met Africans from the continent of Africa who are now American citizens, I began to question the legitimacy of the designation of African-American being placed on the descendents of former slaves in this country. The African born American citizens, in my opinion, are truly African-Americans as they can point to the countries, cities and villages in Africa where they were born on they can identify the birth places of their parents or grandparents. If they or their parents are

American citizens then, I believe, they have a rightful claim to both Africa and America and the right of being referred to as African-Americans. On the other hand, how accurate is it that those of us who can only trace the lineage of our parents, or grandparents, or their parents directly to this country, can lay any claim of legitimacy to Africa? I think that the designation of *American* or *American of African descent* more accurately describe those of us whose ancestry is rooted in this country. This logic seems to give a legitimacy of the claim to citizenship in America first and foremost. The *of African descent* recognizes their being descendents in the lineage of those Africans who were brought to these shores in chains and were made to endure the cruelty and hardship of over four-hundred years of bondage. Because the slaves and former slaves played an equal role in building this country to its greatness, their descendants have no less claim to the land and rights of full citizenship than do the former slave-owners and their descendents. I therefore prefer Americans of African descent as an acknowledgement of shared ownership and a rightful claim to legitimacy as an American citizen.

Another point that influenced my thinking regarding the designation “African-American” was the manner in which the term “African-American dropout” was used in the literature. It seemed as though these children were seen as Africans and by implication not real American children. It was the seemingly very subtle manner in which these children were seen as “them” and not “us”, led me to think that the “African” in African-American may have an impact upon the way these children are being seen by society overall. It is my thinking that although these children are descendents of Africans

who were brought to this country as slaves in 1619, today they are authentic American citizens and as American citizens they deserve all the rights and privileges that their American heritage guarantees them. That includes being thought of as Americans first and foremost.

### *Evolution of the term Dropout*

The term “dropout” emerged in the early 1960s to describe those students who left school early before receiving a high school diploma. Prior to 1960, the phrases “elimination from school” or “leaving school” were used interchangeably when referring to those students who left school before graduation. The dropout problem was created by education and social critics instead of it being discovered as a phenomenon. As a social construction, the premise of dropping out is based on the assumption that schools are accountable for and have the responsibility to socialize adolescents, prevent delinquency and dependency, and to keep students in school until they graduated. Subsequently, students dropping out became an indictment on the effectiveness of schools as their dropping out cast school systems as failures because they did not achieve their primary goal of educating all children (Dorn, 1996).

By the 1970s, the student dropout problem was no longer a front burner issue as school systems nationwide focused on desegregation suits, and busing mandates. According to Dorn, in the 1970s, The Children's Defense Fund and the Southern Regional Council sought to frame the exclusion of Black children in a civil rights context. They argued that students were being pushed out of school through

discriminatory discipline practices that unfairly denied American students of African descent their right to an education. As a result of forced desegregation, the rates that these children were suspended and pushed out of schools by public school officials were much higher than those of their White counterparts (Dorn 1996).

In the 1980s, conservatives espoused two positions that some believed would increase the dropout rate. The first suggested that society needed to socialize and train all adolescents; the other recommended that some children should drop out to make schools safer for those students who were more concerned with obtaining an education. They saw potential dropouts as being behavioral problems that had an impact on the school's ability to raise its academic standards (Dorn, 1996). It seemed that some were satisfied with removing these children from school rather than addressing the main reasons for these students dropping out of school.

#### *How the Literature defines Dropout*

The dropout problem is complex and the one reason the extent of the problem is not completely understood is the lack of a nationwide consensus definition of exactly what is a dropout. There is little standardization regarding the definition of a dropout because states are allowed to define dropouts and dropout rates as they see fit. Because of minimum federal and state oversight, it is difficult to compare and contrast dropout rates and data accuracy between states. Literature relating to defining school dropouts varies and because the term is not consistently defined, it is difficult to monitor and conduct research on the subject in a systematic manner. The absence of a consensus

regarding the best method of reporting dropout data has hampered efforts to standardize a definition of the dropout (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Orfield, Losen & Wald, 2004; Rumberger, 1987; Samuels 2007).

Samples of the plethora of definitions of a dropout are presented in this section. Samuels (2007) cites two types of dropouts. The first type he identifies as leaving school as result of life events. These life events may include pregnancy or bullying from other students. The second type drops out because of a history of academic failure. Attendance is relevant because as the attendance of these students decreased their academic failures increased to where they finally stop attending school altogether (Samuels, 2007).

Kranick & Hargis (1998) describe several types of dropouts.

- Quiet or Invisible dropout – these students go unnoticed until they have dropped out of school. They are low achievers who have experienced failure throughout their school career. This is the largest group.
- Low achievers with low learning abilities – Because of their abilities they continually fail and repeat grades and courses. These students react to failure by being disruptive and annoying in the classroom setting. They constantly call attention to themselves in ways that make teachers and administrators notice them. They don't like to fail and they avoid failure by avoiding school. They are the truants that are purged from the school's rolls by being pushed out through

suspension or expulsion. The irony is that these students are punished for their behavior while in school and punished if they avoid school.

- Adequate student with average or above-average potential. These students can be creative in many ways that place them in conflict with the structured curriculum. To many of these students the work is boring and bears little relevance to them. The courses may be too easy; they may have personal financial or family problems that override the importance of school. The source of their issues is outside of school. This group has the lowest membership.
- Informal dropout. These students continue to attend school but have dropped out of learning anything academic. These students are low academic performers who are out of sync with the rigors of the academic curriculum. Because they consider the work as being “hard” they make little, if any, academic progress. These students don’t experience success and rarely achieve their academic potential. Even with these factors, they somehow manage to continue in spite of prior performance and failures. Some of these students have a higher tolerance for coping with failure experience. They seem to be more durable, self-centered and skilled at making or hiding their real feeling toward the failure barriers. Some of these students have skills that get them through such as athletic ability. Some cheat their way through the barriers.

- Survivors – These students have adequate academic ability and they can do well academically because of their abilities. They drop out because of problems unrelated to school.

Weis, et al. (1989) cite George Morrow's dropout typology that includes: "(a) the push-out (those students who are deemed to be undesirable); (b) the disaffected (those students who do not want to remain in the school setting); (c) educational mortality (those who fail within the school setting); (d) capable dropouts (these students are socialized in such a way that they do not agree with the school demands); (e) the stop-out (those students who dropout and returned to school within the same year)" (p. x).

Barnes (1992) defines a dropout as being someone who interrupted his or her high school education at some point; individuals who return to school and obtained a high school diploma and those who obtained a "GED" (p. 1).

Schargel (2004) distinguishes three types of dropouts as: (a) the Dropouts who are leaving or have left school on their own; (b) the Tune-outs who stay in school but their actions show that they are disengaged from learning; and (c) the Push-outs who have been suspended or expelled.

In an effort to provide a complete profile regarding dropouts, the National Center for Education Statistics defines and provides data for the following three types of dropouts: (a) event dropout; (b) status dropout; and (c) cohort dropout. The event dropout is defined as the student who leaves school each year without completing a high school program. The status dropout is the young adult between the ages of 16 and 24

years old who is out of school and who has not earned high school credentials. The cohort gives an estimate of how many students eventually fail to complete high school (Schargel, 2004, p. 30-32).

The state of Florida defines the dropout in Chapter 1003.01 (9) of the Florida School Laws (2006). The definition of a dropout is addressed in the following manner:

“Dropout” means a student who meets any one or more of the following criteria:

- (a) The student has voluntarily removed himself or herself from the school system before graduation for reasons that include, but are not limited to, marriage, or the student has withdrawn from school because he or she has failed the statewide student assessment test and thereby does not receive any of the certificates of completion;
- (b) The student has not yet met the relevant attendance requirements of the school district pursuant to the State Board of Education rules, or the student was expected to attend a school but did not enter as expected for unknown reasons, or the students whereabouts are unknown;
- (c) The student has withdrawn from school, but has not transferred to another public or private school or enrolled in any career, adult, home education, or alternative educational program;
- (d) The student has withdrawn from school due to hardships, unless such withdrawal has been granted under the provision of s.322.091, court action, expulsion, medical reasons, or pregnancy; or
- (e) The student is not eligible to attend school because of reaching the maximum age for an exceptional student program in accordance with the district's policy (Florida School Laws, 2006, p.135).

In section 1003.21(c), Florida law is specific regarding when a student can legally leave school and not be considered a dropout. This section states:

“A student who attains the age of 16 years during the school year is not subject to compulsory school attendance beyond the date upon which he or she attains the age if the student files a formal declaration of intent to terminate school enrollment with the district school Board. Public school students who have attained to the age of 16 years and who have not graduated are subject to compulsory school attendance until formal declaration of intent is filed with the district school board. The declaration must acknowledge that terminating school enrollment is likely to reduce the students learning potential and must be signed by the student and the student's parents. The school district must notify the student's parents of receipt of the student declaration of intent to terminate school enrollment. The student's guidance counselor or other school personnel must conduct an exit interview with the student to determine the reasons for the student's decision to terminate school enrollment and actions that could be taken to keep the student in school. The student must be informed of opportunities to continue his or her

education in a different environment, including, but not limited to, adult education, and GED test preparation. Additionally, the student must complete a survey in a format described by the Department of Education to provide data on student reasons for terminating enrollment and actions taken by schools to keep students enrolled (Florida School Laws, 2006, pp. 141-142).

### *Why Students Drop out of School*

Dropping out of school is a complex process that no single explanation can adequately account for the totality of the phenomena or the extent that it reaches into the fabric of American society. When students voluntarily leave high school it is doubtful that they realize the long-term affect this action will have on them, their family, society, and their futures. The repercussions from leaving school are felt long after the decision is made and the student actually leaves. The decision to leave school is not made spontaneously and when students finally arrive at the point where they leave school they are ending a slow process of disengagement that accumulated over a period of time (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Wulsin, 2008; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Gallagher, 2002; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Smyth & Haltam, 2001; Wolk, 2009). The beginning of the cumulative process begins long before high school. It may start as early as the first grade (Lee & Burkam, 2003) or it may began by the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grades at the onset of content heavy courses where students must be able to comprehend what they read (Wolk, 2009). For those students who fail early and often, dropping out is almost certain. Many students have decided by the eight grade to leave school but they just mark time until they finally leave (Wolk, 2009); however, most students dropout of school between the 10th and 12th grades in high school (Lee & Burkam, 2003).

The literature documents variables that are believed responsible for children leaving school. Some are student/family centered while others point to structural components in schools as being responsible for students leaving school. These cover a wide range that include: academic failure, discipline problems, conflict with teachers or students, being pushed out, employment opportunities, family responsibilities (Stearns & Glennie, 2006); cultural conflicts between schools and family, racist teachers and administrators, lack of motivation, not being committed or valuing education (Patterson, Hale, & Stressman, 2007); a lack of connection to the school environment, a perception that school is boring, feeling unmotivated, overwhelmed by the academic challenges, missed too many classes, spent time with people were not interested in school, had too much freedom and not enough rules in their lives, and the impact of weight of real world events (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Wulsin, 2008, p 4 ); the number of school suspensions and retentions, parental involvement, race and ethnicity, teacher certification, student enrollment in a school, percentage of white students in the school, school type, and urbanicity (Carpenter & Ramirez, 2007); and being poor, minority, low income families status, single parent, less educated families (Children's Defense Fund 2005). Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson (2007), found that the achievement test scores, rate of grade retention, school attendance, occurrence of maladapted or undesirable student behaviors, school suspensions, poverty, and ethnic background impacted students dropping out of school.

The risk factors for students dropping out of school fall into three categories: (a) social background (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, family structure, in inner-city residence); (b) academic background (e.g., students' abilities, test scores, school retention history); and (c) academic related behaviors (e.g., student engagement with school and school related activities, school grades, course completions and failures, truancy, school disciplines and expulsions). They point to certain characteristics of schools that play a role in determining whether or not students stay in or dropout. They identify these as: (a) school structures, school size and sector (if the school is public, Catholic, private school or charter school); academic organization; and (c) their social organization (kind of relationships between students, teachers, and administrators) (Lee & Burkam, 2003, p. 354-355).

Wolk (2009) states the reasons most students give for leaving school are: (a) boredom; (b) personal or family problems; (c) inability to understand and do the work required; and (d) a waste of time. He believes that learning and motivation are keys to students graduating as many of these students can perform academically but they are not connected in any meaningful ways to school (p. 30).

Students enter high schools during their adolescent years where they are still trying to make sense of who they are and the world around them. The transition to high school can be one more problematic area for students to attempt to figure out. In fact, for many students, entering high school is a cultural shock as they try to adjust to this unfamiliar environment with its very different rituals and requirements. Not all students

are successful making the adjustment and become at risk of dropping out. Signs of adjustment issues can be recognized early. These are the students who do not develop meaningful relationships with adults or peers at school; they are not involved in school sponsored activities; they do not develop a sense of belonging to the culture of the high school; or they can lose their sense of identity and motivation if they are enrolled in culturally diverse schools where they are unable to fit into the culture of the school. Students may also feel overwhelmed by the perceived unfriendliness of this new environment and want to remove themselves to what is more familiar. Many students view school as a hostile unwelcoming setting when their unique needs are not met by teachers and school-based leaders. Those that experience isolation think that if they left school they would not be missed. Other students believe that they are encouraged to leave and are subtly pushed out of school by school-based leaders (Gallagher, 2002).

Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson (2004), found that poverty, the level of racial segregation in a school, and the proportion of non-white students in the school were predictors of student failure. They noted that the growing racial resegregation of schools contributed to low graduation rates and because segregated minority schools are located in minority communities, nine out of ten intensely segregated minority schools also have concentrated poverty. Other factors that contribute to student failure within these schools are: (a) low levels of peer academic competition; (b) few experienced or qualified teachers; (c) limited advanced course selections; (d) greater number of student turnover during the school year; and (e) higher concentration of students with health and

emotional problems that are a result of poverty and their living in poverty conditions (Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson, 2004).

Clark (2004) found that students who dropped out of school: (1) felt alienated from schools; (2) believed that educators in school systems did not care about them; (3) believed that they had no adult in the school system they could turn to for help; (4) many did not participate in extra-curricular activities; and (5) their weak bond toward school gave them a weak sense of belonging. She found that because educators made little effort to mainstream students who were alienated, students felt justified when they left the negative situation created the educators.

Some researchers noted that American male students dropping out of school fall into five categories: (a) behavioral; (b) sociological; (c) political; (d) cultural; and (e) socioeconomic.

### *Behavioral Explanations*

During the 1960's, dropping out was linked to behavior and the dropouts were thought of as deviants because they displayed what was considered as deviant behavior. Many educators held this position believing that because they had success with a majority of the students they must be effective. These educators placed the blame for dropping out on the dropout who was seen as being dysfunctional and having deficits as a result of personal, family or community related issues (Wehlege, 1989).

The Development Transition Model, notes Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple (2002), sees behavior as the product of the students' developmental history and the

current circumstance. The students' present behavior can be explained through an understanding of: (a) the students' early developmental history; (b) the nature of the students' experiences within the classroom; and (c) contemporaneous experiences outside a formal educational setting. The students rely on the experiences gained in each of these areas to interpret and respond in future situations (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). What is important here is that if the students learn negative behavioral responses in early grades then these behavioral patterns can follow them throughout the academic careers or until they leave or are removed from school.

Students who display disruptive behavior and discipline problems in school are more likely to drop out. The behavior of these students places them in an "at risk" category where their dropping out is seen as being caused by a function of their own behavior and bad decision making. These students have histories of absenteeism, grade retention and are generally disengaged from school life. Young students in early grades may be considered "at risk" if they display such school behaviors as low grades, low educational expectations, suspensions, early grade retentions and discipline problems. A special education placement in combination with the above behaviors also qualifies the student for the "at risk" category (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Behavioral explanation places the responsibility for dropping out of school squarely on the student as a result of his own actions or behaviors.

Theories that blame the victim avoid recognizing possible systemic causes of their dropping out. This is a safe position for the caretakers of the system because by blaming the victim, the system assumes no responsibility or accountability for the dropout.

### *Sociological Explanations*

Sociological explanations give the family (parents, family structure, family relations and financial status) and the student's environment major roles of responsibility for his dropping out of school. The student is seen as a product of his environment. Students coming from families with poor relations; a lack of parental involvement in his life; and being raised in a single parent home are likely to drop out of school. Leaving school before completion has an impact on the societal status of the student because school is seen as a way of achieving societal mobility. Students who drop out of school lack social supports and are unconnected to valuable resources that could assist them to meet in their life goals. Often their connections with teachers, friends and positive peers are severed when they leave school because they are no longer able to benefit from relationships with those who can provide stability in their lives (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Dropouts also dropout other ways. An individual's education achievement influences their level of civic involvement; high school graduates are twice as likely to vote as those with an eighth grade education or less (Wolk, 2009, p. 20).

### *Political Explanations*

Districts are pressured to raise standardized test scores and keep dropout rates low but there is little emphasis for districts to ensure that students graduate (Danielson, 2002). Although congress made graduation rate accountability a part of the No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB), schools and districts are not being held accountable for the high dropout rates. NCLB has a testing accountability provisions that is treated somewhat different from the accountability for graduation rates. States are required to meet testing accountability targets and sanctions are spelled out for failing to meet the targets. As a result, states are moving toward meeting the accountability targets. The same is not true for the graduation rate requirements; because there are no sanctions or accountability, graduation rates continued to decline especially for American male students of African descent (UCLA, 2005).

While some school districts and states use methods that inflate the numbers, others use different methods that are designed to depress the figures. There are advantages to both of these practices. Districts may report high dropout rates to obtain state or federal grants to help them address the problem. Others may under-report their dropout figures as they don't want the numbers to reflect on their competency, they don't want to look bad. They want to give the impression that they have a model system (Kranick & Hargis, 1998).

The method for calculating dropout rates can have meaning for schools and school districts and a school can go to a large extent to hide its low figures. Schoenlein

(2004) notes that school officials in Chicago hold the record for fudging its dropout rate by claiming a dropout rate of 1.9 percent when it was actually 58 percent. This seems to confirm that, at least in some instances, school-based leaders are unwilling to take ownership of the problem. They appear willing to cover up the extent of the problem instead of working toward finding solutions.

Supposedly, George W. Bush, according to Walden & Kritsonis (2008), elevated education reform to the top of his domestic priority during his 2000 presidential campaign when he appointed Rod Paige as secretary of education. In doing so, he referenced the alleged “Texas Miracle” that Paige had been credited with performing on the Houston Independent School District. The “Texas Miracle” claimed that Paige had reduced the high stakes test score gap between white and nonwhite students in the 1990s. An audit revealed that thousands of students were not counted as dropouts who should have been counted. Students who should have been counted as dropouts were misplaced and other categories such as moved or transferred. The results of the audit revealed that instead of a 1.5 percent dropout rate, The Houston Independent School District was closer to 40 percent (p. 3).

### *Cultural Explanations*

American male students of African descent often have difficulty relating to school because the structure and culture of public schools tend to reflect White middle-class values and assumptions. These values and assumptions may not be aligned with American male students of African descent and their families. If the school’s culture

does not accept or respect that of the family or student then the dropout rates will not change. Students are expected to conform to the school's requirement rather than the school being responsive to the needs of the students. Researchers have found that faculty often voiced one value but in practice, their actions were inconsistent with the value they stated. There is a relationship between school culture and student performance. It has been shown that the more collaborative and collegial the school's culture the better the student performance, thus resulting in students who are more likely to stay in school (Patterson, Hale, & Stressman, 2007, p. 12).

#### *The Impact of Schools on Students Dropping Out*

Although some researchers focus on factors that point to the students as being responsible for their dropping out of school, Lee and Burkam (2003) believe there are other explanations that focus on the schools that the children attend. They conclude that school structures, academic organization, and professional educators have responsibility for American male students of African descent dropping out of school (Lee & Burkam, 2003).

Kronick and Hargis (1998) posits that the student drop out should be viewed as a curriculum casualty rather than a form of self suicide or an individual casualty. By placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of the school system, they argue that the responsibility and accountability of student failure rest with educators. They blame the structure of the curriculum on the child's failure. The implication is that if the curriculum

is adjusted to fit the child then the child would be successful. What is not so obvious is that in order to make the necessary corrections to the curriculum, school-based leaders must be able to, not only recognize what is wrong, they must know what corrections are needed and they must be willing and skilled enough to make the necessary corrections (Kronis and Hargis, 1998).

Danielson (2002) asserts that to ensure success in reducing dropout rates, educators and school-based leaders must change their attitudes toward American male students of African descent. She believes that educators' beliefs influence their behavior toward these students. If educators believe that American male students of African descent are incapable of performing at higher academic levels and they accept this belief as fact they will not make an effort toward providing a quality educational experience that will surely make a difference in the lives of those American male students of African descent they have the responsibility of educating.

Patchen (2004) believes that positive relevant classroom experiences are critical to a student's motivation and learning. He notes that the following factors have an impact on student success: (1) the educator's motivation and skills; (2) the school's curriculum along with other aspects of the academic program; (3) the school's climate; and (4) the various pressures exerted on the school from outside of the school. According to Patchen, schools are learning laboratories where students learn academically, socially, personally and morally on a continuous basis and given those dynamics students who attend those types of schools are ripe for learning. He further suggests, that when

teachers and school-based leaders provide warm caring environments for students, the students should respond accordingly.

Gordon, Gordon and Nembhard (1994) note that discriminatory practices, within our nation's schools, target American male students of African descent and the result is a negative impact upon their academic performances. These researchers cited studies that concluded that some teachers in the U.S. have few expectations of American male students of African descent in general and even lower expectations of those who are non-submissive and independent. The studies revealed that academic practices such as lower academic tracking and assignment of American male students of African descent to special education classes are pejorative and discriminatory. According to the researchers, the implementation of school disciplinary policies demonstrates the disproportionate and negative impact these policies have had on these students' opportunities to learn. They note that in response to these factors many American male students of African descent: (1) develop negative attitudes toward their educational experiences; (2) experiences higher levels of conflict in school; (3) exhibits anti-authoritarian behavior; and (4) expresses attitudes which negatively affect their academic achievement. While these students may have a lower level of academic self-concept, these same students may not have a lower self-concept in other areas of their lives (Gordon, et. al, 1994). For these students, it appears that although the school experience lowers their self concept, there are other areas of their lives that balance the negative school experiences.

Dorn (1996) states that the dropout problem as a byproduct of the dysfunction of school systems and extent of drop out problem is the result of timid public officials and school administrators not being willing to address the issue. He states that the real reason for the crisis lies with dysfunctional central bureaucracies, principals' lifetime tenure and incompetence at all levels of the system. Dorn believes that education is the right of all citizens and the dropout rate is evidence that schools are failing to guarantee that certain students' rights are protected (Dorn, 1996).

Evidence suggests that school-based practices are responsible for the high dropout rate. In each of these practices, it appears that the individual education needs of the students are secondary to the school's issues. These practices seem to elevate the system's needs above those of the students. Being treated impersonally and unfairly can leave a lasting impact on the impressionable minds of American male students of African descent. Many can easily see through the games played on them and their manner of reaction, while threatening to the system, offers them some degree of protection to their self concepts.

Teachers and school-based administrators must be sensitive to the emotional and development needs of their American male students of African descent. White teachers must be aware of the potential impact that a negative presence can have on the psyche of American male students of African descent (Ladson-Billings, 2000). They should be cognizant of the potential harm that it can have especially to those young Black male students in the early grades and make all possible efforts to create environments that are

conducive to their learning. If teachers work to provide the positive experiences for American male students of African descent as they began their school careers, these students will stay in schools longer.

From my review of the literature relating to dropouts I found that the plethora of definitions of dropouts and the different methods of calculating graduation rates did not produce a standard definition for either. The various definitions of the dropout involve many variables and consideration associated with the dropout and dropping out of school. For this research I define dropout as a child under the age of 17 who no longer attends his school of record and as a result, he has been removed from the school's roll and is no longer counted as an active student.

### *Critical Race Theory*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the mid 1970s with the work of Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman and Richard Delgado, legal scholars who were concerned with the slow pace of racial reform on the national scene in the U.S. (Decuir & Dixon 2004; Ladson-Billings 2000; Mutua 2006). Although Derrick Bell is considered the godfather of CRT, Kimberly Crenshaw is credited with coining the actual phrase *Critical Race Theory* in the late 1980s (Mutua, 2006). Critical Race Theory is an analysis, intervention and critique of traditional civil rights theory and Critical Legal Studies (CLS). The premise is that race and racism are integral to the American normal order and is the foundation of American institutional and community life (Mutua, 2006).

CRT differs from CLS in that it has an activist aspect and the end goal is to bring change that would lead to social justice. The tenets of CRT are counter storytelling, permanency of racism, whiteness as property interest convergence and the critique of liberalism. Counter storytelling is a method of storytelling that challenges the validity of the accepted premises or myths held by the majority culture that perpetuate the status quo. It exposes and critiques normalized dialogue that perpetuates racial stereotypes. By challenging the discourse of the privileged majority, counter-storytelling gives voice to the marginalized group by including their personal stories/ narratives, other people's stories/narratives, and composite story narratives (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

The permanency of racism tenet views racism as a natural part of American society whether at a conscious or unconscious level. The racist hierarchical structure, according to CRT, governs the political, economic and social domains of society. Critical race theorists believe that the history of race and racism in U.S. jurisprudence ratified the notion of Whiteness as property. Regarding interests convergence, civil rights were granted Blacks only in as much as they converge with the self interests of Whites and as long as they were not a major disruption to normal white life. Regarding the critique of liberalism, CRT is critical of three basic notions embraced by liberal legal ideology. They are: (1) the notion of color blindness; (2) neutrality of the law; and (3) incremental change (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Since Ladson-Billings and Tate introduced CRT to education in 1995 it has emerged as a powerful theoretical and analytical framework within educational research

(DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Critical race scholars are aware that schools have both the potential to oppress and marginalize students on the one hand, and to empower and emancipate them on the other. CRT is an accepted tool that assists educators to understand how race and racism impact upon educational practices. CRT is a framework for examining how race and racism impact structures, processes and discourse within the context of teacher education while seeking to transform society by identifying, analyzing and eliminating subtle and overt forms of racism in education (Smith, Yosso & Solórzano, 2007).

CRT, in education, has five themes that form the basic perspectives, research methods and pedagogy. In the first theme, *the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism* recognizes that racism has played a central role in the structuring of schools and the practices that go on within schools. Four dimensions are recognized within this theme: (1) micro and macro components; (2) institutional and individual forms; (3) conscious and unconscious elements; and (4) an accumulative impact on both the individual and the group.

In the second theme, *the challenge to dominant ideology*, certain assumptions are made that are the mainstay of the dominant social and cultural thinking. The school system is challenged as part of the critique of societal inequity. The argument is offered that the traditional claims of objectivity and meritocracy are but camouflages of the self interests, power and privilege of dominant groups in the U.S. society.

The third theme, *the commitment to social justice*, espouses a social justice research agenda that leads to the elimination of racism, sexism and poverty while empowering under represented minority groups.

In the theme, *centrality of experiential knowledge*, because the lived experiences of students of color are generally marginalized, if not completely eliminated from the educational discourse, CRT recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate and critical to understanding, analyzing, practicing and teaching about racial subordination.

Lastly, in the interdisciplinary perspective, CRT is adamant about using an historical and contemporary context in analyzing race and racism using interdisciplinary methods (Solórzano, Daniel & Yosso, 2001).

Critical Race Theory scholars provide insight for explaining, not only, how race can be a factor effecting the dropout rate of American males of African descent, but also, how and why these students are treated as they are in U.S. schools. CRT theorists posit that race makes a difference in this society and depending upon which side of the isle one sits, the journey can be difficult or smooth. According to the theory, it advocates that because racism is a permanent fixture in U.S. society and that whiteness is property right, there are implications for American males of African descent at all levels of society. Given the ordinariness of racism, whites negatively impact these American citizens even though they may not consciously be aware of their racist behavior.

Critical Race Theorists believe that action is essential to initiate improvements and because it is action oriented, it strongly suggests that some type of action is critical if changes are to be made that improve the quality of education provided to American students of African descent (Edwards & Schmidt, 2003). The specific actions needed to address the educational needs of these students rest with the leaders of our nation's schools. Reyes and Capper point out that the manner that the school-based leader defines a problem determines if and how the problem will be addressed (Reyes & Capper, 1991). This is important in the sense that the school based leaders are the key to providing solutions to the problem of children dropping out of school.

Scholars have recognized the need for research that highlights social justice issues. Social justice has different meanings for different groups. Educational leaders, who support a social justice position, would advocate for children who experienced discrimination and social inequalities by being sensitive to and caring about their diverse needs (Gerstl-Pepin, Killeen, & Hasazi, 2006). The concept of Social justice espouses a social justice research agenda that leads to addressing and eliminating marginalizing underrepresented groups in schools. Theoharis (2008) uses an excellent metaphor of a silkscreen t-shirt and a t-shirt made of purple dyed thread when explaining the difference between a social justice leader and a highly regarded leader. He notes that just as dyed thread is woven to become the shirt, of social justice is woven so deeply that it becomes the very fabric that makes up the social justice leader; there is no separation between the leader and the commitment to social justice. On the other hand, in the case of the silk-

screened shirt it is possible to print pattern on the shirt but the fabric of the shirt remains unchanged. As with the “silk-screen” leaders, certain reforms can be enacted, just as it is possible to silkscreen a design on a shirt; but the difference is the to screen will always be on top of the shirt and never part of the fabric. It can be scratched off or worn off and it never becomes a permanent part of the shirt. He notes that because social justice is ingrained within the fabric of the social justice leader’s being, the world is seen through a social justice perspective. Social justice leadership is described as being a calling and not a position that one applies for. The passion and commitment that makes up the social justice leaders greatest gifts also make their work significantly more difficult. (Theoharis, 2008, pg. 22).

#### *Chapter summary*

The literature follows the evolution of the term dropout from being seen as a social construction to being designated as a label for children who leave school for a variety of reasons. As a social construct, the term connoted the school’s responsibility for the socialization of the school aged child until graduation. When the child dropped out the school was seen as failing to meet its primary responsibility for educating all children. The term further evolved as the dropout rates of American children of African descent increased during the period of forced desegregation in schools. Some of these children’s behaviors were seen as problematic in the school systems who believed their removal from schools would make schools a safer place. Also, states passed legislation that raised academic requirements that made it more difficult for marginal students to graduate

(Rumberger, 1987). The oneness of their dropping out became the providence for those who dropped out instead of the school system responsible for their education.

Dropping out of school is a complex proposition that is compounded by the lack of a standard definition of exactly what is a dropout. The literature review provides a myriad of definitions. Rumberger (1983) notes that factors that influence dropping out are themselves influenced by other factors. For instance, while neighborhood may be seen as a factor that impact dropout, a child's neighborhood may be influenced by the parent's education, income, etc.

While there is no single explanation for why children drop out of school, the literature points to behavioral, sociological, political and cultural explanations that may account for reasons why children drop out of school.

Despite the various definitions of social justice, a critical component is addressing and eliminating marginalization of students of color in the school setting. The social justice leader is a passionate visionary who leads through a sense of commitment.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

#### *Introduction*

Chapter three describes the method used to collect and analyze the research data related to the school-based leaders' perceptions of high school dropouts. Next I give the rationale for my selecting the research method and discuss my role as researcher.

Afterward I discuss the case study method and related assumptions followed by the strengths and limitations of the case study method. Next, I offer the data collection and data analysis procedures and end with a chapter summary.

#### *Purpose of the study*

This study described the perspectives of eight school-based leaders regarding American male students of African descent; why they drop out of high school; and the role these school-based leaders play in preventing these students from dropping out of high school.

#### *Research Questions*

The questions that guided this research were:

1. What are school-based leaders' perceptions of American male students of African descent and why they drop out of high school?

2. Are the school-based leaders aware of the dropout rate of American male students of African descent? What efforts are being made to address these students dropping out of high school?
3. What role has school base leaders played in preventing American male students of African descent from dropping out of school?
4. What is needed to keep American male students of African descent in school until graduation?

### *Qualitative Research*

Qualitative researchers believe that individuals construct their reality as they interact with their social worlds. These researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed; how they make sense of their worlds; and the corresponding experiences they have (Merriam, 1998). According to Creswell (2007), a qualitative research method is considered when:

- (a) a problem or issue needs to be explored; (b) a complex, detailed understanding of an issue is desired; (c) the researcher's goal is to empower the study participants by their sharing their stories, presenting information in their voices, and minimizing any power that may exist in the relationship between the researcher and the study participants; (d) the researcher elects to write in a flexible, literary lead style that is not limited by restrictions of formal academic structures of writing; (e) the problem or issue is studied in the same context or setting in which it is addressed by the study participants; (f) the researcher wishes to develop theories because existing theories are partial or do not adequately address the complexity of the issue being examined; and (g) quantitative measures and statistical analysis do not adequately capture the nature of the problem (Creswell, 2007, pp.40- 41).

The qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because it was my intent to gain a detailed understanding of the eight school-based leaders' perspectives of American male

students of African descent and their dropping out of school. Examine the issue from the perspectives of school-based leaders will empower them and allow them to tell their story in their own voice.

The study was conducted within the context of a school selected from a district in a southeastern state. The data for the research was collected from interviews and my reflective journal notes and produced a rich, thick description of their perspectives that will be presented in a flexible written style (Creswell, 2007, Janesick, 2004; Merriam, 1998).

Merriam (1998) notes several key philosophical assumptions that guides qualitative research and the qualitative researcher. According to her:

- the researcher should have an interest in understanding the meaning people have constructed;
- the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis;
- field work is involved as the researcher must go to a setting to investigate the phenomena;
- qualitative research employs an inductive research strategy that builds abstractions, concepts, hypothesis or theories rather than testing existing theories.

She stated that an intensive understanding is gained from fieldwork in qualitative research that the researcher uses to build toward a theory (Merriam, 1998, pp. 6-8)

## *Methodology*

In this qualitative research, the perspectives of eight school-based leaders regarding American male students of African descent and their dropping out of school are examined using the case study methodology. The literature is clear that case study has several connotations. It can be viewed as a methodology, type of design, an object of study, a product of inquiry, an intensive holistic description, a process of analysis or product of analysis. It is also defined as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon, program, institution, person, process or social unit that permits the researcher to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of interest from the perspective of the participants. This is referred to as insider's perspective the "*emic*" (Merriam, 1998). By examining a phenomenon as it exists in its natural occurring setting (Mason, & Bramble 1997) the researcher is able to obtain a detailed, in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and the nature of its meaning for the study's participants. What distinguishes the case study approach is that the researcher's interest lies in the process rather than outcomes; the context rather than any one specific viable; and, discovery rather than confirmation. It is described in terms of the overall intent, to describe, to interpret, to evaluate some phenomena, or to build theory (Merriam, 1998).

Acknowledging the complexity of the case study, Creswell (2007) describes it as a methodology, a type of design in qualitative research, or an object of study, as well as the product of the inquiry. As a qualitative approach, he notes that the researcher examines a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time,

through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (observations, interviews, audiovisual material, documents and reports), and reports any case description and case-based themes (p. 73).

According to Patton (2002) notes that case study can either be a process of analysis or the product of analysis and there are instances where a case study can be both. As an analysis process, it represents a specified manner in which data are collected, organized, and analyzed. When data are collected in comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth manners for each case of interest the analysis process results in a product that is referred to as the case study (Patton, 2002, p. 447). To those ends, I see case study methodology as being perfectly suited to for my research.

#### *Strengths of the Case Study method*

Using the case study method advances the field of study and the knowledge base of a particular area under study. The data collected and the subsequent analysis using case study gives a thick and rich description of the data. A deeper understanding of meaning is gained through the case study approach that can improve practice; influence and informs policy; and have an impact on future research (Merriam, 1998).

#### *Limitations of the Case Study method*

The premise of the case study method is that any unit of investigation that involves people can only be understood through the perspectives of those involved in the investigation. This view ensures that the very nature of the phenomenon that is being researched is quite unique and not open to generalization beyond the study participants

(Pring, 2000). Because the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data, there are certain inherent challenges related to the researcher being human. Mistakes can be made at all levels of the research; the researcher can miss opportunities for a variety of reasons; and the personal biases of the researcher may interfere with the research at the design, data collection, and analysis phase of the research (Merriam, 1998).

The case study method can also lead to oversimplifying or exaggerating the data thus leading to errors in analysis. The integrity, skills and training of the researcher can bias the data collection and subsequent analysis. In addition, Also issues of reliability and validity impact the case study method (Merriam, 1998). Mason and Bramble (1998) describes two ways that researcher bias can affect the case study. First, in selecting a case to study the researcher could possibly bias the outcomes by using a case in which the findings can fairly be predicted. Second, bias can be introduced into a study if the researcher lacks the ability to accurately observe or record the data. The impact of this could carry over to data collection, analysis and interpretation. The open ended nature of the case study causes this particular problem (Mason & Bramble, 1997). Another very obvious issue in case study relates to the volume of data that are generated by the interviews, observations, field notes, journal entries and artifacts collected by the researcher (Creswell, 2007, Janesick, 2004). Janesick notes that in taping and transcribing interviews, a one hour interview produces 21 typed, single spaced pages.

### *My Role as Researcher*

My interest in the issue of American male student of African descent dropping out of school developed as I worked toward my Masters Degree in Education. My increasing awareness of the disproportionate state and national dropout figures for this group of students was the catalyst. I was also concerned with what appeared to be the lack of coordinated effort to address the problem at the district, state, and federal levels. As my reading on the subject increased, I discovered that individuals and groups in some states and districts across the nation were making efforts toward addressing the problem but not at the level that a crisis of this proportion deserves. On the national scene, at the state and district levels, it seems to me that the problem is way out in front of the educational policy makers and school school-based leaders as the dropout rate for American males of African descent continues to increase yearly (Orfield, 2004; Dorn, 1996). School systems and school-based leaders were not aggressively working toward solving a problem that was devastating a segment of students at a disproportionate rate.

My selecting this topic for my research project was a natural progression for me. I had found a timely, relevant problem that sparked my curiosity and I knew it would sustain my interest. I believed that an examination of the dropout rate of American males of African descent would add timely, relevant knowledge to the field of student dropout and dropout prevention. My initial curiosity regarding the high dropout rate of American male students of African descent, gave way to a genuine concern over the high rates that these students were dropping out of schools across the country.

In my thinking about the problem several questions came to mind. I wanted to know if school-based leaders recognized this and were aware of the rate these students and were dropping out of schools? Did the school-based leaders believe they should be held accountable or responsible for these students and their dropping out of school? To what extent is their dropping out influenced by school based leaders? Are there programs in place, at schools, to prevent American male students from dropping out of school? These were some of the questions that influenced my decision to conduct a research project to explore. I believed that exploring this important issue will provide valuable information and add knowledge to the field regarding, dropouts, dropout prevention and school-based leaders perspectives of these students dropping out of school.

As my focus on this problem narrowed, I felt obligated to explore the issue to gain a deeper understanding of the causes and factors that fueled the data. I spent time self reflecting and thinking about the many young American males of African descent I had worked with through the years in various capacities in communities, institutions, probation, parole, and at the alternative school within the Level 8 juvenile facility where I was the assistant principal for seven years. My thoughts were also of some of the young men I had personally known who had dropped out of school early in my youth. I knew that many of these boys had dropped out for reasons not related to their lack of academic ability or their academic potential. There were other reasons that prevailed upon them to leave or forced them to leave some. Some of them were bored with school; some had behavioral problems that made their academic road difficult; some left because they had

to face criminal sanctions; others found jobs and to them earning money to support themselves or their families became paramount; and there were those who did make the connection between obtaining a high school education and its potential value to them to play an important role in their futures. One relevant factor then but not now is that jobs were plentiful and a dropout could earn enough money to support himself and his family.

### *School Information*

For this study, the cases were the perspectives of eight school-based leaders in an urban high school located in a southeastern metropolitan statistical area (SMA) of over a million people. In terms of overall population, whites comprise seventy-eight percent; Americans of African descent 17 percent; and Hispanics twenty three percent. The selected high school is located in a city in a southeastern state whose overall graduation rate for American students of African was about 57 percent for the 2005-2006 school year. The high school has a population of nearly two thousand students. In the 2007-2008 school year, American students of African descent made up nearly thirty-four percent of the population and American male students of African descent was the largest single group in the school. For the 2006-2007 school year, the graduation rate for all students was close to seventy-seven percent. In that same year, the graduation rate for American students of African descent was sixty-four percent; a five percent increase over the previous year (No Child Left Behind School Public Accountability Reports).

Despite the years where the dropout rate remained constant, it dropped one year and then increased slightly the next, the school district's overall dropout rate has declined

over the past ten years. While the district's dropout rate for American students of African descent dropped 1.3 percentage points, over the 2005-2006 and the 2006-2006 school years, the school's dropout rate for that same group remained the same (less than one percent) (No Child Left Behind School Public Accountability Reports). The school has not made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the last four years and its grade dropped two points from the 2007-2008 to the 2008-2009 school years. In the past the school received recognition for excellence of its academic programs.

### *Participant Selection*

Prior to beginning the study, I had to obtain approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the school district where the school was located. As a strict condition for the district's approval of the research, all of the participants had to volunteer to participate in the research. I met with the principal and discussed the research and the district's requirements. I provided him with a written summary of the research and the research questions that he presented at a faculty meeting. As a result of the appeal to the faculty for volunteers, nine school-based leaders originally volunteered to participate in this research, but one withdrew. The participants included members of the administrative team and guidance counselors. All of the volunteer participants were experienced educators who had worked in the school system twelve years or more. Several had thirty or more years of experience. All had served in various capacities from teachers to administrators at other schools prior to their present assignment.

### *Data Collection*

The relevance of the design and construction of the research question is critical to the research as they are the scaffolding for the investigation and the cornerstone for the analysis of the data. It is through the research questions that the researcher finds out exactly what he/she wants to know (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2003, pg.31). Further, the researcher is cautioned to take care in developing research questions as these questions not only drive the research, they determine the type of instrument the researcher uses, the data analysis techniques, and ultimately, the success or failure of the research (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006).

At the planning stage of the research, I decided to collect data to address the research questions via interviews with the participants. The type of interview is important in that it can simplify data collection and the subsequent data analysis. Instead of conducting open ended interviews where the participants would have a free flowing discussion of their thoughts and perspectives, I maintained a tighter focus where the participants' responses were elicited using a fixed interview protocol that was posed to each of the participants. Using this method, I collected data, from the eight participants that captured their perspectives of American male students of African descent and their dropping out of school (Patton, 2002). The interview protocol I used to collect the data for this research data was developed with input from the research committee.

The questions that guided this research were:

1. What are school-based leaders' perceptions of American male students of African descent and why they drop out of high school?
2. Are the school-based leaders aware of the dropout rate of American male students of African descent? What efforts are being made to address these students dropping out of high school?
3. What role has school base leaders played in preventing American male students of African descent from dropping out of school?
4. What is needed to keep American male students of African descent in school until graduation?

When I began the interviews, I intended to: (1) maintain an open minded stance that would not interfere with the flow of information from the participants during the interview; (2) be cognizant of my biases and try not to allow them to influence the participant's responses; and (3) not interject my prior knowledge, thoughts, and feelings during the interviews in such a manner that would cause any of the participants to change, hesitate to answer, or reconsider any of their responses. I attempted to establish a positive rapport with each of the participants that permitted an open and relaxed atmosphere during the interview, by constantly reminding myself not to lead the participants' responses in any direction because the quality of data collected depended on accurately capturing their thoughts through the words recorded and later transcribed

(Janesick, 2004). This train of thought was revealed in my August 18, 2009, reflective journal entry:

August 18, 2009 - ..... At this time, I am aware of several things: number one the number of articles I have continued to increase. I made a decision to stop accumulating articles as of last Friday. Unless it is of tremendous importance, I am finished collecting articles. Number two, my research is important and it's ahead of the curve I am way ahead of the curve. Number three: as I look around at society I feel strongly that there is a connection between American male student of African descent dropping out of school and the majority is thinking and feelings about them. This is my gut feeling. I am aware of this and I will pause, think about it, and write about it openly as to recognize my bias and limits and is it may impact on my analysis. My plan for next month (September) is to get approval all of the IRB, meet with the principal of the proposed school and began collecting data. Dr. B. asked if I wanted him to attend the initial meeting with the principal to introduce the study. I agreed.

- As I think about the upcoming meeting with the principal mind purpose of the meeting will be:

- to create an atmosphere of trust with the principal and the school-based leaders; determine who I will interview for this study. This will be decided when I meet with the school's principal;

- create a schedule of the interviews with the school-based leaders;

- slow down, don't rush the information, probe but give the participant the chance to adequately answered the question;

- be sure to clarify as much as I can before ending the interview;

- if I don't understand the participants answers, let them clarify and don't put words in their mouths;

- write my journal thoughts directly after the interviews although I'll take notes during the interviews.

- I am anxious but a serious anxiousness. I sent an e-mail to the committee informing them of the acceptance of my research proposal by the district.

One of the concerns I have now is if the school-based leaders will volunteer to participate in the research

Qualitative research seeks to capture the richness of an experience using the

words of the participant as the database is the direct quotations from the participant

regarding their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge (Labuschagne, 2003).

Data collected in case study research are extensive and are collected from a variety of

sources. Data for this research was collected from interviews with the eight school-based

leaders and from the research reflective journal I maintained. The journal entries are part of the data that was analyzed for the research. The journal entries are written narratives of my personal reflections, observations, thoughts, impressions, feelings, and hunches regarding the interview, participants and any other issues that was observed before, during and after the interview. Janesick (1999) sees journal writing as a way to reflect by digging deeper into the beliefs and behaviors that are described in the journals.

Journaling is also seen as a means of triangulating data and pursuing interpretations and a type of member check of the individuals thinking that is done on paper (p. 513). She notes that journaling within qualitative research can achieve the following:

- (a) refine the understanding of the role of the researcher through reflection and writing, much like an artist might do;
- (b) refine the understanding of the responses of participants in the study, much like those of the physician or health-care worker;
- (c) use a journal as an interactive tool of communication between the researcher and participants in the study, as a type of interdisciplinary triangulation of data; and
- (d) view journal writing as a type of connoisseurship by which individuals become connoisseurs of their own thinking and reflection patterns, and indeed their own understanding of their work as qualitative researchers (p. 506).

The reflective research journal can be a valuable tool to the qualitative researcher by: (a) providing a focus to the study; (b) setting the groundwork for analysis and interpretation; (c) serving as a tool for revisiting notes and transcripts; (d) serving as a tool to awaken the researcher's imagination; and (e) helping the researcher by keeping a written record of their thoughts, feelings, and facts (Janesick, 2004, p. 149).

Each of the interviews was recorded on audio tape and the recordings were later transcribed to ensure: (1) thorough and accurate data collection; (2) validity of the data

collection process; and (3) that I have confidence in the database as being a true rendition of the what the participant said in the interview. Also, recording the interviews and knowing that the audio tapes would be transcribed allowed me freedom to pay attention to the participants' responses instead of focusing on taking detailed notes during the interviews. When I later listened to the audio-recording of the interviews while simultaneously reading the transcripts, I was able to "feel the data" and I think my closeness added depth to the analysis as a result. Also, Fasick (1977) notes that by recording and transcribing the interviews researchers are able to eliminate the faking of interviews and remove the possibility of a person saying they didn't say something when they actually did say it. Disputes can subsequently addressed after hearing the play back of the tape discussion as the intent can be argued instead of the actual words spoken (Fasick, 1977). This is an obvious protection for both the researcher and the participant.

#### *Interview Protocol*

An interview protocol was developed and used to collect data in one-to-one interviews with each of the eight participants to answer the research questions. The interviews were conducted with the participants in various locations in the school. The interviews were held in the principal's office, the principal's conference room and the guidance counselor's office over a four week period. The different settings were different in that the noise level varied between the settings. The principal's office and the office of the guidance counselor were behind two entry doors while the entrance to the principal's conference room was directly from a main hallway. Thus the student traffic

in the hallway, the bells, and the announcements over the public address system was audible in the recordings making it a distraction both during the interviews and in the transcription of the audio-tapes.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis focused on specific issues or themes that gave clues to understanding the complexity of the case. By identifying key issues within each case and then seeking common themes across the cases, the analysis was rich in the context of the school-based leader's perspectives regarding American male students of African descent and their dropping out of school (Creswell, 2007; Janesick 2004). Patton (2002) refers to inductive analysis as discovering patterns, themes, and categories in the data. He posits that findings emerge out of the data as a result of the researchers into action with the data (p. 453).

Janesick (2004) notes that the interpretation of the analysis makes case study and research useful and, much like Janesick (2004), I approached the data analysis with the notion that the answers to the questions would be found within the data. The participants' exact meaning, what they really wanted to say would be found within the typed transcripts of the interviews (p.118). To come to an understanding of what each participant was saying required a reading and rereading of the transcript. I was aware that rushing or making quick judgments without a thorough review of the transcripts, would not allow me to really see what the participants were actually saying. As I read the transcripts, I consciously tried to think about what I was thinking and feeling during the

interview. I came to a realization that each of the participants elicited different feelings and thoughts during each of the interviews. As I approached each interview, I wanted to explore and reach for the participant's responses. I did not want to not interfere with what they were saying by injecting my thinking to lead them in a different direction than what they wanted to go. My overall interview strategy was to ask the question, listen to the response, and probe where I thought further clarification was needed. What became interesting to me as I completed the interviews was the responses of the different individuals to the questions, the varying length of the interviews, my impact on the participants (from my point of view), the different level of passions, commitment and knowledge of the participants.

After the interviews were completed I had them transcribed from the audio tapes. I received my transcription from the individual who was an excellent typist, but when I read the transcriptions and listened to the audiotapes I realized the difference between typing and transcribing; this was a real awakening for me as a researcher. The typist had done a great job in putting the words on the paper. However, I came to realize the schism between typing and transcribing an interview word for word. As I indicated in my November 15, journal entry:

November 15, 2009 - I find myself having to go back through the transcripts and make additions. I had not made my transcriber aware that the typing of the interviews had to be verbatim. In order to create a database that I am satisfied with, I need to go through each transcript word by word to make sure that the transcript reads as the tape does. This is taking a lot of time to go back through each transcript and make corrections and additions word by word. This is very tedious

and time-consuming but at least I will be certain of the results. I respect [the transcriber's] efforts to type the interviews. Transcribing interviews is nowhere near as easy as I envisioned. I understand how time consuming the process can be.

The individual who transcribed the interviews had made corrections to the words spoken in the interviews. They corrected the mistakes of diction, words, phrases, tense, and on occasions, the typist had summarized thoughts and made interpretations of what was stated by the interviewer and the interviewee. These corrections were very acceptable under normal conditions however; transcriptions must be word for word, syllable for syllable and utterance for utterance. I accepted the responsibility as I did not make it clear to the person who typed the transcriptions that the transcriptions had to be word for word. The typist had indeed provided a service for me by putting the words on paper however I realized at that point that it was my responsibility to make the needed corrections. But I did not have a clue regarding the time intensive nature of the task.

My wanting to have an accurate data base required that I approach the data collection with the notion that the transcripts must be made accurate to the extent I could make them. My goal was to reflect as close a word for word rendition as I could. To accomplish that task I went through each audio-recording and matched it with the transcript word for word, syllable by syllable, and utterance by utterance to produce a database that reflected accurately the words of the participants during each of the interviews. Completing this process took quite a bit of time because of the stopping and starting, reading and rereading each of the transcripts over and over. One of the transcripts took me as long as three days to complete. Despite the time intensive nature of

the task, I was determined to produce a database that was as true to the interview that I could render. In the end it was worth the effort as evidenced by the rush that I experienced when after reading the transcripts and listening to the tape and they matched almost perfectly. I do need to point out that after I had completed my work with the transcripts and believed they were 100 percent correct, I later found that each subsequently time I listened to the tapes I always found minor corrections. I would hear something that I had not noticed before or I found that I had left out some very minor words that I had not heard before. Because of this, I unable to ensure 100 percent accuracy of the transcriptions, I feel more comfortable guaranteeing accuracy somewhere between 96 percent and 98percent. After completing the transcripts, I began the process of making the transcripts manageable.

I labeled the initial versions of the transcripts the unabridged version. This rendition included all of the utterances, double words, and word sounds that were spoken during the interview. An example of this unabridged version is as followed:

*Ans...* we do that. um, I...I would like to see churches be given a bigger role in this society of...of ah...working with...with ah...potential drop outs and because I think they can make a big difference with youth. It's just one... you better to get um there. You know but I think if you can get um there they can make them help a lot because they have a lot of people who care about them and they really wanna make an effort. Ah as far as the...the most...the biggest thing...the most effective thing that I think we can do inside the school is to develop those personal relationships. I think this the most important. Um we have an academic program in place. We have teachers who can teach. We have a curriculum. We have books. We have all of the supplies and equipment and technology that we need. I think that personal relationship factor is the, is the biggest thing that we need to do a better job with and can be the most effective prevention tool that we have.

In the second round of working with the transcriptions I went back through each of the transcriptions and created what I labeled the abridged version. This is where I took out all of the utterances, double words, and word sounds, however, I attempted to be very careful not to change the meaning or intent of the participant. An example of the abridged version of the previous unabridged version is as follows:

*Ans.* - We do that. I would like to see churches be given a bigger role in this society of working with potential drop outs because I think they can make a big difference with youth. I think if you can get them there they can help them a lot because they have a lot of people who care about them and they really want to make an effort. The most effective thing that I think we can do inside the school is to develop those personal relationships. I think this the most important. We have an academic program in place. We have teachers who can teach. We have a curriculum. We have books. We have all of the supplies and equipment and technology that we need. I think that personal relationship factor is the, is the biggest thing that we need to do a better job with and can be the most effective prevention tool that we have.

For each of the transcriptions, I created other versions that centered on certain themes or areas of focus. One set of transcripts contained only answers to the questions; another version looked at the probes to each of the question; and still another contained the data chunks abstracted from the data. Each subsequent version I created required additional hours going through each of the transcripts. This was not time wasted as each subsequent review of the transcripts allowed me to enhance my familiarity with the data and increased my ownership of and respect for the process. As I massaged (listened to the tapes and read the transcripts) the transcripts I felt them almost come alive. Miles and Huberman (1994) point out that the transcriptions alone do not capture the speaker's facial expressions, explanatory gestures and tone of voice (p. 51). I agree that this may

be accurate for the casual reader of the transcriptions who was not involved in the interview process. However, as I read the unabridged versions of transcriptions and listened to the tape recordings, the flavor of the interviews was robust and satisfying as it took me back and into the interviews and I captured the moment again and again.

### *Chapter Summary*

This qualitative research uses case study to describe how school-based leaders perceive American males of African descent and why they drop out of school; their roles in dropout prevention and what efforts are being made to challenge these students to stay in school. I presented my rationale for selecting this method and provided a discussion of qualitative research and the qualities needed by the qualitative researcher. Case study as a methodology was explained followed by what were seen as the limits and strengths of the case study method. I outlined the data collection procedures and talked about how the data would be analyzed.

## Chapter Four

### Data Presentation

#### *Introduction*

This research described the perspectives of eight school-based leaders of American male students of African descent, why they drop out of their high school and their role in preventing these students from leaving school early unprepared for post high school life.

An interview protocol was developed and used to collect data in one-to-one interviews with each of the eight participants to answer the research questions. The interviews were conducted with the participants in various locations in the school. The interviews were held in the principal's office, the principal's conference room and the guidance counselor's office over a four week period.

#### *Data Presentation*

#### **Research Question #1. What are school-based leaders' perceptions of American male students of African descent and why they drop out of high school?**

The data revealed several themes from the eight participants' responses that described and explained their perceptions of American male students of African descent and why they dropped out of their high school. The seven themes were related to: (1) the participants' opinions and personal feelings toward the students; (2) student centered issues; (3) role models: these included athletes, entertainers, and negative figures in the

community); (4) family issues and concerns; (5) peers; (6) community and societal concerns; and (7) School and education/teacher related issues

The participants provided a great deal of information regarding their thoughts, perspectives, perception, feelings and impressions about American male students of African descent and their dropping out of school. Those data presented here resulted from reviewing each of the transcripts for themes that were representative the participants' responses. As the themes are presented in the next section, it should be understood that no single statement adequately reflects the participants' complete responses to the questions. These data are presented as examples of the participants' thoughts, perspectives, feelings and impressions that were shared during the interviews. In the course of an interview, any of the participants may have made several related statements regarding an issue; however, to condense the responses for analysis, I looked for themes, or similarities that were representative of the participants' responses. The following examples illustrate the range of the participant's perceptions.

#### *Participants' Opinions and Personal Feelings toward the Students*

The first theme represents the participants' own opinions, thoughts, and feelings as they relate to their perceptions of the American male students of African descent dropping out of school, responses from the interviews with Ms Adkins, Ms Avery, Mr. Iverson, and Mr. Onley are offered as examples:

Ms Adkins

I just I worry about them. I worry about our male students and the fact that many of them have records already, and they have it's not for, like, petty little things either. I mean, they have records for major crimes that are going to follow them for the rest of their lives.

They don't realize what that's going to do to their chances of being successful. Not to say that it would stop them, but for a lot of them it might because they don't have anybody in their corner really pushing them.

Ms Avery

I pretty much see them as every other student. I acquire knowledge from them of their lives and where they come from, in communities. I talk to every student, including African male students. I ask them about their life, I ask them about their history. I tend to know a little more about African-Americans. My husband is African-American, and so I live in their community and I live their churches, and I live with him in his life as well as mine, so that's where some of my perception of the African-American male community comes from, would be from him. But as far as the student population, I talk to them about it. I'm not very shy.

Mr. Iverson

I think my general perception is in middle school you have a better opportunity in, hopefully, affecting these students and pushing them in a more positive direction. What I noticed when I came to high school, I had to change my whole mentality about dealing with students in general. In middle school, we tend to coddle, help them along, and give them numerous chances. I think to some extent, that tends to hurt them, because by the time we get them in high school, a lot of them have made the conscious decision that, either they want to stay, or they no longer find it useful for them to stay in high school. And the system is set up such that I don't think they get enough opportunities in high school, or I would say some of the assistance that they need, or that they could have gotten in middle school. So I guess I can say I've seen some of the errors in my ways when I was an AP in middle school. I think at that point if I had been a little bit more strict, put a lot more requirements on them, as well as allowing them to learn to accept responsibility, when they came across the street, they would have a better idea of which direction to go.

Ms Unger

My perceptions of the American male of African descent is a strong individual, who if given opportunities, can be a great contributor to society. One, who if provided with the values from home, school, community, education and the church, if they're provided and instilled those tools, one can be a great contributor, as I said, not only to education, the work force and other areas that they deem necessary and warranted.

Mr. Onley

When, you're dealing with young blacks, you have to love them, you have to scold them, you have to be their friend, but you have to give them those things that they're going to need later on when they are adults. But you can be compassionate, yet you have to be strong. To discipline a child in one breath and to hug them in the next, to realize that there is no such thing as perfection. That young black man has luggage, baggage that other people do not. They struggle in their own world. How can they then be successful in a totally opposite and different world that's rule related, that is as rigid as rigid can be but you have to make tough decisions, where other ones' are going to be easy.

### *Student Centered Issues*

Similar themes that were student centered were found in all of the participants' transcripts that, in some way, were connected to perceptions of the students' personal characteristics, the students' opinions or how the participants impacted the students at some level. Of the twenty data chunks coded in this category, nine were positive while eleven took a negative slant. The following perceptions represent the range of responses in this theme.

Mr. Roberts

Well, it's difficult to describe perceptions of a group that large without thinking of individuals. I think that my perception of that group would be that there is a great deal of variety. There's a great deal of difference between individuals within the group just like any other group. Most of the knowledge I've acquired of male students of African descent were from my work as a school teacher and school administrator. I've worked with kids from all backgrounds from all racial and ethnic groups, from all kinds of families, from very poor to very wealthy families, and schools. And I don't think there is one characteristic that you can generally apply to every single member of that group.

Ms Unger

My perception of the American male of African descent is a strong individual, who if given opportunities, can be a great contributor to society. One, who if provided with the values from home, school, community, education and the church, if they're provided and instilled those tools, can be a great contributor to not only education, the work force but other areas that they deem necessary and warranted.

Ms Underwood

It's a mixed bucket because we have some of them that are very motivated to make something of their lives, and it seems that there are a greater number that just want to be what they perceive is expected of them by their local community, which is not always a favorable thing. They might think it's not cool to be smart but cooler to be more thuggish. That perception makes them feel cooler.

Mr. Irving

American males of African descent probably have more obstacles to overcome, seemingly. It has been my experience from the schools that I have worked in that they have different needs. They have different expectations for themselves and we need to find different ways to approach the way we're trying to educate them than we've done traditionally in the past.

### *Role Models*

Through out the interviews the participants seem to have an awareness of the impact of role models on the students. The participants seemed to think that the issue of role models (or lack thereof) seemed to impact all areas of the students' lives:

Ms Avery

Well, the people that these kids idolize are not always the best role models. I think that the kids they idolize that are the good role models need to be in the schools. They need to give back because, realistically, coming from a white female, they're not going to listen to me because they don't feel that I came from their world. Sometimes you need to hear it from somebody else other than me. You can break down barriers with a kid, but when it comes to their life, sometimes they think that we don't understand. And some of them have told me that "You don't understand us, you're white." [I respond] Tell me what I don't understand.

Ms Adkins

My perception is, I think, a lot of our African-American males are falling too far behind the academic curve. A lot of them have no positive role models to look up too. The male role models they tend to emulate, because we live in such a "me, now" society, that some of those role models that they look up to are athletes and are music artists or who aren't real positive to begin. They look at their lifestyles, they want that kind of lifestyle but they don't want to work for that kind of lifestyle. They want it just to, to be given to them.

Mr. Roberts

The rap artist, athletes there's a very small population of young black men who make a lot of money through athletics or through entertainment that I think kids look up to and I think possibly there is a resentment factor that exists from some longer standing establishment people. Other people in other racial ethnic groups who resent other people that are not like them being successful.

### *Family Issues and Concerns*

The participants' perceptions that the students' family impacts their dropping out is expressed in the following:

Mr. Irving

Some of the students that I see are being raised by either one parent or they're being raised by a surrogate parent, like a grandmother or a grandfather. I even know a few students who are being raised by their older siblings

Mr. Onley

I tell this to parents that come out, quit beating yourself up. There is no question you love your child. And yes I, see your tears I, hear what you are saying you simply didn't have all the answers to all the questions. And that's not your fault.

Ms Underwood

We have kids come to us with a mountain of personal issues. It could be that they are a single parent family. It could be that there are six kids and every one of them has different fathers, so there's no positive male role model at home.

Whereas, you know, it's not cool to stereotype, but you and I both know there are stereotypes that fit certain ethnic groups. And along with that come the expectations and everything else that goes with it. Is it because the African American women don't care enough about themselves that they don't care that they have babies with numerous different men? And what happens because then the men aren't there to help raise them and they don't have a positive role model.

Ms Unger

I have my own perception of what the real reason, because I see a lot, poor parenting, lack of that male figure in the household. Although that's just a small part of it, but for some of the kids, I find, the role models that they have, even if they have a parent, some of the role models that these children look up to are questionable.

Ms Adkins

So many of their parents, they were young when they had them, and some of their parents are ill-equipped, because it's almost like a cycle. They didn't have anybody in their lives to really push them so now; here they are trying to raise these children in a society where perception is everything.

### *Peers*

Nearly all of the participants touched on the impact of the students' peers at some point during the interview. Their collective perceptions recognize the influence of peers.

Mr. Iverson

It's not so easy to walk away. You know, the peer pressure is such that sometimes you have to stand and fight. And so it's hard for them, when they get into the high school setting to understand that the way to solve it is not to fight, or 'throw down,' in the middle of the patio. You know, or, I have students that have, have gotten involved with the law, but this code of not stitch, snitching puts them in a situation where they then become a victim. They would rather take the rap than to identify those individuals that actually took part in the incident.

Ms Underwood

Some of the African American males get a lot of pressure from their peers to dummy it down.

Mr. Onley

...it was difficult for those students to break that because there was the reach in the peer pressure put upon them. But they would seek them out and they would want them to fail. I feel the same thing happens in schools where there are students that have already made their decision of the path of life they're going to take, and they want people with them. And they seek them out and if they can't enlist them with very little resistance, then their group grows. And if there is resistance, there's tremendous pressure. If you look at those groups when they travel, when they're together, you have very tall students, and you have very small students, it's almost like a recruiting process. I fear for many 9<sup>th</sup> graders coming in, because they're still eligible for four years of school, where these other ones are 16 and 17 and they know it's going to be difficult for them to graduate. It's almost like they're trying to perpetuate the problem. It's uncanny to look at the size differential.

### *Community and Societal Concerns*

The theme related to the impact of societal/community issues were expressed in the responses of most of the participants. Some comments that reflect their collective responses are:

Mr. Roberts

I know that there's a public perception that as a group those students that fit into that category perform less well, overall, as a group on standardized tests and in school than some other groups that you can pinpoint. But I think that's an individual thing that has to be looked at for individual students.

People are born, or have been born mostly with at least prejudice, biases everybody has them I think to some extent, some more than others. I think that perception is perpetrated perhaps or exacerbated by pop culture somehow.

...I think there is a celebration of the gangster element in movies, music, and the media in general among young people. I think people rebel against authority, including my own generation. I think the rebellion that takes place now is the media rebellion is often associated with young black males. They are the most popular music people now and pop music is on radio stations and all that kind of thing.

Mr. Iverson

The other thing I think that I have noticed is we take them from apartment complexes, we take them from some of the living areas where they come from, and school for them is a safe haven. But what we don't always deal with is what happens when they go back. The

transition from home to school and from school to home, because obviously when they get back home they're dealing with some of the very same issues, and it's not so easy to turn the other cheek.

Mr. Irving

I believe that if you looked at them from a larger perspective, some people who call them "at-risk," not necessarily a term that I would use, but that is the term that is perceived. Males in general, probably would be considered at-risk in schools.

Mr. Onley

They're very hungry for knowledge. Really, especially in kindergarten to second grade, I don't see a difference between that particular child and those who arbitrarily might be in his or her classroom. I think I start to see a change, however, when I get to the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, where some of their characteristics, I think, have begun to change because of many of the environmental and cultural issues that seem to overwhelm them. They still are thirsty for education, but they sometimes have so many conflicts spinning off from the environment.

### *School and Education/Teacher Related Issues*

Examples that illustrate the participants' thoughts about the impact of school or education are found in the following statements made by the participants:

Ms Adkins

We don't have enough positive male role models in our school system, for one and we don't seem to be producing a lot of African-American male teachers. The ones that are going into college and are being successful, don't want to major in education because of the money.

We have to import them into the school, but they're not here on a daily basis where the kids can, if they have a problem there's that man that they can go to and talk to. They have to wait until the next time they're scheduled to come here to talk about something. Well, in that span of time, any number of things could have happened.

Mr. Onley

There is no, and I repeat there is no articulation between elementary to middle, and middle to high school that properly identifies students early on. What I mean by that is this. When a child completes K-5, they may have specific issues in discipline or reading or whatever. The county thinks they do a good job of articulating that but there is not a real bridge in my opinion where students can be, they can move forward from one type of a school environment to the next and what an elementary school might have been doing then the middle schools starts to do it. It is almost like you were elementary, now you are middle, no. Whole different set of things, so instead of trying to solve the problem you magnify the problem and it becomes worst for the child and every time that child sees

more frustration, more heartache the more difficult it becomes for that child to see success. And then when they move from middle to high school a lot of 15, 16 year old kids are already in middle school. Where the middle schools should be doing a better job of identifying those, of helping them and then when they get to us it is so difficult at that point because now it's almost that their mind-set is cemented. They didn't do it there how am I suppose to do it in a high school? What happens is this and I've said this to my staff repeatedly, you might be a high school teacher but those kids cry, they bleed they do everything and what they need is love and understanding. Teacher's have too many ears. They need to be deaf. Because profanity that is being said is like you and I drinking water. They sometimes don't even know they have dropped an F-bomb because it's natural for them. So, you have teachers that want every child to be exactly the same and view every child the same. Well, you can't.

The participants were also asked how they acquired their knowledge of American males of African descent. All of the participants indicated that their personal knowledge of these students, to some degree, was based in their working with them in the school system. In addition, all of the participants, except one, said their knowledge was based on personal experiences with these students that extended into their homes, family, churches, and neighborhood to some degree. Several of the participants indicated they had lived in neighborhoods that were predominately Americans of African descent or a mixture of races. Some had lived in these neighbors as a result of their family's socio-economic status. One of the participants indicated that they had married an American of African decent, lives in that community and attends a church in that community as a result of the marriage. Another participant said that he had visited the community and had gone to their churches only on special occasions when he had been invited. One participant revealed that her knowledge of these students was limited to her school contacts as a guidance counselor. The following exchange illustrates this:

Question - How did you acquire your knowledge of these students, their lives, their histories, communities, etc.?

Ms Underwood - Through personal experience being a high school guidance counselor in an inner city school with a majority population that [is] African Americans, I see it everyday.

Question - Have you had the opportunity to go into their homes, their churches and their communities?

Ms Underwood - No.

Question - So your primary contact has been in school?

Ms Underwood - In school, absolutely.

**Research Question #2. Are the school-based leaders aware of the dropout rate of American male students of African descent? What efforts are being made to address these students dropping out of high school?**

The following responses demonstrate the range of the school-based leaders' response to their being aware of the dropout rate of these students:

Mr. Iverson:

Not at this point. We haven't addressed that issue this year. At the end of last year, we got information from the district that [stated] when students come to your school in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, you follow them from the 9<sup>th</sup> grade to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, regardless of whether they stay at your school or they transfer to another school.

**Probe: If you had to gauge [the dropout rate] would you say it's high, medium, or low?**

Mr. Iverson:

I would say based on our population it's high.

Mr. Irving:

The number? Probably not, I couldn't quote the number, no.

**Probe: If you generally, had to say, would you say that it's low, medium, or high?**

Mr. Irving:

I'd probably go for medium at this point. But it might be leaning towards high, that's an outside possibility.

Mr. Onley:

That has been a real focal point. Matter of fact, I went to a meeting last week, where the region, the state is redefining what a true dropout is. And so, probably my word is a just

little bit keener right now that someone else's. But [yes], I am very familiar with the dropout rate.

**Probe: Are you aware if it's high, low, medium?**

Mr. Onley:

I can only go with what I heard recently. Our dropout rate is right in the mean of the district. Which to me is extremely good, because we are not at risk students. So, to me [we] must be doing something right. If it was at the lower quartile, you know when I look at [this school's] dropout rate versus other inner city at risk schools. We got [them] beat.

Mr. Roberts:

I'm aware that the dropout rate is high among that group compared to some other groups. I don't know the exact number at this point.

Ms Adkins:

I don't have any exact numbers in my school, I know nationwide it's extremely high.

**Probe: If you had to characterize the dropout rate at your school, would you say it's low, medium, or high?**

Ms Adkins:

For my school, I would say low.

Ms Avery:

Yes, I am, and I can't tell you what it is right now, but we do look at it especially since our dropout rate as a whole is now tied to our school grade. It's becoming very, very important – whether they're African-American or not, every dropout is becoming important.

Ms Underwood:

I can't give you what the numbers are. But I know it's a social and academic concern.

Ms Unger:

I am. At this very moment, in terms of the percentage, I definitely can't say above a ten. I'm having to quote '08-'09 school year, it's definitely below 10% at this school. Because I must say the one thing we do is put forth every effort we can possibly can to keep our youth. Not only the African American male, the emphasis on [them] because that's who we lose that's the greatest population that tends...

Four themes were identified in the participants' responses that were related to the efforts made to address American male students of African descent dropping out of high school. The themes were not unanimously found in the participants' responses but are broad enough to be inclusive of their responses. The range of responses reflected a diversity of things among the school-based leaders regarding the efforts that were being

made to address these boys dropping out of school. The themes found in the responses were: (1) direct administrative action; (2) specific dropout prevention programs; (3) improvements needed to address the problem; (4) critiques of present practices.

#### *Direct Administrative Action*

In the theme *direct administrative*, some of the participants said administration takes a proactive role by “talking about it quite a bit”, identifying potential dropouts, providing mentoring and counseling, meeting with them and their parents to talk about their options, and have them sign a behavioral agreement when warranted. It was reported that one administrator created a mentoring program for boys while another has a mentoring program for girls. Along with different clubs to enhance self esteem and peer facilitation, they schedule motivational speakers to talk with these youngsters to inspire them, and give them a sense of hope and the opportunity to see successful individuals. One administrator is working toward securing a bus to take students home who participate in the afterschool tutoring program. The administration has created a policy that requires that students with attendance or discipline issues to automatically go through guidance before they register. All administrators will be asked to work with students who are potential dropouts by meeting with them once a month, reviewing bad grades, building relationships and being there to assist them.

One of the participants indicated that the school targets at-risk students in general and didn't know if the response to American males of African descent was any different.

Another participant seems to think the emphasis is on the American male students of African descent because “they are the ones who mostly drop out”.

*Specific Dropout Prevention Programs;*

The participants’ responses in the theme, *specific dropout prevention programs* include: (1) disciplinary programs inclusive of In School Suspension (ISS), Out of School Suspension (OSS), and Alternative to Out of School Suspension (ATOSS); (2) A tutoring program in place that targets male students based on attendance, grades, and grade point average; (3) Gear Up Program is a grant that targets minority students and provides afterschool tutoring programs, community service, plus other things. This program and Project Shine are for all minority students; (4) Credit Recovery that allows students to make up credits at a quicker pace on line; (5) Impact Program is for children at-risk of not graduating and are a year behind. The students attend full time and are given a chance to make up their classes so that they can graduate on time with their class.

According to the participant, Impact is not a dropout prevention program but is under the umbrella; (6) Educational Talent Search Program (CROP) that targets at-risk youth to help them become successful in completing high school; (7) [the state] Virtual; (8) The Extended Learning Program allows students to go to the Media Center for online classes and receive after school tutoring in any subject; and (9) Under-age GED Program. One participant stated they are working on creating an afterschool adult education program that would allow the students to make up classes they failed in the first semester.

### *Improvements Needed to Address the Problem*

Some of the participants provided responses that made up the theme, *improvements needed to address the problem*. It was stated that although administrators want to do something about the problem and in the past they came up with strategies; however, it was noted that they plans were not followed through because, “things just got worn down as the year progressed”. The participant conceded that “it’s hard to maintain the momentum as there are so many issues going on that the focus goes elsewhere”. It was commented that the right things need to be done and strong leadership is needed to make the system change. One participant indicated that the administration is not doing enough but they are doing what they can. It was the thinking of one of the participants that if more effort or focus was placed on the issue, more could be accomplished.

### *Critique of present practices.*

The theme, *critique of present practices* was reflected by the participants who indicated that there is talk about the issue but a plan of action is not developed to address the problem. It is believed by a participant that the decision makers do not listen to those in the trenches because they veto plans that require work on their part may have problems with the community because they don’t want to upset parents. It was noted that the school systems will never change unless administrators have a belief system that wants to make the changes. One comment was that it was not known if anything is being done to enhance student’s needs to connect to school. Still another said that they would like to say that something is being done but can’t think of anything specific. One participant

expressed the thinking that not all of the administrators see dropouts or dealing with dropout prevention as being important. One believed that more could be done and the leadership needs to take an active role. Participants stated that the male group is run by a male administrator of African descent and the female group is run by an American female of African descent on their own initiative. One of the participants indicated that they thought the biggest obstacle was getting the school to actually incorporate some of the programs that they thought would be more beneficial to the students.

**Research Question # 3. What role has school-based leaders played in preventing American male students of African descent from dropping out of school?**

The school-based leaders believe that they play a significant role in identification of those students who are at-risk of dropping out of high school. All of the participants readily identified the procedures they used that identified those children coming from middle school and those who were in their school who were potential dropouts.

The participants stated that the assistant principals and guidance counselors review the records of every incoming middle school student, in the summer, focusing on their previous academic performance (that includes their test scores and GPA), their attendance, and discipline records. They noted that the past performance in middle school gives them a picture of who's less likely to stick it out through four years of high school. It was stated that students are considered part of a cohort when they enter the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and have four years to complete four years of school. When they see someone who doesn't potentially have that ability to finish in the time frame, then they believe they're

looking at someone who's potentially going to be a dropout. Some did point out, however, that they don't specifically target any one group of students but the majority of the over-aged population coming from the eighth grade that should have been in high school two years earlier are American males of African descent.

One of the participants noted that they start programming from the middle school in November/December. The guidance counselor, assistant principal for curriculum and the assistant principal for student affairs work as a team. They look at the over-aged report in summer to know who's coming from middle school because the middle school sends a lot of 15/16 year olds coming to the high school for the very first time from 8<sup>th</sup> grade; which means the child has been in 8<sup>th</sup> grade two years, if he's coming in here 16 years old and likely to turn 17 the same year and should already be in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

It was stated that they look at attendance weekly, starting as soon as the year starts when they're coming in from 8<sup>th</sup> grade. They review the list of who's missing, and that's a first indicator for them that there may be potential issues. One of the participants revealed that by reviewing their grades, progress reports, and disciplinary histories at mid year, a determination can be made of interventions needed before they may lose them. The assistant principal talks with the guidance counselor to see if there are circumstances in the child's family life that might lead to his dropping out of school. If there are mitigating circumstances and the lack of attendance is a short-term issue is different from a habitual period of attendance that that they're not coming, skipping classes, disciplinary

problems at school, that's when they become "on the radar," so to speak, according to a participant.

Participants reported that they look at their population's over-age report sometime in March, then "we go back in August and look at the over-age reports, not looking specifically at the African American male but looking at everybody, but the American males of African descent are the ones mostly dropping out". The whole administration, guidance and in some cases teachers who refer students but primarily the student affairs office are involved in this process according to some participants:

Ms Underwood

**Probe: How does your school generally identify potential drop-outs?**

Ms Underwood: We look at their attendance, discipline records, and ability level. We look at if they skip classes, attend their classes, do they do their work or do they blow it off? It's pretty easy to identify them, but there are many factors that we look at.

**Probe: How is this done and by whom?**

Ms Underwood: Everybody, just by accessing school records.

**Probe: And when you say "everybody" who do you mean?**

Ms Underwood: They could be teachers, or the administrators or the guidance counselors.

Ms Avery

**Probe: When you generally identify potential dropouts, how is this done, and by whom?**

Mr. Avery: There are some key indicators that we identify, one is attendance. We start looking at attendance rates and that's, again, not targeted specifically at any group. We look at grades, test scores and the student as a whole. AP talks with the guidance counselor to see if there's any issues that might have been going on at home that would not lead you to think that they might drop out. But attendance is the biggest factor,

Mr. Iverson

**Probe: Who is involved in that process?**

Mr. Iverson: The whole administration, guidance and in some cases teachers who refer students but primarily the student affairs office. They identify all students 16 years of age with a 1.75 GPA or below. The three areas we look at are: attendance, discipline, number of credits, and their grade point average and based on that, they meet with the parents prior to school and try to determine the best academic environment is for the child.

Mr. Roberts

**Probe: How do you generally identify potential dropouts?**

Mr. Roberts:

Assistant principals and guidance counselors review the records of every incoming middle school student for their previous performance, attendance, and discipline record to see how they've done in the past that gives them a picture of who's less likely to stick it out through four years of high school

In the summer they identify all students 16 years of age with a 1.75 GPA or

below. The following illustrates the involvement of the staff in the process:

**Probe: When you say "we look at it", what "we" you are talking about?**

Response: Guidance Counselor, Assistant Principal of Curriculum and the Assistant Principal of Student Affairs work as a team.

**Probe: So you sit down twice a year and talk about this?**

Response: It's more than twice a year. They go in and look at that incoming group, at the beginning of the year without waiting. You need to have something in place. When those children come in at 16 and 17 years old and you meet with the kid or the parent, you need to have some kind of plan of action in place I insist that the kid come up with an educational plan of action because I need them to buy into it.

**Probe: ...so you do meet with the parents and the child?**

Response: Oh, you have to.

**Probe: Is this something you do; or is there a requirement?**

Response: This is based on... this is me.

The areas they look at are: attendance, discipline, number of credits, and their grade point average, based on those they meet with the parents prior to school and try to determine the best academic environment for the child.

One of the participants offered an example of using one option with an American male of African descent:

Response: I'll give you a good example of one of my students just recently. This child is 17 years old, there're really [going to] turn 18, should be graduating with the class of 2010, but was barely in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Bright, extremely bright kid, but something happened where in the lower grade the kid was retained, so therefore, as a result of that, this kid had to be almost two years behind. Really bright but the interest didn't seem there because I knew he wasn't going to graduate with his class. So what I recommended his mother do, because his mother was really frustrated because she had taken the kid from one school to

another. In fact, the kid had come to us from another high school not far from here. But [to] this kid it didn't make a difference. And I try to tell parents taking him from one school sometimes just doesn't help, that change must come within because all of us should be providing the same thing, although we do know if different. But anyway, we still saw that he wasn't going to be ready to graduate with the class of 2010. So the mother had begun to take some other route that I felt that the child had expressed was not of interest to him which was going to cause her to really lose the kid. So I encouraged her to come back to the school to sit with me, the guidance counselor, the assistant principal and the student and then presented to her the other options wherein this child could go on and get his high school diploma, which is through our underage, pre-GED high school diploma program where they actually get a state of [State] high school diploma.

**Research Question # 4. What is needed to keep American male students of African descent in school until graduation?**

The participants responses related to the research question, "What is needed to keep American male students of African descent in school until graduation?" fell into themes that were: (1) school centered, (2) community centered, and (3) family centered. Because the theme *school centered* had a large number of responses, sub-themes were identified that impact the administrators and the teachers.

*School Centered*

In the theme addressing what the school administration can do to prevent these students from dropping out of school, the school based leaders reported that the following is needed: more trained counselors are needed to provide counseling for these students; mentoring programs; the visibility of minorities in positions of authority and the hiring of role models that reflect success. One participant noted: "I think that the biggest one would be the early intervention, visibility of minorities in positions, of authority, or in

charge and it doesn't necessarily mean, you know, every other school principal needs to be a minority.”; the leveling of the playing field; expand dropout prevention programs; provide manpower to chase the kids down; create positive way for kids to connect to school by providing attractive courses they are interested in; more vocational schools and vocational programs; year round programs for kids; daytime work for students that counts toward graduation; to teach kids to love themselves, give them the same chances and opportunities; change the perceptions tied to negative stereotypes; smaller counselor case loads for a manageable student-to-counselor ratio that would allow for innovation; put up an information tent at football games maybe give something away free; use money and food as incentives to get them involved with the school; programs that don't require a lot of money; and they need to go the route of science technology.

One participant said that money is pumped into advanced placement and honors classes, and likewise money should be pumped into programs that address the needs of these kids as their reading and math skills are not on grade level. Another said that the administration should find another way to address this, although it might mean working a couple more hours a day, they believed the benefit outweighs the amount of time that would be put into it. Another expressed that educators are needed who can truly meet the needs of today's children and teachers who teach these children should be those who really want to teach. These students need to know if you're no-nonsense and care about what happens to them, children can see through pretend;

One participant believes that quite often legislation is drafted and policy decisions made without input from those involved in dealing with the students on a day-to-day basis. They noted that a wealth of knowledge and information can be gained by just walking around and talking to the teachers that deal with students on a day-to-day basis. They have very good ideas, if you never ask them you never get the answer. People need to understand that all races can contribute to the discussion. They believe that if you want to know what's going on you need to come down to the real world, you need to get input from people to get different people's perspectives. They indicated the need to see what programs are working across the country by visiting other districts and observing techniques and methods that really work with these children. Administrators should be brought in that have made a difference with this population and then model what they have done, stated one participant, and added that they need to see what progressive districts are doing.

It was indicated that the teachers need more intensive reading strategies and better reading programs; more cultural sensitivity training as white middle class teachers need to know how to be more sensitive to other cultures, according to one of the participants. It is believed that a personal relationship is the biggest thing they need to do a better job and it can be the most effective prevention tool that they have in working with these children. Teachers need to stand up and set an example, as students need to know if you're no-nonsense and care about what happens to them, children can see through pretense, stated a participant.

### *Community Centered*

The participants believe that community centered resources can prevent these students from dropping out of school. These include: churches having a larger role in providing after school study space, mentoring programs, and tutoring sessions to assist potential dropouts. It was also expressed that the students need a place to go 24/7 to take online classes to catch-up on work, and to have access to the internet. The Boys Club or other community organization was recommended as a place they can go to sit and work. An advantage was also seen if the community, school, family and society mesh together to do something about the problem of these students dropping out of high school.

### *Family Centered*

Most of the participants' responses indicated that they believed family needs to provide more support for some of these children. They pointed out that some of the children have no support from a family who themselves were not successful in school. Some children don't have summer jobs and no one's home to make them read. The lack of parental involvement was expressed as a concern. More parental involvement was seen as being needed, and at least one participant expresses that parents should be forced to participate with their child's school. The parents were not comfortable with school and they don't want to visit. Many parents have not earned a high school diploma and therefore see little value in their children achieving it. Also the parent may lack certain skills and is in need of help themselves, according to a participant. A first step might be

having a dialogue with them so they can tell us what we're doing wrong, how we can help you.”

### *Critical Race Theory*

In this inquiry, the third theme of CRT, a commitment to social justice, is the theoretical frame that guides this study. Since Ladson-Billings and Tate introduced CRT to education in 1995 it has emerged as a powerful theoretical and analytical framework within the educational research community (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). CRT is an accepted tool that assists educators to understand how race and racism impact upon educational practices and it is a framework for examining how race and racism impact structures, processes and discourse within the context of teacher education while seeking to transform society by identifying, analyzing and eliminating subtle and overt forms of racism in education (Smith, Yosso & Solórzano, 2007). The end goal of this activist aspect of Critical Race Theory is to bring about change that leads to social justice.

In this research, social justice refers to the extent the school-based leaders are working toward creating a school climate where all students receive equitable and fair treatment without regard for their race, sex, gender, or national orientation.

According to critical race scholars, schools possess the potential to oppress and marginalize students on the one hand, and to empower and emancipate them on the other. These scholars note that race can be a factor affecting the dropout rate of American males of African descent and also, how and why these students are treated as they are in U.S. schools. Fine (1991) believes that secondary schools were never designed for low

income and students of color (pg. 31). The structure and culture of public schools tend to reflect white middle-class values and assumptions that may not be synchronized with the values and assumptions of American male students of African descent and their families thus, these students often have difficulty relating to school. Students are expected to conform to the school's requirement rather than the school being responsive to the needs of the students. A relationship exists between school culture and student performance, it was found that the more collaborative and collegial the school's culture the better the student performance, thus resulting in students who are more likely to stay in school (Patterson, Hale, & Stressman, 2007, p. 12).

According to Danielson (2002), educators and school-based leaders must change their attitudes toward American male students of African descent to ensure success in reducing dropout rates. She states that the beliefs of educators influence their behavior toward these students; thus, if educators believe that American male students of African descent are not capable of high academic performance, they may make little or no effort toward providing a quality educational experience that make a difference in the lives of those American male students of African descent they have the responsibility of educating.

Gordon, Gordon and Nembhard (1994) found that the discriminatory practices within our nation's schools target American male students of African descent and negatively impact upon their academic performances. They referenced studies that showed that some teachers in the U.S. have few expectations of American male students

of African descent in general and even lower expectations of those who are non-submissive and independent. According to these researchers, the implementation of school disciplinary policies demonstrates the disproportionate and negative impact these policies have had on these students' opportunities to learn. American male students of African descent respond to these policies by: (1) developing negative attitudes toward their educational experiences; (2) experiencing higher levels of conflict within school; (3) exhibiting anti-authoritarian behavior; and (4) expressing attitudes which negatively affect their academic achievement. While these students may have a lower level of academic self-concept, these same students may not have a lower self-concept in other areas of their lives (Gordon, et. al, 1994). According to Dorn (1996), the dropout problem as a byproduct of dysfunction of school systems and extent of drop out problem is the result of timid public officials and school administrators not being willing to address the issue. Dorn believes that education is the right of all citizens and the dropout rate is evidence that schools are failing to guarantee that certain students' rights are protected (Dorn, 1996).

The school social justice aspect of the perspectives of the school-based leaders is reflected in the participant's statements regarding their being aware of the impact of these boys race, race related or racial concerns.

Ms Underwood

Social conscious makes you recognize majority of those in jails are African-American men. ...It's a social issue, more than academics but we can't preach morality.

Mr. Iverson

I share with them the statistics regarding the numbers of black males in jail.

I try to have them think of their futures because most don't have a clue of their future. ...You have to keep beating and beating. We are making progress this year... I try to make them aware of what's available to them and how their dress and braids can make an impression on people, pants hanging down below your waist. They need to learn the rules to better play the game and then when you get the position folk aren't too concerned about the way you are dressed. ..I work with a couple of groups. .. I referred 10 students for the tutoring program

Mr. Onley

These boys have baggage that others do not. Their struggle, their world is different; different rules. ..These boys' values are different.  
Administrators need to understand and send the same message.  
There needs to be an understanding that doesn't come from books  
People need to see things from the point of view of the Black boys and be willing tell their story. I try to get my teachers to see the human needs of Black children  
Teachers need to be sensitive to the children. ..They need to understand and not react to the language

Ms Avery

As a whole teachers are good with minority students. To say that all of our teachers are perfect, no. This is a Title I school and most children are Title I; Title I is low socio-economic, racial make-up is one third black, one third white and one third Hispanic  
We do have some teachers who should not be in a Title I school. Kids don't listen to me as a white female, they don't feel I came from their world; Kids don't think I understand because of my race. I do not challenge them, but understands their position; experiences in their life that led them to that statement. Once they get to know me, they start to trust. Their perceptions of me and my history does not allow them to see that I am much more aware of who they are and that I have knowledge of their world.

Mr. Irving

A counselor's job is to be an advocate.  
Sometimes this becomes an ethical dilemma when with administration. Two sets of rules exist that govern the different schools.  
Affluent parents have the most power and weight.

Mr. Roberts

Worked with kids from all racial and ethnic backgrounds from very poor to very wealthy  
It [perception] comes from attitudes that people have developed over time.  
People are born with prejudice.  
Everybody has biases to some extent, some more than others.  
Perception exacerbated by pop culture.  
Possibly resentment from establishment people.  
[Majority] Resent other ethnic groups that are not like them being successful.  
There are teachers who say discouraging things to children and are not encouraging and informally help kids make the decision to dropout, out of frustration.

Ms Adkins

Some children are perceived as being thuggish and thugs because of their hair and dress.

Child has to prove they are smart and capable of doing their work

Children fight back when backed into a corner.

Some teachers can be antagonistic

If that child is getting suspended, they're not getting the instruction, and they end up failing classes, and they get further, and further, and further behind and they

If the teacher is not willing to work with them as if they were their child, they give up.

They feel she doesn't care.

There used to be a diversity workshop that the district used to do, not certain if they are still doing it

I talk to students about other's perceptions of them to get them to take more challenging classes.

I encourage them but she was more involved when she was in the classroom.

I stayed with my kids all the time and I would call parents and let them know when something was not going awry, but in this role I don't see them all the time.

When she sees it in the classroom she follows up with them, we address it then.

Ms Unger

We don't listen to youth enough

We need to dialogue with dropouts to find out what's motivating them to leave

Kids say they are sick of the school setting and want out

Schools don't meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century kid

Kids bore easily with ditto and note taking from overhead projector

Studies are needed that track black males from K thru 12

The climate in the school the attitudes of some teachers, attitudes of administrators need to be worked on.

Need diversity training

More faculty that reflect student population is needed

Teachers are needed who reflect the student population

Need strong discipline, creative leadership, people coming in who will create programs

### *Summary*

The data for the research was collected via audio recording and the tapes were transcribed. I presented the participant's responses to the research questions using their own words and thoughts as a frame. The upcoming chapter will provide an analysis of the data and discuss the relevance of the study and its impact on educational leadership.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion and Recommendations

#### *Introduction*

Chapter five provides an overview of the research; gives an interpretation and summary of the findings related to the research questions; discusses the recommendations and implications for social change and ends with my reflections and recommendations for future research.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

This study described the perspectives of eight school-based leaders regarding American male students of African descent; why they drop out of high school; and the role these school-based leaders play in preventing these students from dropping out of high school.

#### *Overview of the Research*

Across the country, thousands of students are leaving schools everyday. At this rate, more than a million students will not graduate with their cohort on time. The impact of these children leaving school transcends just them and their families as their dropping out cost the nation's economy billions of dollars over their lifetimes. If the numbers of students leaving our nation's schools is not addressed over the next decade, it is estimated that 12 million students will eventually drop out at a cost of one trillion dollars to the

nation's economy (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008) The issue of students dropping of school is a crisis that must be addressed.

The dropout problem is complex and the extent of the problem is not completely understood because of the lack of a nationwide consensus definition of dropout. There is little standardization regarding the definition of a dropout because states are allowed to define dropouts and dropout rates as they see fit. Because of minimum federal and state oversight, it is difficult to compare and contrast dropout rates and data accuracy between states. Literature relating to defining school dropouts varies and because the term is not consistently defined, it was difficult to monitor and conduct research on the subject in a systematic manner. The absence of a consensus regarding the best method of reporting dropout data has hampered efforts to standardize a definition of the dropout (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Orfield, Losen & Wald, 2004; Rumberger, 1987; Samuels 2007). For this study, I defined a dropout as a child under the age of 17 who, because he no longer attends his school of record, was removed from the school's roll and is no longer counted as an active student.

When children leave school that decision was not spontaneous but the end result of a slow process of disengagement that began long before high school, for some even as early as the first grade. By the eighth grade, many students have already made the decision to leave school and are just marking time until they actually leave which is many times between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades in high school (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Wulsin,

2008; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Gallagher, 2002; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Smyth & Haltam, 2001; Wolk, 2009).

### *Why Students Dropout*

Children leave school for a variety of reasons that are: (a) behavioral; (b) sociological; (c) political; (d) cultural; and (e) socioeconomic (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Kranick & Hargis, 1998; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Patterson, Hale, & Stressman, 2007; UCLA, 2005; Walden & Kritsonis, 2008; Wehlege, 1989) Other factors are student/family centered while still others are related to the structural components of schools. As most students enter high school they are in their adolescent years when they are still trying to make sense of themselves and the world around them. For many, entering high school can be cultural shock and they have to figure out this foreign world with very different sets of rules. Many students are unsuccessful in navigating the high school terrain and become at risk of dropping out. There are indicators that identify when students are at-risk of dropping out that include their: (1) having issues developing meaningful relationships with adults or peers at school; (2) lacking involvement in school sponsored activities; (3) not developing a sense of belonging to the culture of the high school; (4) losing their sense of identity and motivation if they are enrolled in culturally diverse schools where they are unable to fit into the culture of the school; (5) having attendance, discipline and performance issues in school; (6) low levels of peer academic competition; (7) schools having few experienced or qualified teachers; (8) schools having

limited advanced course selections; (9) poverty level and the level of school racial segregation, and the proportion of non-white students in the school; and (9) attending schools with higher concentration of students with health and emotional problems (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Wulsin, 2008; Carpenter & Ramirez, 2007; Children's Defense Fund 2005; Clark, 2004; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Orfield, Losen, Patterson, Hale, & Stressman, 2007; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Wald & Swanson, 2004; Wolk (2009)

Dropping out of school has serious consequences not only for the student and his family; society pays a price when these children prematurely leave school unprepared to meet the obstacles that lie ahead. When these students leaving school early they forfeit many of the opportunities they would have had had they stayed and graduated. Their marketability in the job market is diminished which impacts their ability to adequately provide for a family. Their opportunity to make a positive statement in their community and any chance for post-secondary education all but vanishes when students dropout of high school before completion (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Rumberger, 1983).

Domestically, students dropping out of schools cost state and local governments billions of dollars in public assistance, unemployment benefits, and emergency medical treatment. When dropouts commit crimes and engage in criminal activity, tax dollars pay for their apprehension, prosecution, conviction and subsequent incarceration (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008; UCLA: The Civil Rights Project, 2005; Weis, Farrar, & Petrie, 1989).

The United States is a world leader in prison incarcerations and American male of African descent, many of whom are high school dropouts, disproportionately fill the prison populations (Carroll, 2008). Comprising six percent of the U.S. population, American males of African descent account for 70 percent of the total prison population (Nealy, 2008). Fifty-two percent of all American males of African descent in their thirties, with prison records, have also dropped out of school at some point in their lives (Orfield).

Certain student cohorts are overrepresented in the dropout statistics which seem to suggest that, nationwide, school districts are not educating all of America's children. One such student cohort, American males of African descent lead the statistics as a majority of these students dropping out instead of completing high school. In comparison to that of their white peers, the dropout rate of American male students of African descent is significantly higher and the graduation rate much lower. Reducing the number of these students who dropout, seem to present an evasive challenge for school districts that are responsible for ensuring that all students receive a quality education.

In 2002, the states in the southern region which is made up of West Virginia, D.C., Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia, Texas, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Florida, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Virginia had the lowest graduation rates in the country and Florida had the lowest graduation rate (38.3 percent) for American male students of African descent in the southern region. Florida's dropout rate of American male students of African descent is disproportionately

high in relation to the overall student population. While more American male students of African descent attend schools in Florida than any other state, their graduation rate is lower than the national average (UCLA, 2005).

In the 2003-2004 school year, Florida had an enrollment of 320,962 American male students of African descent. In that same year, the graduation rate for American male students of African was 31 percent; the graduation rate for White male students was 54 percent, a gap of 23 percent. Data reveal that American male students of African descent enrolled in Florida, New York and Georgia public schools are twice as likely not to graduate with their class. Researchers found a high correlation between racial and social-economical segregated schools and very low graduation rates (Holzman, 2006; The Schott Foundation, 2008).

Researchers have linked poor academic and social performance of American male students of African descent to lack of role models, low self-esteem, hopelessness, productivity dysfunction, and low expectations by the school, communities, and society at large. Despite the discussions that have occurred among educators, researchers, and community leaders regarding the poor performances and failures of these students, little meaningful efforts have been made toward addressing the core issues at a point where it would do the most good (Bailey & Paisley, 2004).

Because a majority of the nation's teachers are white, it is almost certain that American male student of African descent will experience a dominance of white teachers during the course of their academic careers, yet little is known about the effectiveness of

these white teachers teaching these students in the public school setting. Most white teachers are themselves products of schools systems with their own backgrounds and have not had an educational history that was racially diverse. However, background alone fails to adequately prepare middle-class educators to work with children of color. Additional training is needed for these teachers to cope with the misconceptions that often exist within their cultural context. Middle-class white teachers may be ineffective working with American male students of African descent as they may not understand the behavior and banter that is normal for these children and they may misinterpret it for what they perceive as hostility and aggression and they may act/react to these children based on these misinterpreted perceptions. Educators handicap their school systems as a result of what little they know about American students of African descent's development and socialization (Cooper, 2003; Frankenberg, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Murrell, 1994; Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

Despite district pressures to raise standardized test scores and keep the dropout rates low to ensure that students graduate, there is evidence that suggests that school-based practices are responsible for the high dropout rate. In schools systems across the nation, a disproportionate number of American male students of African descent are expelled, suspended, and placed in special educational programs in numbers greater than their white peers (Foster, 1995). The practices of tracking, overcrowded classrooms, mislabeling of minority students, and high expulsion rates have added to the disproportionate dropout rate of minority students (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007;

McKenzie & Scheurick, 2004; Weis et al., 1989). The political, economic, and sociological factors exist within schools are responsible for schools failing to promote and educate students (Murrell, 1994).

School-based leaders determine the school's agenda in terms of programs, policy decisions, school climate, and who goes and who stays. In presenting the school-based leaders' perspectives regarding American male students of African descent and their dropping out of their school, this research examined an important issue that impacts these students and society in general. To that end, this research provided an understanding of the perspectives of eight school-based leaders regarding American male students of African descent and their dropping out of school. In describing how school-based leaders' perceived American male students of African descent and their dropping out of their high school and the role they play in dropout prevention, this research presented the voices of school-based leaders regarding this critical issue. Giving voice to the school-based leaders not only allowed them to share their perspectives of American male students of African descent and their dropping out of school, they were able to tell the story of the efforts they made to address dropout prevention in their own words.

#### *Critical Race Theory: Theoretical Framework*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the theoretical frame that guided this qualitative study. Critical Race Theory scholars provide insight for explaining, not only, how race can be a factor effecting the dropout rate of American males of African descent, but also, how and why these students are treated as they are in U.S. schools. In this inquiry, I

focused on the third theme of CRT, a commitment to social justice, to describe how key school-based leaders perceived American male students of African descent; why they dropped out of their high school; their school's role in dropout prevention; and what they are doing to challenge these students from exiting school early and unprepared for life without a high school education. Using the social justice theme I describe the school-based leaders' beliefs about American male students of African descent; what reasons they believe are responsible for their dropping out of their school and what efforts have they made to prevent these children dropping out of their school.

#### *Interpretation and Summary of the Findings*

The study found that the perspectives of the eight school-based leaders were influenced by their past histories with these students; their personal and acquired knowledge of these students, their families, and their communities; and their personal commitment to work with them. Their previous history with these students seems to have the greatest impact on their present level of support for these students.

The analysis found that seven themes emerged from the eight participants' responses that described their perspectives of American male student of African descent. These were related to: (1) the participants' opinions and personal feelings toward the students; (2) student centered issues; (3) role models: these included athletes, entertainers, and negative figures in the community); (4) family issues and concerns; (5) peers; (6) community and societal concerns; and (7) School and education/teacher related issues

School-based leaders, as a whole, were unable to articulate the drop-out rate of the American males of African descent at their school as they were largely uninformed of the actual dropout rate. Four themes identified related to the efforts the school-based leaders made to prevent this cohort of students from dropping out of high school. These were: (1) direct administrative action; (2) specific dropout prevention programs; (3) improvements needed to address the problem; (4) critiques of present practices.

The school based leaders reported that the process they have in place to identify those students who are at risk of dropping out of school is the most significant role they play in drop-out prevention. Although several of the school-based leaders took it upon themselves to develop and maintain specific programs for at-risk students, there was no centrally controlled program or one specified school-based leader who had the responsibility of coordinating a school-wide drop-out prevention program for American male students of African descent.

The study found that the participants' responses, regarding what they thought necessary to keep American male students of African descent in school until graduation, fell within the following themes: (1) school centered, (2) community centered, and (3) family centered.

The research questions that guided this study allowed me to present the voices of the school-based leaders regarding their perspectives of why American male students of African descent drop out of school. The leaders presented their knowledge about these

students, what efforts were made addressing these students dropping out of school, and their thoughts regarding drop out prevention.

**Research Question #1. What are school-based leaders' perceptions of American male students of African descent and why they drop out of high school?**

Seven themes emerged from the eight participants' responses that described and explained their perceptions of American male students of African descent and why they dropped out of their high school. The seven themes were related to: (1) the participants' opinions and personal feelings toward the students; (2) student centered issues; (3) role models: these included athletes, entertainers, and negative figures in the community); (4) family issues and concerns; (5) peers; (6) community and societal concerns; and (7)

School and education/teacher related issues

*Participant's opinions and personal feelings toward the students*

The degree that the school-based leaders were willing to express their personal opinions and feelings about these students ranged from Ms. Adkins "worry" to Mr. Onley's believing that strong emotions like "love", "compassionate" and "discipline" are appropriate when describing their perspectives. Mr. Iverson believed that he should have been stricter in dealing with these young men when he worked with them in middle school. Ms Avery perception regarding these students comes from her talking to them, living in their communities and attending their churches. She adds that her being married to an American male of African descent adds to her perspective that she considers to be adequate. The perspectives of the school-based leaders demonstrate they see these

students differently to some degree. While they did not have a consensus, their perspectives reflected, at least to some degree, that they had given some thought to these students.

### *Student Centered Issues*

Of the twenty data chunks coded in this category, nine were positive while eleven took a negative slant. Mr. Roberts thought of the students as individuals with a great deal of variety, and believed they were just like any other group of students. He noted that he has worked with a wide variety of racial and socioeconomic groups. Ms Unger recognizes the strength and potential of the American male student of African descent to be a contributor to society if given the opportunities and values from home, school, community, education and the church. Ms Underwood sees some of these students as being motivated but believes more are willing to accept the negative stereo type that believes the community expects of them. Mr. Irving sees them as having a different set of needs, more obstacles to over come, and the system needs to come up with different ways to educate them than the traditional approaches. In this category, some of the participants expressed concerns regarding the students having “a mountain of personal issues”, their “looking for something free”, “their criminal records” and their having baggage that other students do not have.

### *Role Models*

Role models seemed to be the category that the participants had consensus regarding the potential to impact their dropping out of school. Ms Avery noted that the

people that these kids idolize are not always the best role models. Ms Adkins believed the students were falling behind academically due to the lack of positive role models to look up to. Mr. Roberts said the students look up to the rap artist, entertainers, and athletes who make a lot of money.

### *Family Issues and Concerns*

All of the participants' also seemed to have a consensus regarding the impact of the family on the student dropping out of school. All but Mr. Onley believed that either the single parent family, being reared by surrogate parents or older siblings, poor parenting, lack of father figure in the home, young age of the parents assigned the parents primary responsibility for the students dropping out of school. Ms Underwood insisted that mothers' having multiple children with multiple fathers, with no positive male in the home, was a factor in these students dropping out of school. Mr. Onley saw it differently. He stated he would tell parents "...quit beating yourself up There is no question you love your child. And yes I, see your tears I, hear what you are saying you simply didn't have all the answers to all the questions, and that's not your fault".

### *Peers*

Nearly all of the participants also touched on the influence of the student's peers at some point during the interview. Their collective perceptions recognize the influence of peers. Mr. Iverson saw peer pressure as being responsible for fights having youth take the rap for some they did not do rather than "snitch". Ms Underwood believed that student peer pressure made some students "dummy down" instead of excelling

academically. Mr. Onley indicated that peer pressure was a difficult force for students to break.

### *Community and Societal Concerns*

Community and societal concerns were expressed in the responses of most of the participants. Mr. Roberts recognized a public perception of these students that stereotyped them as performing below average as a group. Mr. Iverson saw school as a safe haven from the environment from which they came. He believes that the lessons learned in the environment sometimes conflict with appropriate school behavior. Mr. Irving noted that many students are generally perceived to be at risk. I believe that if you looked at them from a larger perspective, some people who call them “at-risk,” not necessarily a term that I would use, but that is the term that is perceived. Males in general, probably would be considered at-risk in schools. Mr. Onley perspective is that they’re very hungry for knowledge and thirsty for education, but the environmental conflicts impact upon these students.

### *School and Education/Teacher Related Issues*

The impact of school and education/teacher related issues were recognized in a variety of comments. Ms Adkins’ perception was that there is a lack of positive role models that are American male of African descent in the school system. Mr. Onley points to the lack of articulation between elementary to middle, and middle to high school that properly identifies students early on as being a real problem.

All of the participants indicated that their personal knowledge of these students, to some degree, was based in their working with them in the school system. In addition, all of the participants, except one, said their knowledge was based on personal experiences with these students that extended into their homes, family, churches, and neighborhood to some degree. Several of the participants indicated they had lived in neighborhoods that were predominately Americans of African descent or a mixture of races. Some had lived in these neighbors as a result of their family's socio-economic status. One of the participants indicated that they had married an American of African decent, lives in that community and attends a church in that community as a result of the marriage. Another participant said that he had visited the community and had gone to their churches only on special occasions when he had been invited. One participant revealed that her knowledge of these students was limited to her school contacts as a guidance counselor. The following exchange illustrates this:

Question - How did you acquire your knowledge of these students, their lives, their histories, communities, etc.?

Ms Underwood - Through personal experience being a high school guidance counselor in an inner city school with a majority population that [is] African Americans, I see it everyday.

**Probe; Have you had the opportunity to go into their homes, their churches and their communities?**

Ms Underwood - No.

**Probe: So your primary contact has been in school?**

Ms Underwood - In school, absolutely.

The perspectives of the school-based leaders are reflected in their individual backgrounds and the experiences they have had with American male students of African

descent. Six of the participants indicated that they live or have lived in neighbors with Americans of African descent. Seven have had some involvement in the communities of these students. All of the participants have worked with these students. The participants have worked in various capacities in the educational system and one indicated he worked in a Department of Juvenile Justice facility. Only one of the participants' experiences

Figure 5.1 How Perspectives of School Based-Leaders Were Gained

<u>Lived in neighborhood:</u>	<u>Community experience</u>	<u>Work Experience</u>
Mr. Irving	Mr. Irving	Mr. Irving
Mr. Onley	Mr. Onley	Mr. Onley
Ms Adkins	Ms Adkins	Ms Adkins
Ms Unger	Ms Unger	Ms Unger
Ms Avery	Ms Avery	Ms Avery
Mr. Iverson	Mr. Iverson	Mr. Iverson
	Mr. Roberts	Mr. Roberts
		Ms. Underwood

are limited to the work place. Ms Underwood said her experiences are limited to school.

**Research Question #2. Are the school-based leaders aware of the dropout rate of American male students of African descent? What efforts are being made to address these students dropping out of high school?**

None of the school based leaders knew the exact dropout figure for their school. When answering the specific question “Are you aware of the dropout rate of American males of African descent in your school?” They responded as follows:

Mr. Iverson: “Not at this point

**Probe: If you had to gauge [the dropout rate] would you say it’s high, medium, or low?**

Mr. Iverson: I would say based on our population it’s high.

Mr. Irving: The number? Probably not, I couldn't quote the number, no.

**Probe: If you generally, had to say, would you say that it's low, medium, or high?**

Mr. Irving: I'd probably go for medium at this point. But it might be leaning towards high, that's an outside possibility.

Mr. Onley: That has been a real focal point. Matter of fact, I went to a meeting last week, where the region, the state is redefining what a true dropout is. And so, probably my word is a just little bit keener right now that someone else's. But [yes], I am very familiar with the dropout rate.

**Probe: Are you aware if it's high, low, medium?**

Mr. Onley: I can only go with what I heard recently. Our dropout rate is right in the mean of the district. Which to me is extremely good, because we are not at risk students. So, to me we must be doing something right. If it was at the lower quartile, you know when I look at [school] dropout rate versus other inner city at risk schools. We got them beat.

Mr. Roberts:

I'm aware that the dropout rate is high among that group compared to some other groups. I don't know the exact number at this point.

Ms Adkins: I don't have any exact numbers in my school, I know nationwide it's extremely high.

**Probe: If you had to characterize the dropout rate at your school, would you say it's low, medium, or high?**

Ms Adkins: For my school, I would say low.

Ms Avery: Yes, I am, and I can't tell you what it is right now... but we do look at it especially since our dropout rate as a whole is now tied to our school grade. It's becoming very, very important – whether they're African-American or not, every dropout is becoming important.

Ms Underwood: I can't give you what the numbers are. But I know it's a social and academic concern.

Ms Unger: I am. At this very moment, in terms of the percentage, I definitely can't say above a ten. I'm having to quote '08-'09 school year, it's definitely below 10% at this school. Because I must say the one thing we do is put forth every effort we can possibly can to keep our youth. Not only the African American male, the emphasis on [them] because that's who we loose that's the greatest population that tends...

Figure 5.2 Knowledge of their School's Dropout Rate

<u>High</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>Low</u>	<u>Not Known</u>
Mr. Iverson (guessed)	Mr. Irving (guessed)	Ms Adkins (guessed)	Mr. Iverson Mr. Roberts Ms Adkins Ms Avery Ms Underwood

Mr. Irving guessed that the dropout rate was medium leaning toward high. Mr. Mr. Onley: stated he was familiar with the dropout rate because he was recently at a meeting where the region, the state was redefining dropouts and this school's dropout rate is at the mean of the district. Several of the school-based leaders indicated they were aware of the dropout rate and even noted that they did talk about it as a group. It seems that their discussions of the dropout rate did not include the specific figures for the American males of African descent.

Four themes were identified in the participants' responses that were related to the efforts made to address American male students of African descent dropping out of high school. The themes were not found in all of the participants' responses but are broad enough to be inclusive in a majority of their responses. The themes found in the responses were: (1) direct administrative action; (2) specific dropout prevention programs; (3) improvements needed to address the problem; (4) critiques of present practices.

### *Direct administrative action*

The administration was seen as taking a proactive role by “talking about it quite a bit”; identifying potential dropouts, providing mentoring and counseling; meeting with them and their parents to talk about their options; and having them sign a behavioral agreement when warranted. Two of the administrators created mentoring programs, one for boys and the other for girls. Different clubs were created to enhance self esteem and peer facilitation, they scheduled motivational speakers to talk with students to inspire them, give them a sense of hope and the opportunity to see successful individuals. One administrator is working toward securing a bus to take students home who participate in the afterschool tutoring program. The administration has created a policy that requires that students with attendance or discipline issues to automatically go through guidance before they register. The principal said that all administrators will be asked to work with students who are potential dropouts by meeting with them once a month, reviewing bad grades, building relationships and being there to assist them.

A participant pointed out that the school targets at-risk students in general and didn't know if the response to American males of African descent was any different. Another participant seems to think the emphasis is on the American male students of African descent because “they are the ones who mostly drop out”.

Several of these school-based administrators are involved in personal efforts to address students dropping out of school. The administrators have taken it upon themselves to create mentoring programs that address boy and girl. One of the

administrators indicated at risk youth were targeted and not necessarily American male students of African the descent, another indicated that the programs benefited these specific youth because they were mostly the ones who dropped out.

*Specific dropout prevention programs;*

The participants stated that *specific dropout prevention programs* include: (1) disciplinary programs inclusive of In School Suspension (ISS), Out of School Suspension (OSS), and Alternative to Out of School Suspension (ATOSS); (2) A tutoring program in place that targets male students based on attendance, grades, and grade point average; (3) Gear Up Program is a grant that targets minority students and provide afterschool tutoring programs, community service, plus other things. This program and Project Shine are for all minority students; (4) Credit Recovery that allows students to make up credits at a quicker pace on line; (5) Impact Program is for children at-risk of not graduating and are a year behind. The students attend full time and are given a chance to make up their classes so that they can graduate on time with their class. According to the participant, Impact is not a dropout prevention program but is under the umbrella; (6) Educational Talent Search Program (CROP) that targets at-risk youth to help them become successful in completing high school; (7) [State] Virtual; (8) The Extended Learning Program allows students to go to the Media Center for online classes and receive after school tutoring in any subject; and (9) Under-age GED Program. One participant stated they are working on creating an afterschool adult education program that would allow the students to make up classes they failed in the first semester.

*Improvements needed to address the problem*

That school-based leaders have not followed through with plans to address dropouts was seen as an area of concern. A participant said that they wanted to do something about the problem and strategies are developed, however, there was no follow through. The reason given was they just got worn down as the year progressed because it was hard to maintain the momentum due to the many issues going on that the focus shifted elsewhere. It was commented that the right things need to be done and strong leadership is needed to make the system change. One participant indicated that the administration is not doing enough but they are doing what they could.

*Critique of present practices.*

The participant responses were open in the critique of present practices to address these students dropping out of school. It was stated that they talk about the issue but a plan of action is not developed to address the problem. One participant noted that the decision makers “do not listen to those in the trenches because they veto plans that require work on their part may have problems with the community because they don’t want to upset parents.” One participant said that the school systems “will never change unless administrators have a belief system that wants to make the changes.” It was expressed that not all of the school-based leaders recognized the importance of addressing dropouts or dealing with dropout prevention. One believed that more could be done and the leadership needs to take more of an active role. One comment was that it was not known if anything is being done to enhance student’s needs to connect to school.

Still another said that they would like to say that something is being done but can't think of anything specific. Participants stated that a male at-risk group is run by a male administrator of African descent and a female at-risk group is run by an American female of African descent on their own initiative. One of the participants indicated that they thought the biggest obstacle was getting the school to actually incorporate some of the programs that they thought would be more beneficial to the students.

The data reveal that the school-based leaders are not aware of the actual dropout rates of the Americans of African descent in that school. When they were asked to guess the rates they provided different answers. They indicated that they talk about the dropout rates; however, they seem to be doing so without actual numbers that indicate the extent of the problem. They also appear to be a lack of consensus is regarding the extent of the school-based leader's efforts to address these students dropping out of school. They recognize the efforts of certain individuals but they don't agree that the problem is being addressed as a team. They noted that they talked about the problem but nothing was done to address it as a unit. One participant indicated that the administrators would be required this year to work with a certain number of students on a regular basis as a means of keeping students in school.

**Research Question # 3. What role has school-based leaders played in preventing American male students of African descent from dropping out of school?**

The school based leaders believe that the most significant role they play in prevention is the process they have in place to identify those students who are at-risk of

dropping out of high school. All of the participants seemed to be aware and capable of identifying the procedures they used that identified those students coming from middle school and those in their school who were at-risk and potential dropouts. The participants stated that the assistant principals and guidance counselors review the records of every incoming middle school student, in the summer, focusing on their previous academic performance (that includes their test scores and GPA), their attendance, and discipline records. It was pointed out that they don't specifically target any one group of students but the majority of the over-aged population coming from the eighth grade that should have been in high school two years earlier are American males of African descent. The areas that look at are: attendance, discipline, number of credits, and grade point average. They believe that these factors provide insight into the potential of a student becoming a dropout.

**Research Question # 4. What is needed to keep American male students of African descent in school until graduation?**

The participants identified three themes in addressing what is needed to keep American male students of African descent in school until graduation. These themes were: (1) school centered, (2) community centered, and (3) family centered.

*School Centered*

The participants suggested that school administrators can do the following to prevent these students from dropping out of school: increase the number of trained counselors to provide counseling for these students; ; have smaller counselor case loads

for a manageable student-to-counselor ratio that would allow for innovation; increase mentoring programs in the school; increase the visibility of minority males in positions of authority; hire more minorities as role models that reflect success; programs that provide early intervention with families to level the playing field; expand dropout prevention programs; provide manpower to chase the kids down who aren't in school; create positive ways for students to connect to school by providing attractive courses that interest them; create more vocational schools and vocational programs; institute year round programs for students; daytime work programs for students that allow them to make money and earn credits that counts toward graduation; teach students to love themselves and give them the same chances and opportunities that are available for other students; change the educators perceptions that are tied to negative stereotypes of these children; put up information tents at football games and give something away free in order to increase participation; use money and food as incentives to get them involved with the school; institute programs that don't require a lot of money; and schools need to go the route of science technology.

One participant pointed out that “schools pump money into advanced placement and honors classes”, and they believe that money should be pumped into programs that address the needs of at-risk students as their reading and math skills are not on grade level. Another participant added that the administration should find another way to address students dropping out even if it might mean their working a couple more hours a day if the benefit outweighs the amount of time they would be put into it. Another

expressed that educators are needed who can truly meet the needs of today's children and teachers who teach these children should be those who really want to teach. These students need to know if you're no-nonsense and care about what happens to them, children can see through pretend.

The participants stated that teachers need more intensive reading strategies and better reading programs. Also; more cultural sensitivity training is needed for teachers as white middle class teachers need to know how to be more sensitive to other cultures. It is believed that teaching developing a personal relationship with these students is the biggest thing they need to do a better job. This relationship can be the most effective prevention tool that they have in working with these children. It is believed that teachers need to stand up and set an example, as students need to know if you're no-nonsense and care about what happens to them, children can see through pretend.

#### *Community Centered*

The participants believes that community centered resources can prevent these students from dropping out of school. These include: churches having a larger role in providing after school study space, mentoring programs, and tutoring sessions to assist potential dropouts. It was also expressed that the students need a place to go 24/7 to take online classes to catch-up on work, and to have access to the internet. The Boys Club or other community organization was recommended as a place they can go to sit and work. An advantage was also seen if the community, school, family and society mesh together to do something about the problem.

### *Family Centered*

The participants saw family support as being essential but some of these children have no support from a family who themselves may not have experienced success in school. In the summer, some children don't have summer jobs and there's no one's home to make them read. More parental involvement with the student in school is needed and at least one participant expresses that recommendation that parents should be forced to participate with their child's school. It was noted that some parents were uncomfortable with school and they don't want to visit. This may be because some parents have not completed high school and therefore see little value in their children completing high school. It was also pointed out that the parent may lack certain skills and is in need of help themselves, according to a participant. A first step might be having a dialogue with them so they can tell us what we're doing wrong, how we can help you."

### *Recommendations for Social Change*

In this inquiry, the third theme of CRT, a commitment to social justice, is the theoretical frame that guides this study. For this research, I defined social justice as the extent to which the school-based leaders are working toward creating a school climate where all students receive equitable and fair treatment without regard for their race, sex, gender, or national orientation.

The school-based leaders' attitude is a factor in the success or failure of American male students of African descent in the school setting. The discriminatory practices

within our nation's schools target American male students of African descent and negatively impact upon their academic performances.

Gordon, et, al (1994) referenced studies that showed that some teachers in the U.S. have few expectations of American male students of African descent in general and even lower expectations of those who are non-submissive and independent. According to these researchers, the implementation of school disciplinary policies demonstrates the disproportionate and negative impact these policies have had on these students' opportunities to learn. American male students of African descent respond to these policies by: (1) developing negative attitudes toward their educational experiences; (2) experiencing higher levels of conflict within school; (3) exhibiting anti-authoritarian behavior; and (4) expressing attitudes which negatively affect their academic achievement. While these students may have a lower level of academic self-concept, these same students may not have a lower self-concept in other areas of their lives (Gordon, et. al, 1994). According to Dorn (1996), the dropout problem as a byproduct of dysfunction of school systems and extent of drop out problem is the result of timid public officials and school administrators not being willing to address the issue. Dorn believes that education is the right of all citizens and the dropout rate is evidence that schools are failing to guarantee that certain students' rights are protected (Dorn, 1996).

The social justice aspect of the perspectives of the school-based leaders is reflected in the participant's statements regarding their being aware of the impact of these boys race, race related or racial concerns. Ms Avery believes that "as a whole, teachers are

good with minority students”, but then she added “to say that all of our teachers are perfect, no” and that there are some teachers “who should not be in Title I schools”, indicates to me that the issues some teachers are with some students may be based on race. She notes that the school is Title I which has a percentage of low socio-economic students. She also noted that the racial make-up is one third black, one third white and one third Hispanic. Being a white female, causes students to question her understanding of them and their world, but once the student gets to know her then they start to trust her. It appears that her perceptions allow her to address the issue of race because of her understanding and knowledge of these students and who they are.

Ms Underwood believes that her social conscious allows her to recognize the relevance of the numbers of Americans of African descent who are incarcerated. Her position that this is a social issue, more than academics, and that they “we can’t preach morality” seem to take her off the hook of having a responsibility to deal with social issues with these students. It appears that her willingness to take her self out of the equation allows her to see the problem from the safe vantage point of an outsider.

Mr. Iverson shares the jail statistics with these students and involves himself with trying to get them to vision their futures consistently and said that he has made progress. He also stated that he has talked with them regarding the consequences of the way they looked and presented themselves when they apply for jobs. He focuses on their hairstyle and dress. He works with “a couple of groups and has referred 10 students for the tutoring program.

Mr. Onley recognizes that these boys are different because of the “baggage” and their unique struggles in the world and they have different rules and values. He is of the opinion that the administration needs to have an understanding of these boys and send a consistent message. He believes people need to understand these boys “point of view” and be willing to tell their story. He works with the teachers to see the human side of these boys and be sensitive to the world as they see it and not over react to the boy’s language. Mr. Irving, Hispanic male, sees his position as being an advocate for the students. This sometimes puts him at odds with the administration as he sees the job responsibilities of the positions as presenting what he refers to as “an ethical dilemma”. He sees the administration’s responsibility to advocate for the school and his responsibility to advocate for the students as being at the center of the dilemma. He also believes that there are two sets of rules that exist in the school. He notes that the affluent parents have the most power and weight.

Mr. Roberts noted that he has worked with students from all racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds successfully. He stated that people’s perceptions come from attitudes that people have developed over a period of time. He recognizes that people are born with prejudices and everyone has biases, to some extent, but some more than others. He stated that some of the perception that the majority of population has developed about American male students of African descent comes from pop-culture. He also notes that there may be some resentment from “established people” regarding the

success of ethnic groups. He also indicated that teachers may say some discouraging things to students that are not encouraging; and students may drop out frustrated.

Ms Adkins recognizes that some children are perceived by teachers as being “thuggish and thugs” because of their hairstyle and their manner of dress. She talks to students about other’s perceptions of them and because of the hair and dress American male students of African descent have to prove that they are smart and capable of completing their work. She noted that some teachers can be antagonistic which causes the students to fight back when backed into a corner and the end result is that the child is suspended which means that he is not getting the instruction he needs and he winds up failing the class and getting further and further behind. She added that if the teacher is not willing to work with the American male students of African descent as though he was her child, the child gives up because he feels the teacher does not care about him.

She believes that the climate in the school, the attitudes of some teachers and of some administrators need to be worked on. Reportedly, diversity training is needed, and she added that the district offered diversity workshops, at one time, to address some of the issues. She is uncertain if these workshops are currently being offered.

According to Ms Unger she takes a proactive role in working with these students and talks with them and encourages them to take challenging classes. Ms Unger thinks that “we don’t listen to use enough, and we need to dialogue with dropouts to find out what’s motivating them to leave.”

The school-based leaders' responses varied. Most recognized that the American male students of African descent did have problems in the school setting. Several of the participants indicated that their dress and hairstyles was an issue for others. Often the student had to prove that he was smart and capable of satisfactory academic performance. It seemed that how the students were perceived by other is an issue more so that the student themselves. In recommending that the staff needs diversity training leads me to believe that staff dealing with these boys may be an issue. Mr. Onley seems to echo this when he talked about his working with the teachers to see these boys as they are with their unique set of issues. Most of the participants seem to address these boys from a social justice perspective in that they were proactive and demonstrated their working with these in a fair and consistent manner. This is not to say that any of the participants were not, but in certain participants their advocacy for social justice came across very strong in the interviews.

Teachers and school-based administrators must be sensitive to the emotional and development needs of their American male students of African descent. White teachers must be aware of the potential impact that a negative presence can have on the psyche of American male students of African descent (Ladson-Billings, 2000). They should be cognizant of the potential harm that it can have especially to those young Black male students in the early grades and make all possible efforts to create environments that are conducive to their learning. If teachers work to provide the positive experiences for

American male students of African descent as they began their school careers, these students will stay in schools longer.

### *Recommendations*

The school-based leaders at the high school, like their counterparts across the country, are charged with the responsibility of educating all of the children with their preview. And like their counterparts, nationwide, they feel they are working toward that end. This research allowed me to enter their school and interview eight of the school-based leaders to describe their perspectives American male students of African descent, why they drop out of their high school and their role in preventing these students from leaving school early unprepared for post high school life. The interviews produced data that gave me valuable insight into their perspectives, thoughts and the efforts they made and are making to address this very critical problem. As a result of my research there are several recommendation that I am making that I hope will add to the work they are doing.

The data revealed that only one of the school based leaders knew the school's dropout rate of the American male students of African descent. One of the protocol questions asked about their being aware of their dropout rate. Each said they were aware but each had a different answer. When I asked them to make a guess about the dropout rate, their answers varied. While one of the participants offered to get it to me because she did not want to give a wrong figure, no one gave an actual figure. One participant indicated that he had gone to a meeting and knew that the dropout rate was above the medium for the district. I viewed this as a correct answer. They indicated that they talked

about the dropout rate. I think that not just the school based leaders, but the entire school family should know what the dropout rates are for all categories of students. Knowing the dropout rate can be a beginning point for action for the administration team to address this problem.

The data showed that several of the school-based leaders have taken it upon themselves to start programs to work with at-risk children. The principal indicated that a program should begin where teachers who apply for performance pay and the school based-leaders will be required to work with eight at-risk students which should greatly expand the number of students that will have frequently contact with some adult.

In Chapter 4 the participants' recommendations for the type of services they think are needed are listed. The recommendations were made for the school, community and family. The recommendation that I believe is appropriate at this point is for the school to take the lead to convene representatives from each of those areas plus the courts, social services and churches and plan to comprehensively address the dropout rate of American males of African descent.

#### *Implications for Practice*

Bailey and Paisley (2004) found that although educators, researchers, and community leaders have discussed the poor performances and failures of these students, with a few exceptions, little meaningful efforts have been made toward addressing the core issues at a point where it would do the most good (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). The school- based leaders, in this research, revealed they are concerned about the dropout

rates of American male students of African descent and want to do something about it. They said that they have talked about it. But have not followed through by planning, developing specific strategies to address the issue as a team. One reason given was as the school progresses, it's difficult to maintain a momentum and because of the many issues going on, the focus shifted elsewhere. If the school-based leaders are to expect success in addressing the dropout problem in their school, they must show a willingness or ability to take initiatives toward finding solutions to ensure the success of any school program (Kammoun, 1991). Setting specific times for the team to meet to strategize and assign responsibility for implementation would allow them to advance beyond the talking stage.

Many students decide by the eight grade to leave school but they just mark time until they finally leave (Wolk, 2009); which is between the 10th and 12th grades in high school (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Structural components in schools are seen being responsible for students leaving school (Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Hale, & Stressman, 2007; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Wulsin, 2008; Carpenter & Ramirez, 2007; and Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson (2007). This research found that the school-based leaders identify similar factors that put children at risk of leaving school early. They agree that attendance, grade point average, number of credits earned, discipline history and their feeling connected to the school are indicators of a student's success or failure in school.

Some of the participants said that funds could be found for programs for honors and gifted children, then why not find funds and create programs for the at-risk student? It seems that the team approach works well and there were comments regarding new staff

that were hired and possibly new ideas are forthcoming. I think that the school, the community, the at-risk, the potential at-risk and the dropout would benefit from a team effort to plan programs, with the individuals assigned the responsibility of implementation of the strategies.

Reeves (2006) found student failure can be reversed when school-based leaders plan for success through: (1) early, frequent and decisive intervention; (2) personal connection with struggling students; (3) proactive parental connections; (4) personal and electronic tutoring; (5) managing student choices with decisive curriculum interventions; and (6) in-school assistance (Reeves, 2006).

### *Implications for Training*

Political, economic, and sociological factors within schools are responsible for schools failing to promote and educate students because educators handicap their school systems as a result of what little they know about American students of African descent's development and socialization.

Without additional training to cope with the misconceptions that often exists within their cultural context, middle-class white teachers may be ineffective working with American male students of African descent (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Murrell, 1994; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). White teachers need to understand what is normal behavior for these children as most have not had a racially diverse educational history (Frankenberg, 2006). It was reported that the school district had offered diversity training for educators in the past. Given the recognition of the nature of inherent bias in

individuals in general; some teachers having issues dealing with the hair, dress and language of American males of African descent; and that some relation concerns with these students, more of this type of training is needed.

Danielson (2002) believes that educators' must change their attitudes toward American male students of African descent as their beliefs influence their behavior toward these students. If educators believe that American male students of African descent are incapable of performing at higher academic levels and they accept this belief as fact they will not make an effort toward providing a quality educational experience that will surely make a difference in the lives of those American male students of African descent they have the responsibility of educating. If teachers work to provide the positive experiences for American male students of African descent as they began their school careers, these students will stay.

*Recommendation for future study*

This research described the perspectives eight school-based leaders of American male students of African descent, why they drop out of their high school, their role in dropout prevention, and what efforts were made to prevent these students from leaving school early unprepared for post high school life. The school district required that only volunteers could participate in the study. Of the initial list of individuals that I preferred, only nine volunteered and of the nine one person declined after they found out the interview would be audio-recorded. While the interviews provided rich descriptions from the eight volunteer participants, I can only imagine how much the data would have been

enhanced if the study had included all of the school-based leaders who are involved in any aspect of dropout prevention in the school. The eight perspectives reflected the perceptions of eight very different and unique individuals with differences spanned the spectrum of age, ethnicity, experiences, and sex. In the future, a similar study that can controls for the participants would add to the knowledge in terms of an examination of the perspectives of different groups. The researcher could answer the question if the race or sex of the school based leader had an impact on the dropout rate of American males of African descent.

### *Epilogue*

This research examined the perspectives of eight school-based leaders regarding American males of African descent; these students dropping out of school; and what efforts the school-based leaders made to prevent these students from dropping out of school. At the onset of the research I was excited about the research topic and my hope was to produce findings that would assist the efforts to prevent American male students of African descent from dropping out of school unprepared to meet the demands a life without a high school education. The focus of this research was to examine what I believed to be an important problem from the perspectives of school-based leaders who are in a position to initiate solutions and prevent these students from dropping out of high school..

The research design involved in my interviewing school based leaders using a fixed protocol. Data for the analysis was collected from the transcripts of the interviews

and the reflective journal I maintained. In retrospect, I believe the design of this qualitative study was adequate, however, one issue I encountered had an impact on both the collection of data and the subsequent analysis. As a condition for granting approval of the study, the school district required that I only use volunteer participants for the study. In the planning stage, I met with the principal and identified fifteen potential people that appeared to have had some role in working with at risk students in the school. Because of the volunteer restriction, only nine people originally volunteered to participate in the study. Later, as the interview was about to start, one person withdrew their participation when they learned the interview would be audio-recorded; this left the remaining eight study participants. It is my belief that if all fifteen individuals, that were originally identified, had participated in the study, the additional data sources would have enriched the analysis and findings. The ninth volunteer, who decided not to participate, had been recommended by several individuals because of this person's extensive work with at-risk populations in the school. The individual did not offer other any reason for not wanting to participate and I respected that decision to not anticipate. I can not help but think that the knowledge this person possessed would have added to the research database. I believe that by the school district's restriction of my using only volunteers for this study not only restricted the number of potential participants that could have been available, it also impacted amount of data that could have been collected from each of the potential participants.

Although this research took on a complex topic in examining the perspectives of the eight school-based leaders regarding American males of African descent, the data collected in the interviews and from the reflective journal allowed me to gain insights into their perspectives of these students. The school-based leaders themselves were very forthright with their responses and in several cases, their passion and commitment to working with these young men were clearly discernible. At the onset of each interview I ensured the participants complete anonymity and I was willing to go to any length to insure that with each of the participants.

Being aware of the potential for researcher bias in qualitative research, I wanted to limit my biases to the extent that I could. When I began the interviews, my intent was to: (1) maintain an open minded stance where I would not interfere with the flow of information from the participants during the interview; (2) be cognizant of my biases and try not to allow them to influence the participant's responses; and (3) not interject my prior knowledge, thoughts, and feelings during the interviews in such a manner that would cause any of the participants to change, hesitate to answer, or reconsider any of their responses:

I approached the interviews continually reminding myself that I did not know this person. I was careful to listen to the participants words and when I had questions, I would explore them with the participants to check out the accuracy of my questions. My thinking was of the importance of the accuracy of the participants' responses to the questions and my follow-up probes. I placed value on the individual and the individual's

point of view. As I conducted the interviews, I encouraged participant responses by giving them time to answer the questions and the follow-up probes. The interviews were approached with my realizing that there were no right or wrong answers when the participants talked about their own perspectives and I must respect their opinions without arguing or debating their perspectives.

Through the years, it has been critical for me to work toward knowing myself and recognizing my own “hot button” issues through guided experiential training that expanded my knowledge, skills, and ability to address these interpersonal issues. In my training as a social worker and with the training offered by the state of Virginia, I spent years working on my personal growth. Much of this training involved my addressing my biases as they influenced my interactions with people. I have received training as a family counselor, mediator, and supervisor. As a result of the years of training I received, I am aware of my biases and how they impact me and my decision-making processes.

During the course of the interviews, I was aware of an instance that my bias would have impacted my responses had I not consciously address the issue. It occurred when one of the participants began making judgments about the students and their mothers “having a lot of babies by a lot of different men”. I permitted the participant to discuss her thoughts while not injecting my thoughts or making value judgments about her statements.

At the end of the interviews, I was overall pleased with the data that I obtained and my October 2, 2009, reflective journal entry made note of the following observations:

... all of the participants were very different. They were different in who they were, their backgrounds, their degrees of understanding, their histories with this group of students and they were different in how they absorbed and regurgitated information about the students.

I seemed to be taken by the differences of the individual participants as they related their perceptions of the students and their dropping out of their school. As I analyzed the transcripts I came to understand that these differences may be the difference in time so the participants' perspectives of these American male students of African descent.

For several of the participants my notes in the reflective journal referred to them as being, "passionate", "very concerned about these students", "very knowledgeable" and "compassionate". In several of the participants then appeared to be a very strong sense of social justice in dealing with these young men.

As a result of my completing this research, my respect for qualitative research and the process of conducting a qualitative research study was greatly enhanced. I think that my willingness to ensure the accuracy of the database (the accuracy of the transcriptions) permitted me to accurately capture the words of the participants thus, impacting the data analysis. The knowledge that I gained for the process of transcribing audio-tapes was invaluable. As a by-product, I developed a fascination of the difference between ordinary spoken conversation and the transcription of ordinary conversation. The difference is

remarkable and as a result, my verbal, listening, and transcription skills were increased as a result of this research.

Because of my own life experiences I am aware that climbing life's mountain, as an American male of African descent, is a steep, difficult, treacherous, complex, and sometimes deadly proposition. One reason for this reality is that the myriad of consequences and sanctions that I, and others like me, face are simply not availed on others in this society. CRT indicates that those same factors that exist in society are responsible for the high dropout rates of American males of African descent in schools. Researchers (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Danielson, 2002) indicated that the high rate of American male students of African descent dropping out of school can be explained by looking at factors within schools. It does matter how these children are seen in schools. This research has shown me that there are passionate, compassionate, and caring school-based leaders whose perspectives of American male students of African descent are directly related to their, knowledge, experience, and histories with these students

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## Appendices

## Appendix A

### Sample of an Interview Transcription

Transcription Mr. Roberts

*Researcher* - This is the initial interview for my dissertation research. I am meeting with the [School Based-Leader] who is being coded [MR. ROBERTS]. We've reviewed the consent to participate in the research form. He understands the purpose of the research, the study procedures and he's been given a copy of the district's approval and he has signed the consent form saying that he agrees. Do you have any questions regarding the consent form at this point?

**MR. ROBERTS- No**

*Researcher* - Thank you very much. Okay. We are beginning the interview. The first question is, "What are your perceptions of American male students of African descent and how did you acquire your knowledge of these students their lives, histories, communities, churches etc.

**MR. ROBERTS - Well it's difficult to describe perceptions of a group that large without thinking of individuals. I think that my perception of that group as a total group would be that there is a great deal of variety, there's a great deal of difference between individuals within the group just like any other group. Most of the knowledge I've acquired of male students of African descent were from my work as a school teacher and school administrator. I've worked with kids from all backgrounds from all racial and ethnic groups, from all kinds of families, from very poor to very wealthy families, and schools and I don't think there is one characteristic that you can generally apply to every single member of that group. ... I think that they vary as individuals just like any other group. I know that there's a public perception that as a group those students that fit into that category perform less well, overall, as a group on standardized tests and in school than some other groups that you can pinpoint. I think that's an individual thing that has to be looked at for individual students.**

*Researcher* - Where do you think that perception came from, when people talk about that group, what you think that perception came from?

**MR. ROBERTS - Oh, I think it comes from a lot of things, it comes from the media, it comes from attitudes that people have developed over time, I mean, people are born, or have been born... mostly with at least prejudice, biases everybody has them I think to some extent, some more than others. I think that perception is perpetrated perhaps or exacerbated by pop culture somehow I think there is a celebration of the, the gangster element in movies, and music, and the media in general among young**

people and I think there is kind of like young people at all times rebel against authority including my own generation I think that the rebellion that takes place now are the media rebellion anyway is often associated with young black males. They are the most popular music people now and pop music is on radio stations and all that kind of thing. The rap artist and so forth, athletes there's a very small population of young black men who make a lot of money through athletics or through entertainment that I think kids look up to and I think possibly there is a resentment factor that exist from some longer standing, uh, establishment people. Other people in other racial ethnic groups who resent other people that are not like them being successful.

*Researcher* – Okay, you say that you go back from your teaching days to your administration days, about how many years have you been associated...or worked with these young men?

**MR. ROBERTS** -31 years.

*Researcher* - Have you attended any of their churches, community functions?

**MR. ROBERTS** – Yes, we go at least once, maybe twice, three times a year to a back-to-school activity that take place in some of the local community churches, I've been doing that since I was at [names a school] 20 years ago. We've also attended some things, that we've been to some events we've been invited to by organizations, because as [names his position] we get invited to a lot of things and I try to attend those but I don't I don't attend regularly any churches on Sunday morning other than my own.

*Researcher* – Okay. Are you aware of the drop out rate of American males of African descent in your school?

**MR. ROBERTS** - Oh I'm aware that the dropout rate is high among that group compared to some other groups. I don't know the exact number at this point.

*Researcher* - How do you generally identify potential dropouts?

**MR. ROBERTS** - We looked every student who comes in here from a middle school, and analyze their previous performance, analyze their attendance, look at their discipline records [to] see how they've done in the past and we identify them that way. We look at attendance, discipline, and academic performance that gives you certainly a picture of a kid who's less likely to stick it out through four years of high school and maybe another four years.

*Researcher* - Alright, who does that? Who is assigned to that?

**MR. ROBERTS** –Actually, the person who does the most of it is the assistant principle of curriculum and the guidance counselors. But we all take part in that. Our student affairs office has three assistant principals they take a look at kids coming in from the middle school. So really every member in the administration to a varying degree and the guidance counselors.

*Researcher* – Okay. What are your thoughts regarding the dropout rate of these young students?

**MR. ROBERTS** - Well it's too high. Obviously, its tragic that so many of them that are going to be dropouts I think have at least and now own minds if they haven't consciously made that decision they've almost given up by the time they get to high school. If their grades haven't been where they need to be, particularly kids who for not reading, on grade level by the time they get to high school, they have an almost fatalistic, defeatist attitude already, you know. School is already the enemy. And they're embarrassed in the classroom when called upon to read, if they can't read well and they really have a negative attitude about school before they get to high school.

*Researcher* -Any thoughts on, if they have such a negative attitude, why do they... continue? Why do they come to high school?

**MR. ROBERTS** – Well, there are those who come to high school just because that's what they've always done, going to school is what you do. Others do it for the social aspect of it. I mean there are kids who come to be with their friends, and hang out.

*Researcher* - Do you think the dropout... their dropout rate warrants special attention?

**MR. ROBERTS** -Oh yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I think so.

*Researcher* – Alright, so, what?

**MR. ROBERTS** - Well, I think early intervention, I think there are a lot of things you can do, I think, possibly one of the most... I don't want to use the word effective, because I don't have any data to back this up, but I think one of the best things you can do, I guess, is.. the best way I can say that, is to work with kids one-on-one, to try to develop an individual relationship with the teacher, and individual relationship with a guidance counselor, administrator someone who can make the child believe that they care about them. I think kids respond a whole lot better to adults in a school setting or anywhere really, if they feel like the adults care about them as people and as human beings and want them to be successful rather than just, okay, this is just a kid sitting in my classroom and I've got to do with them, you know.

*Researcher* - You indicated that the APC, guidance, and just about everybody in administration, at some point, they will review the records and they find these kids that's potential dropouts...

**MR. ROBERTS – um uh.**

*Researcher* - What do they do is to get these kids coming in, some of them don't want to be here and they are holding on by faith, what do they do when they identify these children?

**MR. ROBERTS-** Well, a number of things, one thing that we try to do is to do the student interested in being a part of something one campus, whether it's an athletic team, whether it's a music group, whether it's ROTC, whether it's a club or organization, something they can be a part of that they can get a sense of belonging to and then, once that relationship is established with that group, then they have a group that they're kind of accountable to for their for their performance, for that behavior. They have people that they can either, support or that they can head down and I think it helps, any person, I think to have an external governor on their behavior that somebody's going to say something to 'em, some peer or person that's depending on them to say "Hey, you're not helping out here", "You're not being part of the team", "You're not pulling you weight" and I think, uh, just like in a family, uh, they can support a person but they can also make a person perform better out of a...out of a sense of obligation.

*Researcher* – You've given some very detailed thoughts. Have you shared your thoughts or concerns regarding these dropouts with anyone outside the school in the district office. If so, who and how?

**MR. ROBERTS** -Yeah, we talk about those things. I actually have spoken with the general director for secondary education in charge of curriculum, with my area director, who has been a principal that's been very successful. Those conversations happen pretty frequently with lots of people.

*Researcher* – Okay. How do they respond to that?

**MR. ROBERTS** - Well, I think everybody recognizes the problem a whole lot more than they believe they have the answer, we all struggle with many problems in school, but I think that's one that that we haven't, the education profession, and locally and nationally, we haven't quite gotten our hands on it yet.

*Researcher* –Alright, you're saying that your school's administration, they're responsible for, their role primarily is to identify these youngsters. What other role do they play in dropout prevention?

**MR. ROBERTS** - Well, mentoring and counseling, of individual students, certainly. We have a couple of people who sponsor, a group, one of our assistant principals has a group of young men that she's identified, as being on the precipice of dropping out and brings in people from the community to sit down and talk with them to try to inspire them, to give them a sense that there is hope in their education, and to try to get them to understand why it's so important for them to take advantage of the education they can get as long as, you know, while they're young and can do that. Uh, while the district provides opportunities for adults that didn't take advantage when they were younger..

*Researcher* - Um hm..

**MR. ROBERTS** - Life comes a whole lot easier for those people did, so we try to, her group is really reaching out to kids who are on the very brink.

*Researcher* – And that's the assistant principal of curriculum?

**MR. ROBERTS** - No, that's the assistant, one of the assistant principals of student affairs [names the AP]. And another thing that we're doing this year, uh, we have a number of teaches here in our IB program and our traditional program who applied for district performance pay and one of the things that we stipulated this year that if you want to apply for district performance pay were going to ask you to take.... we have a list that we have developed of potential dropouts, but they're potential dropouts because their academic performance is so low. Not because of discipline or attendance, that's another set of issue. these teachers are going to individually take these kids, to meet with them once a month, review their grades, ask them how they're doing, ask them how they can help, just, again, be an adult that they can have a relationship with and they can be answerable to that can help them get through some of the things. And so if you multiply eight kids times 40 adults that's a pretty sizable group we can work.

*Researcher* – So they are asked to work with eight kids?

**MR. ROBERTS** - Each person works with eight kids. Each of our administrators are going to do that as well.

*Researcher* – Now, are those programs written down what [the AP] is doing and this program that you're talking about them getting those eight kids. Is that written or is that something that's in the works right now.

**MR. ROBERTS** - Well, [the AP] started her group last year. She has some things written down. I don't know if she has a full articulated plan written down. But I have seen what she's doing with it. But what I've just described with the eight kids is not in writing yet.

**Researcher – Okay. ....**

**MR. ROBERTS - We are working on getting that in the hands of those teachers, over the next two weeks, because of the two weeks, two weeks from now is the deadline for them to apply for that and I want them to know what they're getting into.**

*Researcher*-This is not one of my questions here but you sparked a question when you were talking about the, uh, master's level teachers. Do you have any many here in [names the school] High School?

**MR. ROBERTS – Oh yeah, I don't know how many but it's quite a few..**

*Researcher* – Okay, re they making a difference in the sense of working with these kids or are they primarily focusing on the academic enhancement of the regular program in school?

**MR. ROBERTS – Well, I think they're focusing on the academics and the influence of all students....**

*Researcher - Okay.*

**MR. ROBERTS - I mean, let me say this about that so that you will understand. The kids that are in the really high programs the IB Programs, those kids are kind of separate. I mean, they are...they're in separate classes academically. They aren't, in class with non-IB kids other than elective classes. All of there academic classes are separated. Now, there is no distinction after that though. I mean every kid is the same. We have regular and honors classes, we have AP classes and so forth. But I have teachers who teach regular classes work just as hard as the teachers who teach the AP Classes. So you know...**

*Researcher* – They're getting it both ways.

**MR. ROBERTS – Yeah.**

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol for Principals/Assistant Principals

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Position \_\_\_\_\_ Code # \_\_\_\_\_

1. What are your perceptions of American male students of African descent? And how did you did you acquire your knowledge of these students, their lives, histories, communities, churches, etc.?
2. Are you aware of the dropout rate of American male students of African descent in your school? When do you generally identify potential dropouts? How is this done and by whom? What are your thoughts regarding the dropout rate of these students?
3. Do you think their dropout rate warrants special attention? If so what? Have you shared your concern/thoughts with others in or outside the school, district office? If so, who and how?
4. What role does the administration play in dropout prevention for American male students of African descent? In what ways have these programs or other supports are offered these students? Have these efforts been successful?
5. Are there rules, procedures or barriers that push these students out of school?
6. What resources do you think you need to prevent these students from dropping out of your school?

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol for School-Based Leaders

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Position \_\_\_\_\_ Code # \_\_\_\_\_

1. What are your perceptions of American male students of African descent? And how did you did you acquire your knowledge of these students, their lives, histories, communities, churches, etc.?
2. Are you aware of the dropout rate of American male students of African descent in your school? When does your school generally identify potential dropouts? How is this done and by whom? What are your thoughts regarding the dropout rate of these students?
3. Do you think their dropout rate warrants special attention? If so what? Have you shared your concern/thoughts with others in or outside the school? If so, who and how?
4. What role does your school's administration play in dropout prevention for American male students of African descent? How are these programs or other supports offered these students? Have these efforts been successful?
5. Are there rules, procedures or barriers that push these students out of school?
6. What resources do you think you need to prevent these students from dropping out of your school?

## Appendix D

### Field Notes Form for Interviews with Principals/Assistant Principals

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Position \_\_\_\_\_ Code # \_\_\_\_\_

**1. What are your perceptions of American male students of African descent? And how did you did you acquire your knowledge of these students, their lives, histories, communities, churches, etc.?**

**2. Are you aware of the dropout rate of American male students of African descent in your school? When do you generally identify potential dropouts? How is this done and by whom? What are your thoughts regarding the dropout rate of these students?**

**3. Do you think their dropout rate warrants special attention? If so what? Have you shared your concerns/thoughts with others in or outside the school, district office? If so, who and how?**

**Appendix D (cont.)**

**Field Notes Form for Interviews with Principals/Assistant Principals**

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_ **Position** \_\_\_\_\_ **Code #** \_\_\_\_\_

**4. What role does the administration play in dropout prevention for American male students of African descent? In what ways have these programs or other supports offered to these students? Have these efforts been successful?**

**5. Are there rules, procedures or barriers that push these students out of school?**

**6. What resources do you think you need to prevent these students from dropping out of your school?**



## Appendix E (cont.)

### Field Notes Form for Interviews Protocol for School-Based Leaders

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Position \_\_\_\_\_ Code # \_\_\_\_\_

4. What role does your school's administration play in dropout prevention for American male students of African descent? How are these programs or other supports offered to these students? Have these efforts been successful?

5. Are there rules, procedures or barriers that push these students out of school?

6. What resources do you think you need to prevent these students from dropping out of your school?

### About the Author

John J, Brown, Jr. received a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from Johnson C. Smith University in 1972; a Masters Degree in Social Work from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1979; and a Masters Degree in Education from the University of South Florida in 2003.

He worked for the State of Virginia from 1972 to 1996 in various positions in Juvenile Courts as a supervisor and Field Instructor for Masters level social work students. He as worked as an Agency Management Analysis and Strategic Planner with the Virginia Department of Youth and Family Services.

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