Promoting the Academic Engagement and Success of Black Male Student-Athletes

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of Black Male Student-Athletes

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The goal of this study was to provide a qualitative look at the factors associated with the academic engagement and success of Black male student-athletes in high school. The research team employed a thematic analysis to examine semi-structured interviews conducted with two successful Black male student-athletes, along with their principal, teachers, parents, and coaches. The results suggest that a consistent, collaborative approach laden with cultural competence is necessary to facilitate such outcomes. The study is viewed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and implications for the results are discussed for several education stakeholders. Suggestions for future research and practice are provided.

The purpose of this article is to present the findings of a qualitative study exploring the factors associated with the academic engagement and success of Black male student-athletes in high school. To that end, the results provide further direction for ways to promote the overall college and career readiness of Black male student-athletes. Black male student-athletes are the focus of the study, in part, because of the unique challenges faced by this group (particularly the high profile athletes participating in basketball or football) with regard to academic success and successful

matriculation to college (Singer, 2009). According to Conley (2010), students preparing for college must understand the structure of knowledge and big ideas of core academic subjects, develop a set of cognitive strategies as they develop their understandings of key content, possess the academic behaviors necessary to successfully manage and engage with a college workload, and possess a contextual understanding of the navigational and cultural elements of gaining admission to and being successful in college. Conley's (2012) comprehensive college and career readiness model addresses both cognitive and non-cognitive factors by specifying four keys: (a) Key Cognitive Strategies, (b) Key Content Knowledge, (c) Key Learning Skills and Techniques, and (d) Key Transition Knowledge and Skills.

Cognitive strategies, which are intentional behaviors students must be able to employ situationally and patterns of thinking that lead to the development of specific ways to approach challenging learning situations, include problem formulation, research, interpretation, communication, and precision and accuracy (Conley, 2007). To this end, challenging content often provides the framework for such application of key cognitive strategies, and there are some general areas—English, math, science, social sciences, world languages, and the arts—in which students need strong grounding given the foundational importance of understanding academic disciplines (Conley, 2007). In addition to cognitive strategies and subject-focused content knowledge, key learning skills and techniques are necessary for academic success. Hooker and Brand (2010) argued that students must also have an understanding of the complex college admission and selection process, the academic requirements for college work, payment options for postsecondary education, and the cultural differences that exist between high school and postsecondary education. This "college knowledge" also includes a thorough understanding of college admissions, testing and curricular requirements, application processes, college options and choices, tuition costs and financial aid, college culture and course rigor, and expectations and necessity of increased higher education (Conley, 2007).

The main concerns in this study are the contextual factors that facilitate the employment of two of these keys—key cognitive strategies and key learning skills and techniques—and the subsequent academic success and college readiness of students. These two keys are collectively described in this research study as academic engagement behaviors (i.e., cognitive and behavioral). The overarching research question of this study is: *What are the factors that contribute to the academic engagement and success of Black male student-athletes in high school?* Unearthing such factors can help to both narrow the longstanding achievement gap in K-12 education as well as increase the college readiness and subsequent college success of a group often on the margins.

While some researchers (e.g., Fredricks & Eccles, 2005) have suggested that students participating in extra-curricular activities are more "academically-oriented" than those who do not, others (e.g., Harris, 2012) have posited that such effects can vary upon closer examination across groups, namely with regard to Black males who participate in sports in high school. Other researchers (e.g., Stone, Harrison, & Mottley, 2012; Harrison, 2008; Comeaux, 2010; Martin & Harris, 2006) have provided critical insight along these lines for Black athletes in college. In this study, we attempt to extend such work by taking a closer look at the high school experiences of this group and the best practices employed in the case of two particular students.

The results of this study have implications for all education stakeholders. Parents, coaches, teachers, school counselors, and principals are specifically highlighted.

First, we describe the theoretical framework within which this study rests and two ways that academic engagement is expressed. Then we present the results of a study that explores factors associated with such engagement in Black male student-athletes in high school. The discussion of the high school experience of Black male student-athletes, while it may mirror that of collegiate student-athletes in some respects, is unique in its own right. It is critical to focus on the high school experience to facilitate the preventative maintenance and positive youth development of this population, which is more commonly explored in the research once they are at the collegiate level.

Theoretical Framework
Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological model suggests that the multiple environments (i.e., home, school community) and people within those environments influence the educational experience of all students. In addition, the model explores the layers that form a student's environment and affect his or her development. These layers include: microsystem (layer closest to the student that comprises family, school, and neighborhood), mesosystem (layer that provides the connection between structures in microsystem), exosystem (layer reflecting the larger social system), macrosystem (layer consisting of values, customs, and laws), and chronosystem (layer that describes historical context of development) (Berk, 2000). The microsystem and mesosystem layers provide the framework for this study, though this is not to imply a lack of importance of the exosystem and macrosystem. Rather, the scope of this study is to give particular attention to two of the layers and to suggest areas of possible attention in future research. To this end, our goal was to explore the factors related to the academic engagement and success of Black male student-athletes in high school.

Behavioral Engagement
Behavioral engagement has been referred to as active participation in school-based activities (Finn, 1993). It involves the academic activities in which students participate and the amount of time they spend in those activities (Li & Lerner, 2013). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) defined it as school-related activities that entail the learning processes within the classroom and other academic tasks. Behavioral engagement tasks include participation in class discussion, turning work in on time, attendance, preparing for class (Li & Lerner, 2013), positive conduct (Fredricks, 2011), and extra-curricular activities (Estell & Perdue, 2013).

Behavioral engagement activities have been associated with favorable academic outcomes. Messacar and Oreopoulos (2013) suggested that student attendance raises graduation rates and other long-term academic outcomes. Richtman (2007) found that school and class attendance have a positive relationship with school success. Additionally, students identified that being engaged in meaningful academic assignments positively influence high rates of success (Shepard, Salina, Girtz, Cox, Navenport, & Hillard, 2012). Moreover, suspension rates are inversely related to academic student success (Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012), especially for Black students (Finkel, 2010). Further, Black students have identified behavioral engagement activities that promote academic success. Blacks students, who spent their time working to attain academic goals such as a competitive GPA or academic scholarship, reported high school success (Wiggan, 2008). Black students also identified class participation and extra-curricular activity involvement as contributors to academic achievement (Wiggan, 2008).

Academic Engagement
In regards to academic achievement, behavioral engagement is interrelated with cognitive and emotional engagement (Estell & Perdue, 2013). While academic engagement

is multidimensional, the behavioral construct, which is participating in educational activities, has been shown to precede increased cognitive engagement (Li & Lerner, 2013) and linked to an increased capacity of learning and development (Kuh, 2001).

Cognitive Engagement.   Cognitive engagement is the psychological process of expending great mental effort and utilizing strategies or skills to process information, to complete an academic task, or to understand a concept (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Walker, Green, & Mansell, 2006). Rotgans and Schimdt (2011) defined cognitive engagement as a "psychological state in which students put in a lot of effort to truly understand a topic and in which students persist studying over a long period of time," (p. 465). Meanwhile, Walker, Green and Mansell (2006) described cognitive engagement as the amount and type of strategies that students use.

The theory of cognitive engagement stems from literature on the processing of information for the purpose of memory and retention of a concept (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004). The mind has shallow and meaningful levels of processing that are used to remember information (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). While shallow processing involves activities like memorization and consistent repetition of information, more meaningful processing involves application of a concept to one's experience or current knowledge to help gain a better understanding of the subject (Kardash & Amlund, 1991). Greene and Miller (1996) capture levels of processing in their research and believe that cognitive engagement is the combination of meaningful processing and strategies that help reinforce or correct behaviors.

Cognitive engagement has been linked to certain positive outcomes in educational settings. Deep level processing, a main characteristic of cognitive engagement, is positively related to information recall (Graham & Golan, 1991). Moreover, cognitive engagement is positively related to academic performance (Greene & Miller, 1996; Miller, Greene, Montalvo, Ravindran, & Nichols, 1996). Self-regulatory behaviors, associated with cognitive engagement, are also positively related to an increase in GPA and an increase in educational aspirations (Wang & Eccles, 2012). There is also a positive relationship between cognitive engagement and investment in one's learning and personal goals (Greene & Miller, 1996; Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004).

Parental Engagement.   Parental engagement is a term used interchangeably with parental involvement and has been defined in several ways. Zhang, Hsu, Kwok, Benz, & Bowman-Perrott (2011) defined parental involvement as "parental engagement in school sponsored and home activities that promote student educational outcomes" (p. 29), as their study looked at patterns of parental engagement among socioeconomic status (SES) and race as well as ethnicity. Georgia's Department of Education (n.d.) defined parental engagement as "an ongoing process that increases active participation, communication, and collaboration between parents, and communities with the goal of educating the whole child to ensure student achievement and success" (p. 1). Finn (1998) described parental engagement as a set of activities and behaviors that are impactful inside and outside of school.

Parental involvement contributes to decreasing behavioral problems, boosting teacher morale, and improving student success (Comer, 1976; Henderson & Berla, 1994). Further, parental involvement has been linked to student academic performance (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997, Jeynes, 2005, Posey-Maddox, 2013; Sanders, 1998). Parental engagement has been seen as an activity-driven form of parental involvement (Fan, 2001). Parental engagement activities include parent-child

discussions, assistance with homework, discussions with teachers, monitoring children's time, reading with children at home, and volunteering at school (Eccles, & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1995; Finn, 1998). Although the aforementioned activities are not exhaustive, parental engagement can translate to various ways of parental involvement in the lives of their children.

In the lives of Black students, parental engagement has been positively linked to student achievement. Marcon (1999) found that parental involvement impacted academic variables such as grade point average as well as math and reading scores of African American students. Banerjee, Harrell, and Johnson (2011) found a correlation between parents who sent positive messages about race in relation to education and higher student reading scores.

For Black males, parental engagement has a positive impact on their academic success (Harris & Graves, 2010; Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013; Hrabowski, Maton, & Grief, 1998; Mandara, 2006). Hines & Holcomb-McCoy (2013) found that two-parent homes predicted positive outcomes for African American males. Hrabowski, Maton, and Grief (1998) conducted a study on fathers of high achieving African American males and found that parental engagement characteristics such as open communication and focusing on academics were predictors of academic achievement. Mandara (2006) noted that teachers' perception of parents being actively involved in their son's education increased the child's academic success. In other words, teacher perception of parental involvement had a positive effect on Black male achievement.

Educator Engagement.   An overarching concept that has been deemed related to student success is that of *mattering*. Students' mattering to others at school correlates with a healthy school climate and cohesion, which translates into increased academic achievement (Tucker, Dixon, & Riddine, 2010). To this end, each education stakeholder can play a role in having an impact in the lives of students. Black males, in particular, have been disenfranchised by schools and other power systems (Noguera, 2003) and could benefit from more targeted efforts in this regard. The expectations of teachers, for example, and their impact on student achievement have long been researched (Wineberg, 1987). It is suggested that teachers interact with students in such a way that aligns with their expectations of them; in response those expectations are later fulfilled (Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Irving, Widdowson, & Dixon, 2010). As such, when teachers have high expectations of students, this positively influences students' academic achievement.

Teachers, when providing significant emotional and relational support in the classroom as suggested by attachment and self-determination theories, lead to positive educational outcomes for students (Allen, Gregory, Mikami, Lunk, Hamre, & Pianta, 2013). Conversely, a lack of such support leads to poorer performance in students. Several researchers suggest, for example, that the disproportionate number of Black males placed in remedial or special education classes can be attributed to the low academic expectations of teachers (Kincaid, 2010). Kincaid (2010) further asserted that teacher expectations are particularly important with regard to the development of positive self-images in Black students.

School counselors have also demonstrated the capacity to facilitate student success when they implement strategic interventions aimed at academic achievement (Dahir, Burnham, Stone, & Cobb, 2010). A sense of school belonging, academic self-efficacy, and educational aspirations have all been documented to be positively correlated with academic achievement for all ethnic minorities, including Black males (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008). To this end, Uwah et al. (2008) suggested that school

counselors utilize their unique relationships with all education stakeholders to create a culture of encouragement and participation.

Likewise, administrators also influence the success of students, as they can directly influence the structural framework through which education is experienced in schools. For Black males, in particular, administrators are able to create systems that promote equitable learning experiences for all. The master schedule, for example, is a systemic change tool in that it can be orchestrated in such a way that maximizes the involvement of all in a rigorous curriculum with built-in supports (e.g., study hall) throughout the day. Similarly, principals and assistant principals are ultimately responsible for enforcing discipline, employing equitable policies and, more importantly, intervening in preventive ways that can help to decrease the disproportionate numbers of suspensions among groups. And, given that Black males are disproportionately assigned to special education, it is critical for administrators to appropriately implement systematic identification procedures, such as Response to Intervention (RTI).

Finally, coaches of student-athletes, while presumably hired to garner success on the athletic field, can also have an effect on the academic achievement of students. Given the nature Black males' disproportionate draw to athletics (e.g., Rhoden, 2006), coaches can be instrumental in helping ensure that their participation be a mobilizing mechanism as opposed to an exploitative one. Given that Black males have historically considered sports as a way out of their social condition (Rhoden, 2006), coaches are likely to have the undivided attention of this group and can therefore facilitate development across a number of domains (e.g., personal, academic). For example, coaches can implement their own prerequisites for athletic participation over and above the popular "no-pass, no-play" rule. Such high expectations from coaches in the academic realm can increase the likelihood that student-athletes develop a positive academic identity.

While individual efforts certainly affect change in the lives of students, it is most beneficial when such endeavors execute a shared vision and are not just isolated efforts. Of particular concern in this study are the following education stakeholders: teachers, school counselors, administrators, and coaches.

Methods

Participants
After approval by a university Institutional Review Board (IRB), local school administrators were contacted to assist with initial screening of participants. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were then employed in participant selection. The administrators recommended student-athletes based on the quantitative and qualitative criteria provided by the researchers. From the pool of potential student-athletes initially screened by administrators (10), the research team followed up with two (2) Black male student-athletes as initial participants. The remaining participants (i.e., educators and parents) were selected based on the recommendations from the student-athletes who identified individuals who had a significant positive influence on their success. Specifically, the high school student-athletes named individuals who consistently held them accountable for their behavior academically as well as athletically.

The sample totaled 10: one principal, two school counselors, two teachers, one coach, two parents, and two varsity student-athletes. The student-athletes met the following quantitative and qualitative criteria for participation: 1) maintenance of an overall grade point average of 3.0 or higher; 2) successful completion of at least one AP course during their high school career; 3) demonstration of high levels of academic

engagement across the cognitive (i.e., demonstration of critical thought through written and oral expression), relational (i.e., displayed healthy self-advocacy efforts with faculty and staff), and behavioral (i.e., active participation in the learning process) domains, as attested to by their principal and athletic director during screening interviews; and 4) participation in varsity athletics. The other participants were selected based on the recommendation of the student-athletes and the positive influence they reportedly had on their academic engagement and success. Specifically, the high school student-athletes named individuals who encouraged and supported their success both academically and athletically, and held them accountable for such success.

These individuals, who included teachers, counselors, and parents, had varying lengths of engagement with the student-athletes, ranging from two years to 18 years. What proved consistent was the way each treated the student-athlete: respectfully and with high expectations of excellence academically as well athletically. Tables 1 and 2 outline further demographic background information about all participants.

Table 1: *African American Male Student-Athlete Participant Characteristics*

Participant	Age	Varsity Sport(s) in which they participate
David	18	Football, Lacrosse, Track & Field
James	18	Football, Basketball, Track & Field

Table 2: *Stakeholder Participant Characteristics*

Participant	Position	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
Bob	Principal	Male	White
Jacob	Coach	Male	White
Jane	Counselor	Female	White
Janet	Teacher	Female	Black
Linda	Counselor	Female	Black
Mark	Teacher	Male	White
Sally	Parent	Female	Black
Bruce	Parent	Male	Black

Positionality
The first author is an African American male and was a high school athlete whose career was cut short due to injury. However, given the encouragement and support of his parents and older siblings, he was still able to matriculate to a top-tier post-secondary institution on academic merit. To some extent, school officials in his personal experience contributed to what could have been an exploitative experience in sports lest for the efforts of his family. He would go on to play intramural sports in college, coach high school and college teams, and ultimately pursue a career in education, first as a high school counselor, and now as a counselor-educator. As such, he is acutely aware of the potential for sports to serve as both a mobilizing or exploiting mechanism, and his desire is to uncover the strengths in and around student-athletes that facilitate the former.

Such a predisposition on the part of the first author naturally lends itself to an intentional effort to deconstruct in Black male student-athletes' experiences on the field what can be applied to other experiences (i.e., in the classroom, etc.). Implicit in such

an approach is the assumption that Black males have access to internal and external assets that can facilitate their tying a solid educational agenda to their athletic pursuits. As such, sports participation can be wholeheartedly supported for the positive youth development it can facilitate. However, participation in sports has the potential to have negative effects, particularly for Black males.

Interviews

All of the semi-structured interviews were conducted at the school, lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and were conducted by the first author with stakeholders from one local, public high school on the east coast. The interview format was intentionally structured to allow the participants to share their experiences rather than answering a series of explicit questions. Open-ended questions with prompts and follow-up questions were employed in order to elicit responses (Breakwell, 1995). The interview generally asked the participants to speak about the factors they deemed critical to the success of the student-athletes and what their perceived role in that process was.

Data Analysis

In this study we used thematic analysis, a foundational method for qualitative analysis, as the methodological approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After transcribing the audio-recorded interviews, the research team began by familiarizing ourselves with the data, which involved reading through the entire data set at least once prior to coding. Second, after producing a list of ideas about what was in the data, we generated initial codes from the data, coding for as many potential themes/patterns as possible. Third, after all of the data had been initially coded and collated, we refocused on a broader level and sorted the codes into potential themes. Next, we reviewed the themes, collapsing themes into others where appropriate, and ensuring that data within themes were consistent. This phase involved two levels of reviewing. One level involved focusing on the coded data extracts, confirming that there was a coherent pattern within each theme, and the second level involved considering the congruence between the individual themes and the entire data set. Further refinement and naming of the themes occurred next, and peer debriefs and member checks were employed to determine credibility of our conclusions about the data and to ensure trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007). For peer debriefing, researchers who had not conducted the interviews and completed the initial data coding looked at the data to review and refine the coding scheme. Member checking included sending the finished themes to the participants to ensure that what was shared was accurately captured.

There are several methodological decisions before and throughout the analytic process that we want to make explicit. The research team decided that a theme would be anything that captured something important about the data in relation to the research question, representing some patterned response within the overall data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to some researchers (e.g., Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Boyatzis, 1998), there are two primary ways through which themes within data can be identified: in an inductive or "bottom up" way or in a theoretical or deductive or "top down" way. In this study, we chose an inductive approach, which meant that our identified themes would be strongly linked to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, we decided to focus on the semantic content of the data—that which are identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach lent itself well to another decision, that of conducting the thematic analysis within a realist/essentialist paradigm. Within such a paradigm, "you can theorize motivations, experience, and meaning in a straightforward way,"

(Braun & Clarke, p. 85). Lastly, another goal of ours was to provide a description of the entire data set as opposed to a detailed account of one particular aspect of the data.

Results

Two significant themes were identified through our thematic analysis: 1) team approach, and 2) cultural competence. The team approach theme emerged via each of the participants talking about the importance of every stakeholder working together, communicating high expectations, and executing a shared vision for the success of all students. The cultural competence theme, defined here as the ability to effectively interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds (e.g., Black males), stemmed from the participants talking about the importance of dismantling stereo- types regarding Black male student-athletes, collectively emphasizing the importance of education coming before sports and preparing student-athletes for college and life and not just to meet NCAA benchmarks.

All stakeholders understood the importance of collective responsibility and action to support student-athletes. The principal exemplified this vision:

> You have to clue that in with the entire staff the kids are working with, begin- ning with the professional school counselor, and kind of trickling down to the teachers they're working with, so that there is a support network, and everybody's on the same page with the message they're communicating to the kids.

To that end, each of the participants was particularly clear about the importance of holding the student-athletes accountable. As one teacher stated, "Make sure that the students are held accountable… I find that when I hold them accountable for stuff that they need to do, they'll respond. I don't mind giving them a zero if they didn't turn something in." Similarly, the football coach expressed the importance of accountability. He spoke of ensuring that his student-athletes were contributing citi- zens to their community, and he expected that their behavior off the field repre- sented the kind of the leadership needed to become role models among their peers. He described a scenario where his student-athletes were seen leaving the school's courtyard in disarray after lunch:

> So, I got my football players together and said listen, we're not gonna do that. And I said if I see you guys throwing trash out in the courtyard, I said we're all gonna come in here, and we're gonna pick up every piece of trash on [this] property… So for two weeks they tested me, and so for two weeks on a Saturday I got them all together and we picked up trash on this whole complex… These kids need discipline, they need tough love, especially when it comes to academics… I think of holding them accountable and making them pay atten- tion to every detail. It's not a process of them becoming a better football player because to me that's one of the end results… I think that I can teach them enough football, but by them following that process of academic discipline, they're going to become a better overall athlete, human being, student.

The parents reinforced the same notions of teamwork and accountability, while also stressing the need to begin early in the student-athlete's life. One parent said:

> One of the key factors is staying firm with your child and just reiterating the need to stay focused… I think it actually goes back to… everybody understand- ing and coming together as a whole to communicate. There are seeds that have to be planted at a very early age… We need to replace those poisons with some positive reinforcement. It's not done at sixteen, it's done at six months.

The poisons this particular parent was referencing were those that disproportion-ately affect Black males. According to Smith (2007), approximately one in every three African American men will be incarcerated in their lifetime. Black males are also dying in large proportions, as the rate of homicides among Black men ages 15 to 24 is the highest for any group within the U.S. population, and the suicide rate has surpassed that of their White counterparts (Noguera, 1997). Such horrid statistics reinforce the need for future conversations such as the one this study facilitated, as collectively unearthing and maximizing the internal and external assets of Black males as early as possible is critical in their success.

All participants also felt that the students needed to be pushed and to take academi-cally rigorous courses, graduate high school, and attend college. There was a clear notion of the need to scaffold support around the student-athletes to ensure their success and really promote a college-going culture amongst the group, as evidenced, in part, by one of the school counselor's commentary:

> One of the most important things is getting them in academically rigorous courses as soon as possible…. Whether it's in just one honors class, whether it's World History 9 Honors or English 9 Honors, just so they can start feeling comfortable… It's important to get them set up with teachers who are gonna push them… If you can place them in Honors level courses with teachers that are going to nurture them, and get them involved with programs like AVID, not to mention the school component, communicating with parents on a regular basis… It's really about the home-school partnership. That's really what's going to help Black male student-athletes remain academically engaged.

She went on to speak about the importance of building a solid rapport with her students, and using their interests to do so:

> Building relationships with my students was very important to me. I feel like drawing on, well not only their deficits, but also focusing on their strengths made them feel like they could come and talk to me about anything… I would not judge them. I would support them.

The student-athletes further described how each of the other stakeholders inter-viewed communicated the same message in their own way:

> David: [My parents] see themselves as not having the same opportunities and chances for success … so they want me to have the most opportunities that I could possibly have, and to take advantage of them, and so everyday they always ask, how school went, what homework did I have, what did I do, what happened? And I tell them and they make sure everything goes ok, and if I ever need help then they'll always help me and stuff, so that's, that's a big part of it.

> James: Well my mom and my dad, they would like push, like when I was younger to go to college… It wasn't a choice, I just had to go.

> James: My teacher pushes us to go, [because] she wants to see us go to college… she's basically like another mother, and she actually knows my mother… keeps me on track.

> David: A teacher…. diminishing the line between teacher and student as more person to person…… when trying to relate to them so that they can make the teaching atmosphere better. 'Cause a lot of students I guess feel more intimi-dated by a teacher. They might not… open themselves up to the learning and

what a teacher has to say. So I guess when teachers come off more humble, and sort of open to their surroundings.

David: My principal strives for the best of all students, which in turn helps me Because I know he would be there for me whenever I needed.

David: One thing that my school counselor has done is they've gotten to know my life, sort of my schedule, my motives, and they had an idea or planned out what type of future I'd be looking forward to, whether it be what kind of classes I'm gonna take, and incorporated my needs and my wants, so, to put me on the most helpful path.

James: Well the assistant coach… set up… after school tutoring… and then they'd cook food so we won't be hungry after practice, and this goes on every Tuesday and Thursday and that helps a lot.

David: I would say that relationships are key to helping… students bring the best out of them… If the relationship is… good, positive, then that would be the underlying factor that would help the most."

The student-athletes spoke at length not only about the significant influence of adults in their lives, but also the impact that their peers had on their success as well. Each student-athlete emphasized the importance of being around other students who were just as ambitious and driven as they were, which promoted a sense of healthy competition in and out of the classroom. Such competition not only motivated them further to excel both on and off the field, which allowed them to have multiple options (i.e., academic and athletic scholarships) upon graduation. "Another key factor is my friends," David said. "I guess in the classroom and in the classes that I take I see them being successful and I want to strive to be successful, or more successful, sort of like a competition type way."

Discussion and Implications
The results of this study suggest that a team approach, one that involves all stakeholders executing one vision for the success of all students, should be employed, along with cultural competence (i.e., the ability to interact effectively with individuals of diverse backgrounds, particularly marginalized populations like Black males), in order to promote the academic engagement and success of Black male student-athletes in high school. Viewing the experiences of Black males through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems theory, such suggestions appear congruent with what researchers (e.g., Holcomb-McCoy, 2007) have considered critical to the growth of all underrepresented populations, particularly Black males. Given the multiple environments (i.e., home, school community) and people within those environments that influence the educational experience of the Black male student-athletes, it is only appropriate that all of those stakeholders be consistent with their advocacy efforts as it relates to Black male student-athletes. While the microsystem (layer closest to the student that comprises family, school, and neighborhood) and mesosystem (layer that provides the connection between structures in microsystem) were the primary foci in this study, it would be quite appropriate for future studies to include the other layers' influence on the development of Black male student-athletes.

The student-athletes' perspectives clearly conveyed the importance of everyone communicating the same message of high expectations and belief in the students' success in the classroom and on the field. This is of particular importance with Black males, who, more than other groups, are exploited educationally by their

participation in athletics. The adults interviewed in this study emphasized the importance of authentic positive reinforcement, lest they engage in superficial reinforcements that do not have a substantive basis, which can have unintended harmful results (Swanson, Spencer, Angelo, Harpalni, & Spencer, 2002). Such harmful results might include the students not fully engaging behaviorally and cognitively for fear that their efforts would be moot.

The findings of this qualitative research study support previous studies (e.g., Bryan & Henry, 2008; Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007), which found that the student achievement of minority students is increased when there are school-family-community partnerships. The engagement of the parents in this study aligned completely with such research, as each parent communicated with school officials, held high expectations for both their student and the school, and acknowledged race in relation to their child's educational experience. The results also support previous research that states that the cultural competence of school stakeholders can lead a reduction in the achievement gap between Black and White students (Coggins & Campbell, 2008; Howard, 2010). Such cultural competence, manifested in experiences described by the student-athletes in this study, generally reflects an ability to interact effectively with persons of diverse backgrounds. This, too, requires the ability to view individuals within the paradigm of Bronfenbrenner's theory and the multiple dimensions of influence that have an impact on a student's educational experience. Each of the educators in this study demonstrated that their students mattered, and such an approach helped to facilitate their success, which echoes previous research (Tucker, Dixon, & Riddine, 2010). The emotional and relational support of students and ongoing communication with parents also contributed to such collaborative efforts.

One medium through which such collaborative efforts can be facilitated includes group counseling. School counselors can spearhead such an effort by implementing a systematic, strengths-based group experience that draws on the expertise and knowledge of other stakeholders through selected measures that gauge the development of students in relevant areas (e.g., academic engagement behaviors, grade point average, etc.). For example, the Achieving Success Everyday (Steen, 2007) intervention is designed to maximize the participant's internal and external assets critical to helping students thrive, while progressing through the model's specified phases (i.e., Assessment, Review, Acquaintance, Challenge, Empowerment, and Support). Specifically, it is during the empowerment phase that more didactic and psychoeducational activities would take place to promote growth in the specified learning objectives. In this phase, other education stakeholders can, for example, participate via guest lecturing on their respective areas of expertise. The group counseling approach also facilitates the growth of stakeholders' awareness of the interests, skills, and aptitudes of students through the selected measures that all parties are monitoring throughout. Such an intervention and its effects on the academic engagement and success of Black male student-athletes warrant further inquiry.

The implications of this study reach beyond that of high school stakeholders and extend to higher education as well. As many higher educational professionals work with and aid the transition of students to their post-secondary experiences, it is imperative for all who work in higher education to also have a keen understanding of how the microsystem and mesosytems can interact in such a way to produce positive outcomes for students. As such, vertical teaming that includes K-16 educators would only enhance the school-family-community partnerships and ensure that Black male student-athletes experience smooth transitions and equitable services

throughout their educational experience. The same certainly applies for those closely involved with the transition of high school student-athletes who will also be collegiate student-athletes. Comeax and Harrison (2011), for example, echo the sentiments of Bronfenbrenner's (1992) framework in their suggesting that higher education professionals, too, should examine closely the layers of influences on collegiate student-athletes' development so as to appropriately address their academic needs.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The results of this study have raised questions that can be further explored in future research. A place of departure for future research can be the limitations of this study. For example, the quality and quantity of the data collected was often dependent on the researcher's skills and the extent to which he was able to elicit responses from the participants without leading them. To that end, the researcher's presence during the data collection period (i.e., interviews) could have affected the subject's responses, perhaps contributing to a biased data set. Though safeguards, such as training in the methodology chosen and deliberate measures taken to ensure optimal confidentiality, were put in place to help mitigate such challenges, there is always the possibility of those factors to have an effect.

The results of this study represent a broad, rich description of the entire data set. It serves as a basis for future research to explore more specifics of each theme, which would have very practical implications for educators. For example, who is involved in the team approach, and what responsibilities do they have that contribute to the success of Black male student-athletes in high school? Answering such questions would provide more breadth, depth, and specificity to the current study, and would be a heuristic addition to the results of this study and the body of knowledge on this subject in general. Future research should also include more quantitative measures.

Conclusion

During a time of increased need for effective practices and the promotion of college and career readiness among students, it is critical for all education stakeholders to work collaboratively to advocate for all high school students, particularly historically disenfranchised groups. For example, while sports have generally been considered to have a positive effect on educational outcomes of students (Eide & Ronan, 2001), such effects slightly diminish for Black male student-athletes as their participation status increases from high school junior varsity to varsity (Harris, 2012). This negative correlation increases significantly when participating on revenue-generating sports teams in college (Harper, Wiliams, & Blackman, 2013). To this end, this study adds to the existing literature, most of which focuses on collegiate Black male student-athletes, by specifying factors unique to the academic engagement and success of Black male student-athletes participating in high school varsity athletics. The results of this study suggest that principals, teachers, school counselors, and coaches execute a shared vision through collaborative efforts that consider the unique cultural and educational experience of Black male student-athletes.

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