

# The Role of a Black Church–School Partnership in Supporting the Educational Achievement of African American Students

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## Abstract

Despite efforts of educators across the nation, African American students in the United States underperform their peers and experience graduation rates lower than any other ethnicity. The purpose of this case study was to gain an understanding, through the lenses of social learning theory (SLT) and critical race theory (CRT), of how a partnership between a Black church and an urban high school supports the achievement of African American students. Findings, consistent with the literature on the Black church's foundation, include the importance of relationships, equity, community, and commitment. Implications include the partnership's positive influence on student educational outcomes by meeting student needs of relationship and community. Interest convergence and counterstorytelling, tenets of CRT, are used to explain student success and support provided through partnership efforts.

Key Words: Black church–school partnerships, African American students, high schools, social learning theory, critical race theory, relationships, equity, community, commitment, educational achievement

## Introduction

Despite sweeping educational reform initiatives codified in legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTT), and the Every

Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), African American students in high poverty communities across the U.S. continue to underperform as compared to their peers. The 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress report indicated that only 18% of African American fourth-graders were proficient in reading, and only 19% scored proficient in math (Camera, 2015). Eighth grade numbers were even lower with 16% of African American students proficient in reading and only 13% proficient in math (Camera, 2015). Unfortunately, 2017 scores for African American students at both grade levels and in both subjects remained largely unchanged even though the nation's average reading score at Grade 8 increased as compared to 2015 (Institute for Education Statistics, 2018b). Further, school graduation rates and college preparation are lower within African American communities nationwide than any other ethnicity (Douglas & Peck, 2013) with Black students graduating at a rate of 69% compared to 73% for Hispanic students and 86% for White students (Institute for Education Statistics, 2018a). In response to legislative efforts to address this long-standing problem, public school districts are spending unprecedented amounts of money on instruction, staffing, nutrition, transportation, and other operational costs (Lipman, 2013), yet the academic achievement gap continues to grow wider with African American students falling further and further behind (Keisch & Scott, 2015).

Many possible explanations exist for the continuation of this gap in achievement. Research indicates that the overall teaching staff morale is low in many public schools serving large populations of African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2017) and that teachers in high poverty, urban schools, where many African American students attend, often have negative perceptions regarding the abilities of African American students in their schools (Ladson-Billings, 2017). Low student motivation has also been noted to influence the achievement of African American students in the classroom (Douglas & Peck, 2013) when pedagogies and teacher ethnicities differ from cultural norms in the Black community. African American culture is unique, and oral communication is something that is cherished in the African American community (Evans, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2017). Therefore, teachers of other ethnicities often have difficulty in understanding these cultural differences (Evans, 2015), and teachers who do not adapt and adjust their instruction and communication techniques for diverse student populations can negatively influence African American academic motivation (Evans, 2015). Findings indicate that there is a strong need for cultural connection and affirmation that is not often found in the classrooms of many African American students (Harper & Davis, 2012).

Effective community–school partnerships that encourage student growth are possible resources to address the growing gap in achievement. The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2019) defines partnerships as “a shared responsibility and reciprocal process whereby schools and other community agencies and organizations engage families in meaningful and culturally appropriate ways, and families take initiative to actively support their children’s development and learning” (para.1). However, for many students, family involvement is extremely limited (Ladson-Billings, 2014). It is in these instances that community organizations can “step in” to promote student success.

Research supports this contention. Research suggests that community–school partnerships may be an important tool for enhancing student success, especially in low income, diverse schools (Camera, 2015; Epstein, 2013, 2018; Gross, 2015; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Latunde, 2016; Sheldon, 2016). Specifically, partnerships can make a difference by promoting innovative and supportive strategies to strengthen student academic achievement, especially in districts with limited resources (Epstein, 2013). For example, mentorship programs between community organizations and schools can provide resources such as technology, tutoring, mentoring, or practical application of classroom learning for struggling students (Epstein, 2013). Through effective partnerships, community groups, faith-based organizations, businesses, and other groups are able to provide academic interventions and supports to promote academic success.

### **Problem**

Although many efforts have been made in public schools across the nation to educate African American students using innovative and supportive pedagogies and partnerships with community organizations, student achievement for African American students often falls far behind their majority peers (Keisch & Scott, 2015). Additionally, disrupted home lives and other external factors leave some African American students in need of more than just instructional support to reach academic goals (Sianjina & Phillips, 2014). Thus, deeply embedded community solutions to supplement that of the home and school system must be found (Ladson-Billings, 2014). One possible solution for promoting the success of African American students is partnerships between Black churches and schools in high poverty neighborhoods. History suggests that the presence of the Black church in African American communities has made a difference in advocating for equity, social justice, and cultural preservation for African Americans (Ladson-Billings, 2014); therefore, it is likely that the Black church serves an important role in providing African American students a better life both now and in their futures.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain an understanding, through gathering the perceptions of school administrators, African American students, and Black church leaders, of how a long standing partnership between a Black church and an urban high school supports the educational achievement of African American students engaging in partnership activities. In addition, this case study will likely support the establishment of an inclusive learning environment for African American students and their families, and it may enhance the cultural competency of faculty/staff as they learn this pedagogy from these African American community members.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study: How has this partnership between the Black church in this community and this public school promoted success for involved African American students?

Subquestions included:

1. What are church member, administrator, and student perceptions concerning the influence that this Black church partnership has had on African American students' educational achievement in the classroom?
2. How does this partnership between this Black church and this school support student's social and emotional development?
3. How do critical race theory and social learning theory explain these results?

## **Theoretical Framework**

Critical race theory (CRT) and social learning theory (SLT) serve as theoretical frames to understand the influence of this Black church–school partnership on student success.

### *Social Learning Theory*

SLT (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Walters, 1977) can help to explain African American student perceptions concerning how this Black church–school partnership enhances educational achievement and provides support for students as they prepare for college. SLT posits that learning takes place in social contexts (Bandura, 1977). For example, Bandura's concept of modeling suggests that, when individuals observe others performing actions or activities with success, those individuals often develop the self-efficacy to mimic those behaviors. Bandura (1994) defined self-efficacy as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (p. 71). Bandura (1994) further explains that

self-efficacy beliefs determine “how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave” (p. 71). The idea of modeling applies, in this study, when African American students receive guidance of Black church members and leaders who have encountered and successfully navigated similar challenging life experiences (Hope et al., 2017; Jordan, 2013). An additional component of SLT, vicarious learning, occurs as students learn through observation in social relationships. Transfer of information can take the form of direct instruction or observational learning, as students are introduced to the skills and knowledge of their mentors (Bandura, 1977). Observational learning in a social learning environment, like that of a church and school partnership, is successful if four components are found: attention, retention, reproduction, and reinforcement/motivation (Bandura, 1977).

The first process, attention, is esteemed when African American students experience successful Black church members committed and playing an active role to improve their learning and performance (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Douglas & Peck, 2013). The second process, retention, suggests that African American students remember and regard the support offered through the church and school partnership, both in the presence and in the absence of the Black church members (Bandura & Walters, 1977). The reproduction phase requires replication of modeled behaviors as the African American students produce learned behaviors that are well received and favorable to their teachers, school leaders, and even relationships with others formed in the Black church partnership (Hope et al., 2017). The fourth process, motivation, includes self-assessment performed by the students themselves about their overall production of learned behaviors through the support structures set forth in the Black church partnership and their school. As students experience success, they are further motivated to persist in reaching their educational goals. When students see themselves as able scholars who are capable of setting and reaching high academic goals, success is promoted. This research aligns with Bandura’s work in self-efficacy because it highlights the importance of gaining self-efficacy as a way to enhance persistence when faced with adversity.

### *Critical Race Theory*

CRT examines society from a critical perspective in order to bring social change and justice for marginalized groups (Robinson et al., 2018), specifically through the incidence of counterstorytelling and interest convergence. Aligning with this study, critical race theorists argue that minority students in public school settings are not as prepared, supported, or offered the same opportunities as those students identifying as White (Douglas & Peck, 2013). Interest convergence is the idea that operational decisions are often made, intentionally or unintentionally, in the best interest of dominant groups. Applied to

public education in the U.S., White educational leaders and decision makers often make decisions that primarily benefit White students as the beneficiaries of quality education and resources to ensure academic excellence and college preparation (Tripses & Scroggs, 2009). For example, hiring decisions at the district level often involve placing the least experienced teachers in classrooms with large populations of African American students and in schools with lower student performance, where the largest populations of African American students are typically assigned (Tripses & Scroggs, 2009). CRT explains that, while these decisions may be intentional or unintentional, students of minority races are affected by and must comply with decisions made by district leaders, even if the decisions are inequitable (Dixson et al., 2014). Of note, Dumas and Ross (2016) further suggest that even when decisions are made that help African Americans specifically, interest convergence indicates that these decisions must also be in the interest of White students, as well, before implementation. The idea of interest convergence suggests that possible improvement strategies such as rebuilding communities and encouraging communal participation in schools are more likely to evolve if enhanced ethnic representation at the district level emerges (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

## **Literature Review**

### *School–Community Partnerships*

Partnerships between schools and community organizations can, indeed, make a difference in student achievement. A school–community partnership refers to the commitment and dedication of community members in making student success a reality for all students (Jordan, 2013). School and community partnerships vary significantly. Purposes for partnerships between communities and schools often include helping schools “prepare students for college, career, and citizenship by offering additional opportunities, supports, and enrichment for young people” (Roche & Strobach, 2019). Additionally, some share an intense academic focus including tutoring, mentoring, and improving access to resources limited by challenging financial situations (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015). Community partners for schools can include, but are not limited to, faith-based organizations, service organizations, philanthropists, businesses, and other groups that can provide academic interventions and support to promote academic success (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015). School partnerships involving K–12 students often motivate students to set higher goals for themselves and make a lasting impact on a child’s educational achievement and success in their postsecondary education (Jordan, 2013; Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015).

### *Opportunities for Partnerships*

Opportunities for partnerships between community organizations abound, and these partnerships often support reform efforts to bridge the achievement gap between White and minority students (Epstein, 2013). Programs in a variety of service organizations, such as the Salvation Army, AmeriCorps, and the Boys and Girls Club of America are committed to supporting youth through acts of benevolence (Jordan, 2013). Local businesses and commerce organizations are also valuable entities to assist students in improving academic success (Cousins et al., 2008). Businesses often have financial resources to provide funds to schools for instructional assistance and scholarships for students who are graduating from high school and attempting to attend college (Lipman, 2013). These partnerships can be mutually beneficial as students prepare to become contributing members of society and to the workforce.

Faith-based organizations also commonly partner with and sponsor public schools. Their efforts are often targeted toward improving their community presence, impacting educational achievement, and modeling behaviors and attitudes that lead to success (Khalifa et al., 2013). Regardless of a student's religious background, many faith-based organizations look to the well-being and mindset renewal of students that, they believe, will provide hope and, therefore, promote higher achievement in all areas of life (Jordan, 2013). Faith-based organizations support education through a multitude of efforts including backpack drives, college visits, tutoring programs, mentoring, and community activism (Jordan, 2013; Latunde, 2017).

### **The Black Church**

The Black church is a faith-based organization that has a rich, culturally significant history in the U.S. for its multifaceted function in the lives of African Americans (Stuckey, 2013). Black churches are connected to the personal identity of many African Americans, and they hold a significant place in their daily lives (Jordan, 2013). Since times of slavery, relationships within the Black church have brought about strength, unity, and empowerment (Khalifa et al., 2013).

### *Community Involvement*

Not only has the Black church influenced its individual members, the Black church has a respectable reputation for being an advocate for community involvement (Logan, 2018). Historically, the Black church has sought to inform and critically assess equality and fairness in society. As a gathering place centrally located in many African American neighborhoods, it has consistently been an information center for many African American families. Black churches support all communities where African Americans reside, not just neighborhoods

in close proximity to the Black church. The Black church's inner motivation and desire to improve society through community involvement is found in direct relation to the past racial discrimination and inequity in quality of life embedded in the threads of U.S. history (Logan, 2018).

### *Instructional Support*

Education, literacy, and spirituality are inseparable to many in the African American community (Tripses & Scroggs, 2009). Some of the efforts made to enhance literacy include showing academic interest, providing homework assistance techniques, and building relationships with school administration and teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Countless Black churches offer afterschool tutoring programs that occur several times each week (Tripses & Scroggs, 2009). Some tutors whose background is in education will provide additional instructional exercises geared to strengthen the core competencies in mathematics, reading, and language arts (Tripses & Scroggs, 2009). In addition to support for elementary and secondary education, many efforts have been made by Black churches to promote college attendance among their members by providing high school students with resources to facilitate their enrollment in college. Some Black churches host college fairs where local and sometimes long-distance colleges will present information and provide assistance to first generation college students (Logan, 2018). There are also many Black churches that have developed courses to assist high school students to prepare for college entrance exams, such as the ACT and SAT, as they make plans for their lives after high school (Mitchell, 2010).

### **Partnership Participation: Benefits to African American Students**

African American students often receive support from Black churches that would not normally be afforded just by attending their neighborhood school (Jordan & Wilson, 2017). A deep connection based on relational trust often develops when church members engage with students (Wigan, 2014). Through partnerships, African American students typically receive one-on-one attention, and these relationships can help African American students connect with other African Americans socially (Jordan & Wilson, 2017). The social constructs found in African American student interactions assist students in building self-confidence and a positive outlook regarding their academic abilities (Evans, 2015; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). However, all Black churches do not operate similarly, and supports for African American students will likely differ across churches (Clark, 2015; Wiggan, 2014). As in this study, some partnerships between the Black church and schools involve students outside of the church congregation. These efforts of the Black church reflect a unique effort to reach beyond the walls of the church to support the success of students.



## Research Design and Data Sources

This qualitative case study employs a case study design utilizing multiple sources of data (Yazan, 2015) including observations, participant interviews, artifacts, and document analysis to gain a better understanding of the influence of this Black church–school partnership on student success. Student success, for this study, is defined as completion of a high school education. The case for this study is a partnership that has continued for approximately 40 years between a Black church and a high school in a large city in a Midwestern U.S. state. This partnership was chosen because of the duration of partnership efforts, high levels of involvement from both the Black church and school personnel, and historically successful student achievement gains. Additionally, this partnership reflects an effort of a Black church to partner with students who are not necessarily members of their congregation to promote the success of these students.

### Population

Two distinct populations contribute to this 40-year-old partnership between this historically Black church and urban high school. To protect the anonymity of all participants, the pseudonyms of Joyful Noise Baptist Church and Successful Preparation High School are used. Additionally, the information below was collected through the church and school websites as well as through personal interviews conducted as part of this research.

#### *Joyful Noise Baptist Church*

Joyful Noise Baptist Church is home to one of the largest African American congregations in this urban area, with a weekly attendance of 650–700 members and guests. This church is located in a large urban neighborhood with historical significance for many African Americans in the city. The church, founded in 1917, supports a large number of ministries to its congregation and to the community including ministries for children, education, married adults, seniors, drama, finance, health, media, nursery, prayer, women, men, social service, and youth. It employs one senior pastor and five associate ministers. The church places a strong emphasis on the educational attainment of its members. Joyful Noise Baptist Church has been instrumental in supporting students both in K–12 and in college. The church is home to a congregation of diverse ages. Thirty percent of the church's membership is 50–80 years of age, and approximately 40% of the membership is 20–50 years of age; approximately 25% of the congregation is under 20 years of age, and 5% is older than 80 years. The church membership is proud of the fact that it has nurtured countless successful African American students who have graduated from high school. It is

important to note that students do not have to be members of Joyful Noise Baptist Church nor are they required to attend the church to be involved in partnership activities. Partnerships are formed at the school, and church member participants agree to meet the student at a location that is convenient and comfortable for the student. Members of the church mentioned that several members of the congregation that were formerly involved as students in partnership efforts are now doctors, attorneys, judges, principals, and teachers. These former students are passionate about continuing the legacy of support for educational excellence for the upcoming generation of young people.

### *Successful Preparation High School*

Successful Preparation High School is a public high school in the second largest school district of this Midwestern state. The school has a rich history and served as an all-Black high school before racial integration was enforced in the 1960s–70s. The total student population of Successful Preparation High School at the time of the study was just over 1,100. The ethnic breakdown of the student population of Preparation High was as follows: African American 41%, Caucasian 41%, Multiracial 7%, Hispanic 6%, Native American 3%, Asian 4%. Three of its certified teachers, one guidance counselor, and the school registrar are members of Joyful Noise Baptist Church. At the time of the study, Successful Preparation High School had enrolled an additional 260–270 students due to a recent consolidation of schools in the district. Successful Preparation High School serves students in Grades 9–12.

### *The Partnership Between Joyful Noise Baptist Church and Successful Preparation High School*

Joyful Noise Baptist Church is located within a five-mile distance from the school. The partnership began 40 years ago when the pastor's children attended the school, and he saw the need to support African American students who had recently gone through school integration. Since the partnership's beginning, there has been a close relationship between the two organizations, and consistent support has been provided to ensure effectiveness and efficiency to impact its community and families. Although there have been two pastor changes and approximately six principals of the school since the inception of the partnership, the partnership has strengthened each year. Efforts were made on both sides of the partnership, the church and the school, to maintain partnership efforts even during transitions in leadership. For example, when times came to hire a new building principal, the school invited the pastor of the church to serve on the interview committee. Upon selection of each new principal, the pastor and involved church members met to talk about the supports the partnership provided. Additionally, when selecting a new pastor, the church

congregation members made sure that the pastor was supportive of partnership efforts before being voted into the position. The principal and the pastor continue to serve as primary contacts for partnership efforts.

An estimated 60 members of Joyful Noise Baptist Church regularly participate, at least once per week, in the partnership with Successful Preparation. A multifaceted approach takes place to support student achievement. Church members give of their time weekly to support reading and mathematics tutoring. These tutoring sessions typically take place on the school campus. Also, opportunities exist for students who are preparing for college to work with a mentor, a church member, to complete college applications and prepare college entrance materials and documents. Students who simply need “someone to talk to and confide in” also have time with a mentor, also a church member. A few of the church members who participate in the partnership conduct small group sessions with students. Topics addressed during group sessions include drug and gang prevention, respect for members of society, communicating with law enforcement, and practices for healthy living such as nutrition and exercise. Church members also play basketball with some of the young men two times per week during the activity period at Preparation High School. There is a strong presence of Joyful Noise Church members present at Successful Preparation High School, with many on campus as often as three times per week.

### **Research Sample**

Purposeful sampling was utilized to identify participants. Participants included (a) seven students over 18 years of age who are “on track” to successfully complete high school and who have participated in partnership activities, (b) four Black church members who have participated in partnership efforts, and (c) four school personnel who have participated in partnership efforts. The reason that students were selected that were on track for graduation was that we wanted to understand their perceptions regarding the influence of this partnership on their successful completion of high school graduation requirements. Participants were purposefully selected based on the following criteria: engagement in partnership efforts for a minimum of one year, voluntary participation in partnership efforts, and a willingness to participate in the study. Church member and school administration/teacher participants were recruited through a flier distributed at the school and the church. A list of names of at-risk students involved in partnership efforts who were on track to graduate was provided by the school, and names were selected randomly. These students were contacted by phone. Church participant characteristics varied as related to their length of time as a member in the Black church, role in the Black church partnership, age, and gender. These demographic characteristics are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Participant	Role in Partnership	Approx. Age	Gender	Ethnicity
1	Student	18	Male	African American
2	Student	18	Female	African/African American
3	Student	18	Female	African American
4	Student	18–20	Male	African American
5	Student	18	Female	African American/Native American
6	Student	18	Female	African American/Hispanic
7	Student	18–20	Male	African American
5	Church Leader	35–40	Male	African American
6	Church Leader	45–50	Female	African American
7	Church Member	60–65	Male	African American/Native American
8	Church Member	30–35	Female	African American
9	School Principal	50–55	Male	White
10	Teacher	25–30	Male	White/Hispanic
11	Teacher	35–40	Female	White
12	School Counselor	40–45	Female	White/Native American

Interviews with students provided student perceptions of lived experiences regarding the specific ways in which the Black church partnership supported their educational achievement in and out of the classroom and their preparation for college. Church leadership participation was important to provide an understanding of how church members have supported educational achievement and perceptions regarding why the Black church has continued to partner with the school. Four Successful Preparation High School staff members, one counselor, the principal, and two teachers participated in the study. Their insight and experiences with education provided administrator and teacher perceptions of the role this church-based partnership has in the educational achievement of African American students.

**Data Collection**

This research employed multiple data sources including interviews, observations, artifacts, and document analysis to provide a solid, accurate account of the case being studied (Yazan, 2015).

*Interviews*

An open-ended, semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix) was utilized to elicit understandings regarding the support offered by this Black church partnership for student success. A total of 30 interviews were conducted, one initial and one follow-up interview with each of the 15 participants. The seven students who participated in the study, even though they were 18 years of age or older, were “on track” for completing graduation requirements; however, these students were still attending classes at the school and were still engaged in partnership efforts. Two interviews, one in the fall and one in the spring, allowed additional understanding regarding the development of relationships across time. Each interview was conducted individually, and the length of the interviews ranged from 17 to 31 minutes.

*Document and Artifact Analysis*

Participants were asked to bring any artifact to the interview that they considered to be significant to the Black church partnership. These artifacts differed from the more general artifacts reviewed by researchers (such as church and school websites) because they provided an opportunity for participants to tell their individual “stories” as each explained why the artifact was important. The artifacts also elicited details that would have been unknown to the researcher. Artifacts also included documents relevant to the Black church and school partnership. These documents included invitations for involvement in partnership efforts at both Successful Preparation High School and Joyful Noise Baptist Church, program certificates, published materials such as newspaper articles, and web published information retrieved from school and church websites.

*Observation*

Observation was an instrumental part of the data collection process. Extended time was spent both on the church campus and the school campus to observe interactions between Black church members and students. Observations were made at various times during the school day: before school, during activity period, lunch time, and after school. Observations on the church campus occurred during scheduled partnership activities after school and in the evening, during church services, and during individual mentor/mentee tutoring sessions.

Observation in this study provided a deeper understanding of how the Black church partnership with the school supports the educational achievement and college preparation for African American students. There were three observations conducted of tutoring sessions, one at the school and the other two at the church. Each observation was approximately 25 minutes in length, and there

were no less than 13 pairs of students and their tutor/mentor at each session observed. Additionally, three observations were conducted of college and career readiness seminars during which mentors discussed topics such as healthy living habits, gang prevention, interviewing skills, college application/preparation, and decision-making skills. Each of the three college and career readiness observations had at least 20 students, and volunteers ranged from 12–15 per session. There were also two observations of a parent university, when parents would attend trainings on supporting the reading comprehension efforts of struggling readers at home. Each observation had 12 church partners and approximately 40 parents in attendance to support their children at home, who were participants in the partnership. There were eight observations total, and each observation was at least 20 minutes in duration.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Merriam (1998), qualitative researchers must provide enough detail to show that their findings and conclusions “make sense” (p. 199). Credibility for this study was enhanced through systematic data analysis and searching for competing explanations and interpretations in meaning making. For example, some responses to interview questions elicited long, personal stories from the participants. Metaphors and figurative language were found in responses to the interview questions. Data of this comprehensive nature required thorough review and analysis throughout the coding process (Yazan, 2015).

Following Merriam (1998), data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously following a constant comparative approach. Open coding—forming initial categories by breaking down, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data through meaning that emerged from the data—occurred more than once to further condense data. Following open coding, codes were organized by category to identify salient themes or relationships between codes using axial coding techniques. Triangulation was also performed (Saldaña, 2015) through multiple methods of data collection (interviews, extended observations, field notes, artifacts, and document analysis) in order to enhance the overall trustworthiness of the findings and to identify potential alternative interpretations of the findings. Through interpretation of the findings, this study may be able to provide further understanding concerning how this Black church and school partnership supports the educational achievement and college preparation of African American students.

### **Researcher Bias and Limitations**

As with any research study, this study includes limitations. Because the study design is a qualitative case study, the findings cannot be generalized beyond the

scope of this study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The intention of the study is not to be generalizable to all Black church partnerships with public schools. However, this study may become a resource to educational leaders, schools, churches, and other community members as they reflect upon the opportunities provided through this long-standing partnership. Joyful Noise Baptist Church is just one Black church out of thousands that may have different ways of supporting African American students. Additionally, one of the researchers of this study has been deeply involved in this African American community for many years. He has witnessed inequity of opportunity and many of the challenges that students in this community experience. However, his understanding of this community also adds to the richness of the description and the validity regarding inequities in this district. Despite this familiarity, our purpose was to rely on voices of participants and data collected during interviews and observations to identify findings in this study that reveal the lived experiences of individuals involved in partnership efforts.

## **Findings**

Four themes emerged through the analysis of participants' responses to interview questions, field observations, and document analysis. These themes were the importance of relationships, press for equity, community, and commitment.

### **The Importance of Relationships**

Relationships, the most recurring theme, was thoroughly saturated in the data. Each of the participants in this study referenced the importance of relationships in their responses to interview questions. Relationships developed from the partnership with Successful Preparation High School played an instrumental role in preparing the African American students to succeed both in and outside of the classroom. From the students' perspectives and the older adult participants' perspectives, relationships were seen as important for educational achievement in the African American student community in this school. A Joyful Noise Baptist Church leader shared:

The church has and continues to step in and fill any inadequacies through love and nurturing relationships with Black church leaders and members. God exhibited his love for all of his children, and in return it is our duty to love one another and help our children in every area of their development.

One student participant in this study expressed his support of establishing, developing, and maintaining a solid relationship with church members. The student shared:

I have a great relationship with my tutor for the past two years now. I don't have the help I need from my parents because they are working all the time. I don't know if I would be passing my math class if it had not been for [the relationship I have with] my tutor.

An observation during a summer school tutoring session for students who were involved with the partnership with Joyful Noise Baptist Church revealed strong relationships that had evolved over time. One Black church leader stated, "The family in the African American community possesses strength and transformation, and these types of relationships are needed for our young people." The following words were also overheard as one Black church leader spoke to another Black church leader at a tutoring session, "the media presents the academic struggles facing the African American communities; you know we gotta get these babies ready for a world that is not in favor of their intelligence and abilities to be successful."

One Successful Preparation High School leader further described the positive influence supportive mentors have for an at-risk school where a large number of African American students fall behind their peers in their achievement in core subjects. This leader stated, "[This partnership] really makes a difference and works to ensure the mission and vision of the school are being met by the school's leaders and community stakeholders." A student also reflected upon his mentor from the previous year, and as tears swelled in his eyes, he shared that he was still mourning because his mentor had just recently passed away from complications of a chronic illness. The student stated, "My mentor made the difference in my life especially because I had no other male role model in my life because my father was absent. I know this upcoming year I will have another tutor and mentor to help me...but I still miss him."

Interestingly, students and church member mentors often referred to each other as "family." These relationships reflected deep, family-like bonds between participants. For example, one student stated,

My mentor calls me "son," and since we have formed a bond over the past four years, I call him "pops." He is just like a father to me. He always looks out for me and won't allow me to give up. He always tells me that he is committed to making sure I do what I am supposed to every day. My biological father passed away a few years back. I really respect [mentor's name], and I look to him as a father figure.

These relationships reveal characteristics of "fictive kin" relationships between individuals who are unrelated but have a relationship that takes on the characteristics of those experienced by close family (definitions.uslegal.com, 2019). Fictive kin relationships are quite common in the African American



community (Allen et al., 2011; Brooks & Allen, 2013, 2016; Chatters et al., 1994; Steward, 2007; Taylor et al., 2001), and they are developed primarily out of need and are depended upon for support in the absence of immediate family members (Brooks & Allen, 2016). We found, in this study, the presence of parent/child fictive kin and sibling fictive kin relationships. For example, another student participant shared that he and his mentor have a strong bond. He explained,

My “brother,” he is the brother that I never had and one that I always wanted. I guess like other people say, “a brother from another mother.” He is only three years older than me, but he is in college. The experiences that he gained are helping me not only prepare for college but [are helping me to] understand that even though I struggle with math, I can make it in college. There are things out there to help out. Boy, I needed to hear this from my bro...real talk! He always makes himself available to help with all of my schoolwork and makes sure that I keep up with college applications and the due dates. He always says you have to be committed to whatever you do...I always respond, “I know.”

An observation during the school activity period when mentors from the Black church were engaging with their mentees included a current college student who had participated in the partnership as a student and was now participating as a mentor. He expressed his gratitude for having a middle-aged African American male to take on a “fatherly” role in his life. This college student explained to his mentee that his mentor helped him “become the man he is today.” Further evidence of the importance of relationships between African American students and Black church partners was noted during the instructional day. Mentors and tutors affiliated with the partnership between Joyful Noise Baptist Church and Successful Preparation High School greeted their students with handshakes, hugs, and smiles, and they engaged in noneducation-related conversations as a way to establish and maintain nurturing relationships. Both the school and Black church leaders expressed their esteem for the partnership and its propitious impact on relationships with students.

### **Press for Equity**

The second theme that emerged was that participants, both students and church members, were motivated to join partnership efforts as a press for equity. Students and church members perceived a lack of equity in school/district decision making, school resources and teaching assignments, and urban neighborhood conditions such as poverty and gang activity negatively affecting educational outcomes for these students. Their desire for participation in

partnership efforts largely stemmed from the opportunity to “make a difference.” One church leader expressed:

Our young Black sons and daughters are seen every day in the news and the media for their poor choices, but what about the good choices and successful ones? We have to work relentlessly to...equalize educational opportunities for excellence for our young people from members from our church family in order to prepare them for a bright future.

The church leader continued to share his deep concerns and frustrations with inequitable treatment of African American students in this community, primarily because he sees that the district in which this school is located seems to focus on higher performing schools, especially those in more affluent neighborhoods.

For student participants in this study, equity was one of the reasons the students became involved with the partnership. These students understood that this partnership was the community’s way of providing opportunities for growth that would not have been available without partnership efforts. All student participants in this study mentioned equity when answering the question, “What motivated you to become involved with this partnership?” One student participant boldly commented, “You know, a lot of these schools around here ain’t right. I applied to go to another school because it was [a] better [school], and I was not accepted. They didn’t even tell me why because I know I met the qualifications. That’s not fair.” For this student, becoming involved in the partnership was an effort to expand his educational opportunities through resources provided by the church.

### **The Importance of Community**

The third theme found in this study was the support of the surrounding community and a foundational belief in the importance of the African American community to support the success of younger generations. For these participants, the Black church represented the strength of the surrounding community. Each participant in this study mentioned the importance and involvement of community as it relates to the Black church and its support for African American students. One participant indicated that African Americans believe that taking care of the younger generations (of African Americans) is, in part, a community effort, not a single responsibility of one person or even one group of people. One church leader commented, “There is not a greater organization than the Black church. The Black church, you know, is a community that represents strength, and it even works to promote citywide support to ensure the success of African American students.” This very idea was emphasized by the church leader participants. One church leader explained, “The work we

do at the church is not a one-person effort, it is a communitywide effort. There is absolutely no way that we could support the students in the ways we do if we did not have other partnerships in these neighborhoods around the school.” Examples of other partnerships included the local YMCA, The Boys and Girls Clubs local chapter, and the regional library. This church served as a “hub” to bring together resources to support students through partnership efforts.

### **Commitment Required for Success**

The fourth theme that emerged was the requirement of a strong sense of commitment for successful partnership efforts. The Black church leader participants at Joyful Noise Baptist Church and school administrators at Successful Preparation High School indicated that they are strongly committed to making positive strides to ensure that African American students have access to opportunities to grow and further enhance their learning. For church and school leaders, the partnership reflected “not only what we do, but who we are.” In return, the commitment efforts of the leaders at Joyful Noise Baptist Church and the administrators at Successful Preparation High School are consistently well received by student participants in this study. The commitment of the Black church to consistently serve the students at Successful Preparation High School gives ethos to two emerging subthemes found in the data aligning to the commitment theme: service and time. Service and time equally represent required consistency, continuous improvement, and influence of the educational achievement for the African American students attending Successful Preparation High School.

#### *A Servant’s Responsibility*

Service was identified as one of the main characteristics emphasized in the partnership between Successful Preparation High School and Joyful Noise Baptist Church. Joyful Noise Baptist Church participants mentioned the importance of leaders in the Black church serving both as a role model for students and as a follower of Christ. One church leader shared that he feels that his leadership in the church, both by being an associate minister and a youth leader at Joyful Noise Baptist Church, is evidenced in a life of serving others. The church leader explained Jesus is his ultimate role model: “It is by Jesus’ life that I should seek to provide students with this same type of sacrificial service to support them in having a successful education and thorough preparation for the future.” Another church leader pointed to a picture of Jesus washing the disciple’s feet that was hanging on the wall of the church. He stated that the picture, “shows how we should look to the needs of others and not just our own, and this means our young people, too.” A responsibility for service

seemed to be woven into the identity of these church members as they each acknowledged the importance and necessity for supporting and serving the students through this partnership. Although their faith motivated their service, the church members were committed to serving all students regardless of individual student's beliefs. One church leader added, "We know that everyone may not be a Christian, and we respect this. However, we know, as children of God, we are [responsible] to love and care for all children."

### *Time*

There is substantial amount of time spent each year by church partners to plan, execute, and revise the partnership efforts from year to year with Successful Preparation. Regular contact with students and the partnership participants is crucial to the success of the program. Weekly participation from Joyful Noise begins the third week of school and continues to the very last day of the spring semester. Joyful Noise partners typically come to the school three times per week, sometimes more, depending on the support needed to encourage student achievement. Even after the school year has ended, during the summer months, social gatherings are coordinated for the students who were part of the partnership. During the summer, students are invited to come to the church and even some of the community centers, like the YMCA or Boys and Girls Clubs of America near the school for ongoing contact and support with their mentor/tutor. These summer events provide year-round access between mentor and mentee, and because school is not in normal operation during the summer, church members and leaders provide support and facilitate all partnership efforts. This partnership involves a commitment of time from all members involved: school leaders, church leaders, and students. Successful Preparation leaders indicated that the school leaders and church partnership leaders meet before, during, and after each school year to engage in discussions regarding what "went well, what could improve, and how to make a greater impact in the upcoming year."

## **Discussion**

It was clear, in our findings, that relationships, both fictive kin and mentor/mentee, are fundamental to partnership efforts between Joyful Noise Baptist Church and Successful Preparation High School. These relationships integrally assisted these African American students to achieve and perform well academically. These relationships served a variety of purposes. They assisted in giving voice to older African American partners to speak to younger African American students about their cultural heritage and their own personal, marginalized

experiences. This concept, referred to by CRT as counterstorytelling, is a tenet that can support positive change in an equitable direction (Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Through telling their own stories, these leaders connected with students and helped them understand that they, too, could experience success despite academic, family, and resource challenges they were facing. The opportunity for counterstorytelling in partnership efforts increased as relationships deepened and strengthened. When relationships developed to the point of “family-like” or fictive kin relationships, students and partners had shared many stories and had developed vulnerable, trusting relationships. Bandura’s social learning theory further explains this finding. SLT discusses the presence of modeling and how it works to communicate a system of positive or negative consequences in order to increase the likelihood that the learner will reproduce the behaviors being modeled for them (Ravitch, 2016; Bandura & Walters, 1977). SLT provides an understanding of how relationships, developed through shared experiences, provide a platform for learning. Through the lens of SLT, these mentor/mentee relationships provided opportunities for modeling of behaviors that can lead to success. For example, the college student who was serving as a mentor demonstrated to participating students that graduates from Preparation High can attend and experience success in college. Additionally, as this mentor shared his experiences with college applications and interviews, partnership students learned vicariously how to approach the college application process. They also gained self-efficacy as they witnessed the success of church members who are currently successful business professionals who had graduated from Preparation High. These factors—counterstorytelling, vicarious learning, modeling, and self-efficacy—expressed within relationships, motivated these students toward success as each one was successfully completing high school requirements.

Students in this study were clearly motivated to participate in the partnership because of the access to opportunities and educational resources offered through the partnership that helped them succeed in the classroom. Students were able to gain access to resources that would not normally be found in at-risk schools. The permanence of racism tenet of CRT suggests that racism controls the political, social, and economic realms of U.S. society, including public education (Ladson-Billings, 2017). This partnership counteracted this tenet by providing support not often experienced by African American students. This support came in the form of fictive kin relationships that developed when family members were not able to provide academic support and in the form of professional mentorship and advice from successful church members. Fictive kin relationships also worked to support teachers who simply could not fill the emotional void that some students possessed. An additional aspect of

CRT represented in this study were the social connections that these students made through relationships. These connections appeared to serve these students well as they applied for scholarships, employment positions, and college acceptance. Black church partners were committed to listening and learning the needs of each student, and they sought support to meet individual student needs.

The student participants in this study appreciated the community support and the amount of time taken with them by Black church members to increase their educational achievement. Students in this study expressed that their teachers were not able to give them the one-on-one instructional support that they desperately needed. Church leader participant perceptions in this study supported this understanding by explaining that overcrowded classrooms in this high-need and large minority populated school prevented teachers from providing the academic support that these students needed. For this school, the inclusion of an additional 260–270 students since the previous school year did not result in additional resources such as hiring additional classroom teachers. Instead, the new students assimilated into the existing structure of the school, increasing workloads and class sizes for teachers. This finding supports the interest convergence tenet of CRT because teacher assignments and consolidating schools in low socioeconomic neighborhoods consistently occurs, while high performing, White student-populated schools often have smaller class sizes (Ladson-Billings, 2017). This partnership helped to minimize this limitation for these students by providing access to high-quality, supportive mentors.

School leaders at Successful Preparation High School communicated that this partnership represents the commitment of the community in partnering to support the education for children in this high poverty district. School leaders appreciated the support from this community organization, and it helped them to understand the valuable resources available in this community, a perspective that is not often recognized by majority population district leaders. According to CRT, resources in the African American community often go unnoticed, and this partnership brought these vast resources to the attention of school leaders. These resources included rich understandings of the culture of the community and embeddedness that allowed deep, authentic relationships to emerge. Even though this school included very few African American teachers, a situation often experienced by students in high minority schools, this school–church partnership offered opportunity to expand cultural competency in the building. The fact that strong, culturally centered relationships drive this partnership to continue each year (as indicated by those interviewed) provides a platform for vicarious learning for teachers and administrators as well. Further, the fact that church leaders expressed that there is minimal African American

district leadership, providing limited representation when school district decisions are made, esteems the interest convergence proponent of CRT (Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2017). In this study, Successful Preparation School Leaders recognized that their racial/ethnic and cultural differences pose a challenge regarding their ability to effectively support achievement for students who do not have the same life experiences as they have. This partnership revealed the potential for collaboration between those with different life experiences as they work to dissolve past racial tension. This idea aligns with the critique of liberalism tenet of CRT in the fact that society often goes “against the grain” to eradicate historical norms of the past to improve society moving forward (Dixson et al., 2014). CRT suggests that, only through the building of relationships will past injustices and misunderstandings be rectified. This partnership serves as a long-standing tradition where cultural competency is being developed.

The partnership between the church and the school in this study continues to “bridge the gap of achievement” as expressed by church and school leader participants because it helps to “level the playing field” to provide more equitable resources, instructional support, and relationships for African American students at Successful Preparation High School. Education reform strategies set in place by the U.S. government and funding to support educational achievement for all students have only minimally worked to support African American students attending schools with a reputation for low academic achievement (Willems & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2012). According to CRT, there is an overall challenge to dismantle the continuity of inequity in public school districts (Ladson-Billings, 2014) across the U.S. This inequity in decision making, as evidenced in this study primarily through resource allocation and lack of minority teachers, appeared to be minimized through partnership efforts. This finding clearly addresses the interest convergence tenet of CRT (Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2017) as society strives to enhance accountability for equity through policy implementation.

## Conclusion

This study sought to understand how this long-standing Black church–school partnership supports the educational achievement of African American students in a high-poverty, high-minority high school in the Midwest. Findings support information that is consistent with the literature on the mission of the Black church: to advance equity, social justice, and cultural preservation through promoting the success of its members. Important implications include

the fact that this partnership, one that is deeply embedded in the community, positively influenced educational outcomes for these students by meeting student needs of relationship and community. The press for equity and commitment of church members and administrators motivated students to persist in educational efforts.

## **Implications for Practice, Theory, and Research**

### *Implications for Practice*

Implications for practice include the finding that mentors often used counterstorytelling as a means to “connect” with students through relationship. This finding has strong implications for enhancing connections between majority teaching faculty/staff and minority students, as counterstorytelling is often an important means of communication and information transfer in the Black community. This research supports and develops a foundation for school leaders to build professional development opportunities centered on relationship building with community members to ultimately motivate, teach, and support every student in their classroom. Utilizing this technique may create a more inclusive environment for African American students and their families, and it may enhance the cultural competency of faculty/staff as they learn this pedagogy from these African American community members. Further implications for practice include utilization of resources freely shared by this Black church. These resources were perceived as part of their “mission as a church” and were valued as a means to enhance the future of students in the community. When these school leaders opened the school to the presence of these church members during activity periods, before, and after school, the partnership became embedded in the culture of the school, and students were motivated to participate. According to findings in this study, this work was perpetuated by school administrators and church pastors who deeply valued and were deeply committed to partnership efforts. The dedication and commitment of both parties sharing equal responsibility promoted success. As stated by a member of the church, “in a world of instability, the one thing that must always be stable is a willingness to serve and positively impact students.”

### *Implications for Theory*

Implications for theory include the combination of CRT and SLT theories as a means to understand partnership efforts. When these findings were interpreted through the tenets of CRT (interest convergence and counterstorytelling) and SLT (vicarious learning, modeling, and self-efficacy), the interpretation helped to explain how historical practices of injustice were minimized for these students who were on track to successfully complete their



high school education. These findings suggest that this Black church–school partnership not only helped students reach their educational goals but also helped both institutions to meet their organizational goals. Arguably, the most important goal was enhancing equity in one of the most disadvantaged and marginalized communities in the state. Applying these theories together as a theoretical framework in future studies can help to provide further understanding for their utility in efforts toward equity in educational contexts. Healing from past injustices and acceptance may be achieved through respect and a willingness to listen to the voice of marginalized individuals. The use of CRT and SLT as theoretical frameworks suggests that support from a community partnership, such as the partnership between the school and the Black church in this study, and the relationships that result, may serve as a vehicle to promote healing, acceptance, and success for marginalized groups.

### *Implications for Research*

One of the most important implications for research is the finding of the use of counterstorytelling as a means to build relationships with marginalized students. These students easily accommodated to this pedagogical practice utilized by their mentors. Counterstorytelling also assisted in relationship formation as students developed meaningful, often kin-like, relationships with Black church mentees. Further research is needed to determine if counterstorytelling can help school leaders and teachers gain cultural competency and effectiveness with academic efforts involving African American students. Counterstorytelling may facilitate environments that actually become inclusive and not simply superficially diverse (Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2017). The finding of the presence of fictive kin relationships in partnership efforts deserves additional attention. Further understandings regarding how these relationships are formed could enhance partnership efforts. Further, partnerships with community organizations which are deeply embedded in the African American community may offer promising opportunities for educational enhancement through resource expansion and cultural competency. Additional research is needed to expand these understandings.

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### Appendix. Interview Protocol

#### All Participants

Please describe this partnership between the church and the school.

1. How are you involved with the school–church partnership?
2. How does the partnership influence the educational achievement and college preparation of African American students in this school?

## BLACK CHURCH-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

3. Why do you feel the Black church partners with this school?
4. Why do you feel the school partners with the church?
5. How does the Black church support African American students' education?

### School Administrator/Church Leader

1. What are the primary goals of this partnership?
2. What factors motivate you to participate in the partnership with the Black church/school?
3. How might this partnership influence students other than academics?
4. What aspects of the partnership are most influential for student learning?

### Student Specific

1. What did this partnership mean to you?
2. What difference did it make in your learning?
  - 2a. What other differences did it make?
3. What motivated you to participate in the partnership?
4. What advice would you offer to educational leaders who wish to create partnerships?

### All Participants

1. Is there any other information you would like to provide me as it relates to Black church and school partnerships? If yes, please share.
2. Is there any other information you would like to provide me as it relates to educational achievement and college preparation of African American students? If yes, please share.