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Elevating Excellence: An Examination of K-12 Teacher Characteristics and Instructional Practices from the Perspective of College Graduated Black Men

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Elevating Excellence: An Examination of K-12 Teacher Characteristics and Instructional Practices from the Perspective of College Graduated Black Men

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.3.2.4><https://mje.williamwoods.edu/>**Richard Abram II, Ed.D.****Sarah J. Hicks, Ph.D.****Abstract**

This study examined K–12 teacher–student relationships and instructional practices as perceived by Black males who had graduated college. Using a mixed-methods design, quantitative survey data (N = 55) and qualitative focus group interviews were analyzed to identify factors associated with educational persistence and success. Quantitative findings identified building relationships, engagement strategies, high expectations, and teacher closeness as highly valued characteristics associated with positive educational experiences. Qualitative findings emphasized supportive relationships, advocacy, cultural relevance, resilience, and interactive learning as influential factors in participants’ educational journeys. The integration of these findings informed the development of the R.E.A.C.H. Framework: Resilience Through Supportive Educator-Student Relationships, Engagement Through Interactive Learning, Advocacy Through Supportive Relationships, Cultural Relevance with Exposure to Diversity, and High Expectations with Personal Accountability. The findings contributed to understanding factors associated with Black male educational success and persistence.

Keywords

Academic Success; Black Male College Persistence, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy; R.E.A.C.H. Framework; Teacher–Student Relationships;

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Introduction

Black males, more than any other racial or ethnic group, experience high rates of suspension, expulsion, grade retention, low graduation rates, and overrepresentation in special education (Thompson, 2023). Nunn (2014) demonstrated that high schools are disproportionately underpreparing Black male high school students for college futures. This research seeks to advance our understanding of the influencing factors and relationships involved in the educational trajectories of Black male students. In particular, it seeks to identify the attributes of teacher-student relationships and instructional strategies within United States K-12 settings that play a role in promoting and influencing success in school for Black males. To better understand the educational experiences that contribute to Black male success, this study examined the perceptions of college-graduated Black men regarding the teacher characteristics and instructional practices that influenced their educational journeys.

Literature Review

Black males, more than any other racial or ethnic group, experience high rates of suspension, expulsion, grade retention, low graduation rates, and overrepresentation in special education (Thompson, 2023). Nunn (2014) demonstrated that high schools are disproportionately underpreparing Black male high school students for college futures. This research seeks to advance our understanding of the influencing factors and relationships involved in the educational trajectories of Black male students. In particular, it seeks to identify the attributes of teacher-student relationships and instructional strategies within United States K-12 settings that play a role in promoting and influencing success in school for Black males. To better understand the educational experiences that contribute to Black male success, this study examined the perceptions of college-graduated Black men regarding the teacher characteristics and instructional practices that influenced their educational journeys.

The goal of this study was to ascertain characteristics of K-12 student-teacher relationships and instructional practices that influenced college graduation in Black males by examining the influencers of academic success for students in K-12 schools as identified by college graduated Black males. The literature which informed this study drew upon four sectors of research (a) gender disparities in college graduation between males and females; (b) the impact of K-12 teacher-student relationships and instructional practices; (c) the disproportionate under preparation of Black high school students for college; and (d) the importance of connecting education to students' lived experiences and cultures.

Female enrollment and graduation from higher education institutions was higher than males among all racial groups in the U.S. In 2021, of adults aged 25 and older who had completed a least a bachelor's degree, 53.1% were women and 46.9% were men (United States Census Bureau, 2023). Bachelor's degrees were important markers of progress for both an individual and society. Compared with non-college-graduates, individuals who held a bachelor's degree had higher lifetime earnings, lower odds of unemployment, and better health outcomes (United States Census Bureau, 2023). According to the US Census Bureau American Community Survey (2021), 52% of Black men (compared to 61% of all men) aged 25 and older had been to college, which was an increase from 50% in 2018.

African American males lagged behind their female counterparts in most educational performance indicators, including high school, undergraduate, and graduate graduation rates (Garibaldi et al., 2007).

For Black male students to be engaged in the teaching and learning in academic spaces the culture and environment had to provide psychological safety where they can take risk, express ideas, ask questions, and make mistakes, without fear of negative consequences, ridicule, judgement, or rejection. Harris (2018) asserted it was critical to help male participants become aware of how they perceived Black masculinity and its impact on academic achievement.

Male underachievement relative to females has only more recently become a widespread concern for the American educational system relative to other countries (Harris, 2018). Harris established the term “saboteur” to define someone who had self-defeating patterns that negatively impacted their academic behaviors, beliefs, and outcomes. In Black male students being a saboteur was linked to the imposter phenomenon and self-handicapping as Black males may felt disoriented and uncomfortable in predominantly White colleges or K-12 institutions where Black students were not reflected in the staff, curriculum, or governing body. The saboteur diverted failure from lack of ability to lack of desire which was designed to protect the Black male student’s psyche from internalizing feelings of inadequacy in the academic setting. Unfortunately, the long-term consequences of temporary comfort were reflected in low grades and delayed academic progression which increased the risk for attrition and a dream of obtaining a college education deferred.

Marzano (2017) highlighted the critical role of fulfilling students' psychological needs for feeling welcomed and valued as pivotal to their educational success. A student's sense of belonging in the classroom served as an entrance to engagement and intellectual curiosity, contributing to a positive mental context conducive to learning. Marzano emphasized that this was achieved through the intentional development of teacher-student relationships, where a student's worth was affirmed through consistent, caring, and respectful interactions. By intentionally cultivating such an environment, teachers could create a comfortable and secure learning space that encouraged students to embrace academic challenges with confidence. Marzano proposed evidence-based practices that advocated for a responsive pedagogy, adapting to the needs of each student and recognizing the diversity of experiences they brought into the classroom. Marzano provided a framework with eleven research-supported instructional strategies to implement these principles effectively, ensuring that all students had equitable access to high-quality education that was both nurturing and rigorous. Within his framework, the teacher was central and utilized behaviors to improve student outcomes.

Zee et al. (2021) studied teacher-student relationships in grades K-6 students. They concluded that relationships with high closeness, low conflict, and low dependency were key prerequisites for students’ academic success. Additionally, Ma (2021) found similar results in Beijing. That is, when adolescents trusted their teachers and accepted their guidance, they were more likely to achieve better learning outcomes. The relationship between teachers and students provided students with a vital connection to school resources for academic success.

Unfortunately, United States’ high schools were disproportionately failing to adequately prepare African American and Latino high school students for college (Nunn, 2014). Data revealed a more pronounced gender gap existed among Black males compared to other racial or ethnic groups (Lee & Ransom, 2011). Lee and Ransom identified factors that contributed to the persistence of these students included supportive faculty, campus environments, and peer mentors. Attrition factors included forced classroom participation,

faculty teaching styles, lack of financial support, failure to seek support services, and challenges in navigating the transition from home to school.

Emdin (2016) argued that educators had to genuinely connect with their students, understanding their unique backgrounds, struggles, and aspirations. He suggested that these authentic relationships could foster trust and create a supportive environment where students felt valued and motivated to succeed. Emdin (2016) emphasized that the true value of teacher-student relationships was found in their authenticity; when teachers genuinely connected with their students, these relationships became profoundly impactful.

Allen et al. (2018) discussed the critical role that K-12 student-teacher relationships and instructional practices played in the academic and social development of African American and Hispanic students. They expounded on the pervasive impact of racial microaggressions within the educational landscape and advocated for a strategic shift towards culturally affirming education as a countermeasure. This approach was postulated as essential not only for mitigating the adverse effects of such microaggressions but also for fostering an inclusive, supportive, and empowering learning environment for minority students. This research aligned with the broader educational equity discourse, with further examination of student-teacher relationships and implementation of instructional strategies that resonated with students' cultural and individual identities.

Tensions and Gaps in Current Scholarship on Black Male Educational Experiences

Existing scholarship on Black male educational achievement offered valuable insights yet revealed persistent theoretical gaps. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995) established that students learned best when instruction affirmed cultural identity, developed critical consciousness, and promoted academic excellence. Reality Pedagogy (RP) (Emdin, 2016) further operationalized these ideas through cogenerative dialogue (cogen) and teacher-student co-construction of classroom culture. He argued that traditional teaching often ignored the cultural and social experiences of students, creating a disconnect between what happened in the classroom and students' "reality" or lived experience. Cogens emphasized the process of learning alongside and deriving value from the cultural knowledge and personal experiences that students contributed. In the context of cogens, what students brought to the learning environment, encompassing their cultural backgrounds and real-life experiences, held a central position. While both frameworks re-centered culture and authenticity in teaching, their primary focus remained the instructional moment—what happened *within* the classroom space. They do not fully capture the longitudinal effects of these practices on students' educational trajectories, particularly the complex pathways that led Black males from K-12 experiences to college persistence.

Furthermore, the literature highlights a tension between teacher intent and systemic reality. Marzano (2017) and Zee et al. (2021) emphasized teacher behaviors that improved student engagement and achievement, yet these models often treated relationship-building as a strategy rather than a structure. Conversely, scholars such as Allen et al. (2018) and Harris (2018) underscored the emotional and social dimensions of schooling—issues of trust, identity, and belonging—that extended beyond instruction into institutional climate. However, these studies rarely integrated these dimensions into a cohesive system of practice that addressed both classroom-level and systemic factors.

The underrepresentation of Black male perspectives further constrained the field. Much of the literature interpreted student outcomes through the lens of educators or policy makers, not the students themselves. This absence of reflective, first-person accounts limited our understanding of which teacher characteristics and instructional practices truly sustained long-term success. By foregrounding the voices of college-graduated Black men, this study offered a corrective to that gap, transforming lived experience into conceptual insight.

R.E.A.C.H. (Resilience, Engagement, Advocacy, Cultural Relevance, and High Expectations with Personal Accountability) addressed these limitations by offering an integrative framework that merged the relational depth of CRP and RP with the outcome orientation of resilience and accountability research. It theorized that success was not only a product of cultural alignment but of a continuous feedback loop between support, engagement, advocacy, relevance, and expectation. In doing so, R.E.A.C.H. reframed educational success for Black males as the result of a relational ecosystem rather than a single pedagogical intervention. This synthesis pushed the discourse beyond “what worked” in classrooms toward “what endured” in lives.

Methodology

Utilizing a mixed methods approach, we investigated the null hypothesis: There was no difference in rating of importance related to teacher characteristics and actions by Black males who did and did not report positive relationships with K-12 teachers. Additionally, we sought to describe the unique experiences and challenges of Black males who successfully graduated college with a focused exploration of their perceptions of their relationships with K-12 teachers during their elementary and secondary school. Surveys were administered to gather quantitative data. Then, focus group interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. An exploratory sequential design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023) research process was used to validate the initial survey findings and uncover the intricate and varied nature of participants' experiences. By combining both quantitative and qualitative data, this approach enhanced the depth and breadth of findings, offering a more holistic understanding of the influence positive relationships with K-12 teachers had on college graduation success among Black male students.

The data collection process first involved reaching out to potential participants through educational institutions and community organizations that served Black male populations. That is, a recruitment email with an invitation to participate was sent to leaders within Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated, the Brothers Liberating Our Communities (BLOC) organization, and within the Greater Kansas City K-12 public school community of educators. Participants were expected to be black men, 18 years of age or older. A consent form was included at the start of the online survey. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to participate in a follow-up in-person focus group interview. If they volunteered, they were prompted to enter their name and an email contact in a separate form that was disconnected from the anonymous survey results. After quantitative data collection ended and analysis was underway, the graduate student researcher scheduled focus group interview times and days with volunteer participants. Focus group interviews with five to six participants per session were conducted with audio recording.

Survey participants completed an anonymous survey with 21 items. The first eight questions asked participants about their demographic characteristics. The remaining 13 items asked participants to rate the importance of teaching strategies and teacher characteristics, which have been identified as effective by

Marzano (2017) and Zee et al. (2021). The Likert scale rating options ranged from Not Important (1) to Very Important (4).

Following collection and analysis of survey data, the focus group interviews were conducted using a semi-structured design within a barbershop protocol (Curry et al., 2022). The semi-structured design supported the graduate researcher in asking consistent questions across focus group interviews and included follow-up prompts related to the findings in the quantitative survey. Participants were asked to describe their perceptions of what the survey results said were the top six most important teaching strategies and characteristics. This provided confirmation and expanded understanding of the quantitative findings. The barbershop protocol created a structure for the space so that Black male participants would feel safe for cultural engagement, guidance, reflection, and candidness that was free of stigma or judgment. The utilization of culturally relevant settings, analogous to barbershops in the initial study, fostered a comfortable environment that encouraged genuine and open responses (Curry et al., 2022).

Each interview session extended for approximately 1.25 hours and was conducted across 3 interview groups with 3-5 participants each. The interviews were designed with an open-ended approach, providing participants with the opportunity to add insights not captured by the survey. Interview questions queried the influence of these relationships and instructional practices on the participants' decision to pursue higher education and their persistence through challenging times in college. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences from elementary through secondary school and how these interactions with teachers might have supported their resilience leading to college graduation. Participants were also prompted to discuss the top six characteristics of influential teachers as identified by the survey data: building relationships, using strategies that appear in all types of lessons, using engagement strategies, communicating clear goals, and high closeness. These attributes were further explored to understand how they were represented in the participants' K-12 educational experiences. Interviewees were invited to share any significant instructional practices or relationship elements, not previously listed in the survey, that contributed to their academic success.

For data analysis, survey data was first analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify the most frequently reported instructional practices and teacher characteristics that were deemed important. Then, *t*-test analyses were used to compare means of responses between participant groups - those that selected either "yes" or "no" when asked if they had positive relationships with any of their K-12 teachers. After conducting focus group interviews, responses from audio-recorded semi-structured interviews were transcribed and reviewed to gain a thorough understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences. Two researchers independently reviewed the transcripts, and discrepancies in coding were discussed until consensus was reached among the research team. The codes were then grouped into broader themes to explain and present the nature of the qualitative results. The themes were further refined and revised with additional reading of the transcripts and a third research reviewer who helped identify quotes that reflected the essence of the data.

Results

Most Black males who had attained a degree in higher education (76%) reported having positive relationships with K-12 teachers (see Table 1). This finding of positivity with K-12 teachers was consistent across all levels of degrees earned, with notable figures including 79% (15 out of 19) from bachelor's

degree holders, 74% (20 out of 27) from master's degree holders, and 100% (5 out of 5) from doctorate participants. A Pearson chi-square test was employed to evaluate the association between students' perceptions of positive relationships with their K–12 teachers and their attainment of a college degree. The results of the chi-square statistic indicated no statistically significant difference between the groups ($\chi^2 = 3.237$, $df = 3$, $p = .357$). These findings suggested that the presence of positive relationships with K–12 teachers did not have a discernible association with a particular level of advanced college degree attainment.

Table 1

Positive Relationship Reported by Highest Degree Earned

Highest Degree Earned	Positive Relationship	
	Yes	No
Bachelors	15	4
Masters	20	7
Specialist	2	2
Doctorate	5	0
Total	42 (76%)	13 (24%)

In addition to reporting whether participants had positive relationships with K-12 teachers, participants were asked to reflect upon their most influential K-12 teachers. With these individuals in mind, rate the importance of each characteristic and instructional practice associated with student-teacher relationships. Ratings were on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4, where 1 indicated a minimum value (“not important”) and 4 indicated a maximum value (“very important”) of perceived importance. The analysis revealed the top five attributes undergirding the positive relationships with K-12 teachers. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2*Characteristics and Strategies Attributed to Positive Relationships with Teachers*

Characteristic	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Building Relationships	1	4	3.67	0.610
Using Engagement Strategies	1	4	3.53	0.663
Communicate High Expectations	1	4	3.47	0.716
Conducting Knowledge Applications	2	4	3.44	0.660
High Closeness	1	4	3.38	0.707
Using Strategies That Appear in all Types of Lessons	1	4	3.38	0.652
Communicate Clear Goals	1	4	3.35	0.775
Conducting Practice and Deepening	1	4	3.31	0.791
Implementing Rules and Procedures	1	4	3.16	0.898
Conducting Direct Instruction	1	4	3.09	0.800
Uses Assessments	1	4	3.02	0.850
Low Conflict	1	4	3	1.00
Low Dependency	1	4	2.35	0.947

*(*N* = 55)

Building Relationships emerged as the most critical factor, with an average rating of 3.67 (*SD* = 0.610), indicating a strong emphasis on the importance of relational foundation in the educational experience. Using Engagement Strategies was rated at an average of 3.53 (*SD* = 0.663), highlighting the significance of interactive and engaging teaching methods. Communicating High Expectations was the third most valued characteristic, with an average rating of 3.47 (*SD* = 0.716), suggesting that students valued when teachers expressed confidence in their abilities to succeed. Conducting Knowledge Applications received an average rating of 3.44 (*SD* = 0.660), reflecting the importance of applying learned knowledge in practical contexts. Finally, High Closeness was rated at an average of 3.38 (*SD* = 0.707), indicating that a sense of closeness and personal connection with teachers is crucial for positive educational outcomes.

The study also utilized t-tests to assess the impact of the attributes of Communicating Clear Goals, Using Engagement Strategies, Building Relationships, Communicating High Expectations, and High Closeness on positive teacher-student relationships. The t-test was employed to analyze the scores from the survey designed to assess the significance of various teacher attributes and instructional practices that supported positive teacher-student relationships. The scores were analyzed based on participants ratings of the attributes on a Likert scale ranging from 1-4, where 1 indicated the minimum value (not important) and 4 indicated the maximum value (very important). The t-test compared the mean scores between two groups: participants who reported having a positive relationship with their K-12 teachers and those who did not. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3*t-Test for Significance Between Groups on Rating of Survey Statements*

	<i>t</i>	df	one-sided <i>p</i>
Communicating Clear Goals	-0.95	25	0.25
Using Engagement Strategies	-1.38	25	0.08
Building Relationships	-1.45	25	0.08
Communicating High Expectations	-1.45	25	0.08
High Closeness	-1.47	25	0.07

Focus group interview data provided qualitative insight to further understand the rationale for the importance of the top K-12 teacher attributes and instructional strategies that positively impacted Black males. Through the focus groups, variations in how participants viewed and interacted with the identified instructional practices and relationship elements emerged, both affirming and expanding upon the survey results. The analysis revealed five central themes used to describe the teaching practices and the critical role of supportive teacher-student relationships as identified by college-graduated Black males. These themes included: (a) high expectations with personal accountability, (b) cultural relevance with exposure to diversity, (c) supportive relationships with advocacy, (d) nurturing resilience through supportive educator-student relationships, and (e) active engagement with interactive learning.

Table 4 presented each identified theme, supported by direct quotations from the interviews. These themes highlight the instructional strategies and relationship elements deemed most impactful by participants and provide a framework for developing teaching practices that are both responsive and empowering. In this research, pseudonyms are used for all participants to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 4*Themes and Representative Participant Quotations from Focus Group Interviews*

High Expectations with Personal Accountability	Cultural Relevance with Exposure to Diversity	Supportive Relationships with Advocacy	Nurturing Resilience Through Supportive Relationships	Active Engagement with Interactive Learning
"You can be what you want to be. We're helping you to be successful." (Larry)	"Learning about different cultures made me realize the world was bigger than my neighborhood." (Larry)	"I had some phenomenal teachers who... made themselves available or encouraged us to find the resources." (Larry)	"My teacher noticed I was struggling and offered support... it helped me push through tough times." (Curt)	"We had the old school chalk boards... when we did math problems, it was interactive." (Brandon)
"There are no excuses. You have to choose what you want to do with it and how well you choose to do it." (Khalil)	"Coming from so far was everything under the sun." (Curt)	"My teacher encouraged me to speak up... that made a huge difference in how I navigated school." (Khalil)	"Nobody cared. Got to high school, nobody did one of these things. The close relation I had was my geometry teacher." (Harold)	"A lot of my secondary teachers... pushed us to be critical thinkers with opportunities for practice and feedback." (Larry)
"I was expected to do well, not just by my teachers but at home too. That pushed me to hold myself accountable." (Harold)	Curt's experience transitioning from the Caribbean to North America underscored the impact of exposure to diversity on his educational path.			"I loved it when we got to solve problems on the board... it made me feel involved and helped me learn better." (Khalil)

Note. Participant names are pseudonyms.

Participants consistently spoke about the importance of high standards and expectations set by both educators and parents. This theme encompassed belief in students' potential and the push for academic excellence, which was often internalized as personal accountability. It suggested that when educators held

students to high standards and students embraced personal responsibility for their learning, they were more likely to aspire to and reach higher educational goals.

Additionally, exposure to diverse cultures and the presence of culturally relevant teaching materials and role models were identified as pivotal. This theme illustrated that students benefited from seeing their own experiences reflected in their learning and from being exposed to a wide range of perspectives. Curt's statement reflected on the cultural and socio-economic barriers to higher education in his home country, highlighting the relevance of understanding diverse backgrounds and the challenges they presented in accessing education.

Furthermore, building relationships and having advocates throughout the educational journey were identified as critical. This included students' ability to advocate for themselves, which educators could foster by empowering students to speak up and by providing guidance on navigating the educational system. Similarly, the role of educators in fostering resilience in students emerged as a vital theme. Educators who recognized and responded to the adversities faced by students played a significant role in helping them build resilience. By establishing supportive and understanding relationships, educators provided the necessary encouragement and resources for students to overcome obstacles and persist in their educational journeys. Finally, participants favored instructional strategies that actively involved them in the learning process. This included interactive learning experiences, such as solving problems 'at the board', which were both engaging and memorable.

Discussion

The themes identified through qualitative analysis offer a rich, nuanced understanding that complemented and expanded upon the quantitative findings of this study. The quantitative results highlighted specific instructional practices—using engagement strategies, conducting knowledge applications, using strategies that appeared in all types of lessons, conducting practice and deepening, implementing rules and procedures, communicating clear goals, conducting direct instruction, and using assessments—and teacher attributes of building relationships, communicating high expectations, high closeness, low conflict, and low dependency (Marzano, 2017; Zee et al., 2021) that influenced the academic success of Black male students. The qualitative results identified meaningful subthemes of personal accountability, advocacy, exposure to diversity, supportive relationships, and interactive learning that supported the academic success of Black male students.

The R.E.A.C.H. Framework was comprised of Resilience Through Supportive Educator-Student Relationships, Engagement and Interactive Learning, Advocacy in Supportive Relationships, Cultural Relevance and Exposure to Diversity, and High Expectations with Personal Accountability—emerged from this study as a comprehensive model for understanding the factors influencing the academic success of Black male students. This framework integrated key findings from both quantitative and qualitative data, providing educational practices and teacher attributes that were essential to developing equitable learning environments.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the sample consisted exclusively of Black men who had graduated from college, limiting the transferability of findings to Black males who did not persist through postsecondary education or to other student populations. While the focus on college-graduated Black men provided valuable insight into factors associated with educational success, it did not capture the experiences of individuals whose educational pathways differed.

Second, the study relied on participants' retrospective reflections of their K–12 educational experiences. As with all retrospective research, participants' recollections may have been influenced by the passage of time, subsequent educational experiences, and personal interpretation. Although these reflections provided meaningful insight into perceptions of influential teachers and instructional practices, they may not fully represent the complexity of participants' original experiences.

Third, the study utilized self-reported survey and focus group data. Participants' responses reflected their perceptions and interpretations of their experiences, which may have been influenced by social desirability bias or individual differences in meaning-making. Additionally, participants were recruited through educational institutions and community organizations, which may have influenced the perspectives represented within the sample.

Finally, the relatively small sample size and regional nature of participant recruitment limited the generalizability of the findings. The purpose of this study was not to establish causal relationships but to explore perceptions of teacher-student relationships and instructional practices associated with educational success among college-graduated Black men.

Despite these limitations, the findings provided valuable insight into the educational experiences, relationships, and instructional practices that participants associated with persistence and achievement. Furthermore, the integration of quantitative findings, qualitative themes, and existing scholarship informed the development of the R.E.A.C.H. Framework as a conceptual model for understanding factors that support Black male educational success.

Development of the R.E.A.C.H. Framework

The R.E.A.C.H. Framework emerged through the integration of quantitative findings, qualitative themes, and existing scholarship on teacher-student relationships, culturally responsive pedagogy, and educational equity. Quantitative results identified building relationships, engagement strategies, communicating high expectations, conducting knowledge applications, and teacher closeness as the highest-rated characteristics and instructional practices associated with positive educational experiences. Qualitative analysis further revealed five interconnected themes: Nurturing Resilience Through Supportive Educator-Student Relationships, Active Engagement with Interactive Learning, Supportive Relationships with Advocacy, Cultural Relevance with Exposure to Diversity, and High Expectations with Personal Accountability. Collectively, these findings informed the development of the R.E.A.C.H. Framework as a conceptual model for understanding factors that supported Black male persistence and educational success.

Resilience Through Supportive Educator-Student Relationships emerged from participants' descriptions of educators who provided encouragement, consistency, and support during critical moments in their educational journeys. Quantitatively, building relationships received the highest mean rating among all teacher characteristics and instructional practices. Qualitative findings reinforced the importance of

supportive educator-student relationships as participants consistently described teachers who recognized their potential, offered guidance, and helped them navigate challenges. These findings aligned with Zee et al. (2021), who identified positive teacher-student relationships as foundational to student success, and Marzano (2017), who emphasized the importance of creating environments in which students feel valued and supported. Together, these findings informed the Resilience component of the framework.

Engagement Through Interactive Learning emerged from participants' emphasis on instructional practices that actively involved them in the learning process. Engagement strategies ranked among the highest-rated instructional practices in the quantitative findings, while participants described memorable learning experiences that required discussion, collaboration, feedback, and active participation. These findings reflected Marzano's (2017) emphasis on engagement as a critical component of effective instruction and Emdin's (2016) advocacy for learning environments that position students as active contributors rather than passive recipients of knowledge. The convergence of these findings informed the Engagement component of the framework.

Advocacy Through Supportive Relationships developed from participants' descriptions of educators who not only taught content but also encouraged, empowered, and advocated for them. Participants frequently discussed teachers who made themselves available, encouraged them to seek opportunities, and helped them navigate educational systems. These findings extended beyond traditional notions of relationship-building and reflected the role educators played in helping students develop voice, confidence, and agency. This theme aligned with the work of Allen et al. (2018), who emphasized the importance of affirming educational environments for historically marginalized students, and Emdin (2016), who highlighted the importance of authentic teacher-student partnerships. These findings informed the Advocacy component of the framework.

Cultural Relevance with Exposure to Diversity emerged through participants' reflections on the importance of seeing their experiences reflected in their learning while also being exposed to perspectives beyond their own. Participants described how exposure to different cultures, experiences, and educational opportunities expanded their understanding of the world and influenced their aspirations. These findings aligned with Ladson-Billings' (1995) work on culturally relevant pedagogy and Emdin's (2016) emphasis on connecting learning to students' lived realities. While cultural relevance was more pronounced within the qualitative findings than the quantitative survey results, participants consistently emphasized the importance of representation, exposure, and authenticity in shaping their educational experiences. These findings informed the Cultural Relevance component of the framework.

High Expectations with Personal Accountability emerged through both quantitative and qualitative findings. Communicating high expectations was among the highest-rated teacher characteristics, and participants frequently discussed educators who challenged them to achieve at high levels while simultaneously holding them accountable for their effort and performance. Participants described expectations not as punitive measures, but as affirmations of their potential. These findings aligned with Harris's (2018) discussion of academic identity and Marzano's (2017) emphasis on clear expectations as a catalyst for student achievement. Together, these findings informed the High Expectations with Personal Accountability component of the framework.

The integration of these five themes resulted in the development of the R.E.A.C.H. Framework: Resilience Through Supportive Educator-Student Relationships, Engagement Through Interactive Learning, Advocacy Through Supportive Relationships, Cultural Relevance with Exposure to Diversity, and High Expectations with Personal Accountability. Rather than functioning as isolated concepts, the findings

suggested that these factors collectively contributed to educational experiences that supported persistence, achievement, and college completion among Black males. The framework therefore served as a synthesis of participant experiences, quantitative findings, and established educational scholarship, providing a model for understanding the relational, instructional, and cultural factors associated with Black male educational success.

Table 5 illustrates how the components of the R.E.A.C.H. Framework were informed through the integration of quantitative findings, qualitative themes, and existing educational scholarship. The table demonstrates the relationship between the study's mixed-methods findings and the conceptual development of each framework component.

Table 5

Alignment of Quantitative Findings, Qualitative Themes, and Literature Within the R.E.A.C.H. Framework

Component	Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Findings	Supporting Literature
Resilience	Building Relationships	Supportive Educator-Student Relationships	Zee et al. (2021); Marzano (2017)
Engagement	Engagement Strategies	Interactive Learning	Marzano (2017); Emdin (2016)
Advocacy	Building Relationships; High Closeness	Advocacy	Allen et al. (2018); Emdin (2016)
Cultural Relevance	Exposure to Diversity and Cultural Relevance Theme	Exposure to Diversity	Ladson-Billings (1995); Emdin (2016)
High Expectations	Communicating High Expectations	Personal Accountability	Harris (2018); Marzano (2017)

As shown in Table 5, each component of the R.E.A.C.H. Framework was supported by both participant experiences and existing scholarship. While some components emerged more directly from the quantitative findings and others were more strongly reflected in the qualitative data, the framework was developed through the convergence of these findings and supporting literature. This integration provided a conceptual structure for understanding the relational, instructional, and cultural factors associated with Black male educational success.

Research Implications and Future Inquiry

The findings of this study highlighted the importance of teacher-student relationships, culturally relevant practices, advocacy, engagement, and high expectations in supporting Black male educational success. Collectively, these findings informed the development of the R.E.A.C.H. Framework and provided a foundation for future research examining the relationship between educational experiences and long-term academic outcomes.

Future research should expand upon this work by including both college-graduated and non-college-graduated Black males to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing educational persistence. Additional studies may examine how the components of the R.E.A.C.H. Framework operate across diverse educational settings and student populations. Such inquiry has the potential to further inform educational policies, practices, and interventions designed to support historically marginalized students.

The findings also offered several implications for educational practice. Schools and districts should prioritize professional development that strengthens teacher-student relationships, culturally responsive instructional practices, student engagement, and high expectations. Consistent with Williams, Smith, and Williams (2022), educators should incorporate multicultural texts and learning experiences that reflect students' lived experiences while expanding their exposure to diverse perspectives. Furthermore, schools should consider structures that promote student advocacy, resilience, and meaningful participation in the learning process.

For policymakers and educational leaders, the findings underscored the importance of creating systems that support equitable educational opportunities through inclusive curriculum design, culturally responsive practices, mentorship, and the recruitment and retention of diverse educators. Continued investigation of these factors may further enhance understanding of the relational, instructional, and cultural conditions associated with Black male educational success.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the voices and perspectives of Black men who had graduated college as they reflected upon the K–12 instructional practices and teacher relationships they experienced during their educational journeys. Black males advocated for educators to prioritize cultural relevance, supportive relationships, and active engagement within their teaching strategies to support academic success. This research began to provide additional explanation and confirmation of the attributes that fostered positive educational outcomes for Black male students, aligning with scholarly arguments for the necessity of ethnoracial congruence between students and teachers.

As educators and leaders sought to create more equitable and effective educational environments that enhanced outcomes for Black males, it was imperative that these findings informed both practice and policy in education through the recruitment and retention of Black male teachers, culturally responsive training, inclusive curriculum design, mental health and supportive services, equitable discipline policies, community and parental engagement, research and data collection, accountability measures, and policy advocacy. The experiences of college-graduated Black men suggest that educational success is influenced

not only by what educators teach, but by the relationships, expectations, advocacy, engagement, and cultural relevance students experience throughout their educational journeys.

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