

# The Perceptions of Black and Latinx High School Males Regarding their Attitudes Toward School and of Hopefulness

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## Abstract

The purpose of the study was to discover and give voice to Black and Latino adolescent males regarding their school attitudes (attitudes toward school, attitudes towards teachers, motivation/self-regulation, goal valuation, and academic self-perception) and their level of hope (agency and pathways thinking) for the future. This mixed methods study used an explanatory sequential approach. The results of a multiple linear regression revealed that four independent variables: motivation/self-regulation, agency, attitudes towards teachers, and pathways,  $R=0.729$ ,  $R^2=0.532$ ,  $F(4, 242) = 68.256$ ,  $p<0.001$ , effect size=1.137, large, predicted academic self-perception. Qualitative themes included the following: intrinsic motivators support overall success, students want to be supported by educators to succeed, role models are essential, and schools should offer courses, clubs, and career tracks that will interest students. These results should be used to construct a positive school culture and inform teaching practice.

## Purpose of the Study

The world is constantly changing, and many male students of color will not be able to keep pace with this change if they are not engaged in their own education [1]. Fifty-nine percent of the Black male U.S. high school population graduated with their cohort in 2013, while during that same year, 65 percent of the Latinx male population graduated with their cohort [2]. Although the graduation rate for Latinx males is slightly higher, Black and Latinx males have the highest secondary school dropout rates in the U.S. across all racial and ethnic groups [3]. This is a disturbing statistic that exists in all school districts, including rural, suburban, and urban regions [4]. It is imperative that Black and Latinx males believe that the educational process offers advantageous outcomes [5]. In addition, these young men need to believe that academic engagement is not simply doing a task in school but actively engaging in activities that are challenging and non-superficial [1]. This type of engagement leads to favorable outcomes for all students, especially those who have been identified as academically at-risk [1].

In comparison to their White peers, Black/African American and Latino males significantly underperform in GPA measurement and standardized testing [4]. (The terms Black and African American shall be used interchangeably). Many students of color, particularly those raised in poverty, have less than favorable learning experiences, when compared to those from other ethnic backgrounds [6]. Although behavior, cognition, and affect are very different constructs, they are interrelated [7]. While behavioral engagement speaks to on-task performance, participating in class discussions connects to cognitive engagement that aims to have students comprehend complex concepts, acquire critical thinking skills, solve challenging problems, and demonstrate understanding of complex content matter [1]. Behavioral and cognitive tasks are related to affective engagement, which is assessed by a student's interest level and task investment.

Black and Latinx males can accomplish goals and achieve success in their lives [5]; however, only limited scholarly writing exists from the viewpoint of these students within their educational setting [8]. Therefore, this study was designed to examine the perspectives of secondary school Black and Latinx males toward academic engagement and education, in general.

## Rationale

Many Black and Latinx male students have high aspirations for themselves but often fail to recognize that academics play a big part in the attainment of their goals [9]. Due to this disconnect, they may lack hope, which can lead to consistent underachievement [10]. For students of color, these perspectives contribute to low rates of high school completion and a lack of preparation for college level rigor [10]. This study was conducted to investigate factors that contribute to the participants' academic self-efficacy as well as their level of hope for the future.

## Related Literature

### Theoretical Rationale: Hope

According to Snyder et al. [11], hope is a cognitive, motivational theory. Snyder and his colleagues [12] have defined hope as "the process of thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation to move toward those goals (agency), and the ways to achieve those goals (pathways)" (p. 355). To believe circumstances will change for the better, hope must be evident. Studies have shown that hope is a significant predictor of test scores and GPA [3]. It predicts student success and has led to a 12% bump in positive student outcomes [13]. In fact, those who attend school on a regular basis tend to be more hopeful for their future [13].

Hope is connected to our spirit being lifted, our energy being boosted, and life being seen as worth living [14]. Young men of color rely heavily on the collectivism of their community and the inspiration surrounding them [1,10,15,16]. The communities of our Latinx and Black males pride themselves on the successes of those who "make it" and, as a result, instill hope in the subsequent generations.



Hope is supported by those who provide a caring environment [17]. Caring is not simply a feeling, but rather an attentive action that allows the person showing the caring to meet the needs of others [18]. For example, when leaders are visible in the school and community, they reassure students, teachers, and parents that they care for their constituents [17].

### Participation in School and Other Activities

While participation is the outcome of hope, it also has a direct effect on life satisfaction [19]. Students who participate in activities within their academic settings, experience positive outcomes that can propel them to succeed regardless of their circumstances [1,19,20]. It is imperative for male students of color to know that causality, the cause-and-effect sequence, necessitates them to be more active and positively engaged in activities such as academics and sports, which will lead to much more satisfaction and higher participation in life activities [19,22].

### Suspension from School Deflects Hope

“Simply put, you can’t teach students who are not in school” [2]. The use of suspensions, being temporarily removed from classes or from school, results in the loss of instructional time. This loss impacts students’ academic achievement in a negative manner [1,2]. Research has explicitly shown that students who have been suspended or expelled feel that they do not belong in the school community. As a result, they will most likely drop out of the educational system [2]. Furthermore, research reveals that suspensions are ineffective at improving student safety and student behavior. They also increase student alienation from the school environment and contribute significantly to the school-to-prison pipeline [2]. Unfortunately, African American males are “disproportionately represented” in this pipeline and are subsequently placed in “correctional facilities” [23].

When they are in the K-12 school system, students of color have higher rates of office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions from school. Black males who are identified as students with disabilities have the highest suspension rates of any subgroups and this statistic has remained static over the past 30 years [2]. National data have indicated that 15 percent of Black males received out-of-school suspensions, compared to seven percent of Latino males and five percent of White males [2]. These data also indicate that there is no evidence to suggest that Black students engage in higher rates of student misbehavior when compared to their White counterparts, but studies have shown that Black students are punished in a more severe manner for less serious or more subjective infractions [2]. Besides taking a heavy toll on student performance, suspensions do not contribute to a healthy learning and living community.

### Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy allows individuals to believe they can attain whatever they firmly decide to accomplish [24]. It is defined as “people’s judgement of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” [25]. These beliefs serve as predictors. This means that individuals who have high self-efficacy beliefs will want to persist in a task because they believe they will achieve their goal. Likewise, those with low self-efficacy beliefs choose to avoid a task because they believe they are incapable of achieving it. Since academic performance is positively correlated with one’s self-efficacy beliefs [25], educators need to find ways to improve the self-efficacy of their students to enhance performance. Regrettably, the research has shown that Black and Latinx males who believe they can do well in the classroom are often not afforded the opportunities to do so [1].

### Academic Self-Perception

Academic self-perception is the evaluation of one’s perceived academic abilities [26]. These researchers have concluded that students who are confident in their scholastic abilities will engage in and continue to persist in these types of tasks. Underachievers are students who have a discrepancy between their expected achievement and their actual achievement [27]. They also typically exhibit low self-perception and may have difficulty with authority figures, such as teachers and school personnel. These attitudes negatively impact their achievement. While these students have the ability to reverse their underachievement, they must work harder than their peers to develop goals that motivate them to succeed academically [28,29]. In comparison, students who have a positive attitude toward their teachers, classes, and school tend to do well in school [26].

### Academic Engagement

Researchers have found that there are three distinct levels of academic engagement: emotional, behavioral, and cognitive [30,31]. For students to be academically engaged in their studies, they must be motivated to pursue their academics. In comparison, “When a student is uninterested, that person shows negative emotional states, such as boredom, frustration, depression, anxiety, or even rage” [31]. These emotions may lead to depression, delinquency, and criminal activity [30], eliminating any focus on addressing academic challenges.

Students who are behaviorally engaged actively participate in their academic activities. They spend time on completing their individual educational tasks, such as homework [31]. Those who are disengaged manifest behaviors such as mental disconnection, unpreparedness, and passivity related to school tasks. A student’s psychological investment coupled with their effort to be successful in the learning process leads to cognitive engagement [31]. This type of engagement leads to self-regulated learning, planning, and decision making [32,33].

In addition to internal factors, there are numerous external factors that influence engagement, including a school’s size, as well as its rules and regulations, curriculum, and availability of extracurricular activities [30]. For example, a large high school that does not create smaller student communities, enforces unfair expectations for conduct, implements learning objectives that are not related to career paths, and offers few meaningful extracurricular activities can create student alienation.

### Methodology

#### Research Questions

To what degree and in what manner do pathways thinking, agency thinking, attitudes toward teachers, attitudes toward school, goal valuation, and motivation/self-regulation predict academic self-perception?

What are the perceptions of Black and Latinx males regarding their education?

#### Setting and Sample Recruitment

The study took place in a New England state that contains 15 high priority urban districts. Districts are categorized as high priority based on lower-than-expected levels of student achievement and lack of educational opportunities, including early reading intervention programs. The following criteria were used to select potential high schools to participate in the study: (a) a minimum of 15% of African American and Latinx male students attending the school, (b) a suspension rate greater than or equal to 5%, and (c) chronic absenteeism greater than or equal to 10% for the targeted population. Three districts met all criteria. One district leader declined to enter the study, while another district changed leadership and withdrew their consideration. The remaining superintendent granted permission for the district to be a part of the study. This high school had an enrollment of 1700-2000 students with at least 20 percent of the male population identifying as African American or Latinx. This was a sample of convenience, since the lead researcher was also employed in this district, however, none of the study participants were under their direct supervision.

#### Participants

Parental consent, student assent, and completed surveys were received from 262 Black or Latinx male students in grades 10-12. Initial demographic information is included on Table 1.

**Table 1:** Student Demographic Data for the Sample of African American Latinx Males.

Racial/Ethnic Status	Percent of School Population	Sample	Percent of Population
African American/Black	11	54	14
Hispanic/Latinx	65	208	53
Total		262	

**Note:** There were 390 males in grades 10-12.



Participants were invited to be included in the interview portion of the study based on their having high or low average scores from the quantitative instruments that assessed academic self-perception, agency thinking, and pathways thinking. Ten students were identified to be interviewed and four consented to participate in the qualitative aspect of the study.

### Mixed Methods Design

A mixed-methods explanatory sequential approach Creswell & Plano Clark [34] was used to examine the quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were collected using a researcher-created demographic survey, the Adult Trait Hope Scale [12], and the School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised [26]. These data were analyzed to predict academic self-perception and identify interviewees to collect qualitative data. A collective case study [35], grounded in the theories of hope, self-efficacy, and academic self-perception was used to gather student perspectives and reflections about education. Themes were identified from the coded data and compared to the quantitative outcomes via triangulation.

### Instrumentation and Data Collection Tools

#### Demographic Survey

Each student participant was administered an online demographic survey containing personal information such as racial/ethnic status, grade level, extra-curricular participation hours, and post-secondary plans. The demographic survey consisted of seven items and took 10 minutes to complete.

#### Adult Trait Hope Scale Snyder et al. [12]

The Adult Trait Hope Scale Snyder et al. [12] was completed via an online link. The purpose of this 12-item instrument was to measure the level of hopefulness within each student. The response format of this instrument was an 8-point Likert scale ranging from "definitely false" to "definitely true." The two subscales were agency thinking (goal directed energy) and pathways thinking (planning to accomplish goals), each with 4 items having total scores ranging from 4 to 32. Four items were added to lengthen the overall scale. Higher scores indicate higher levels of pathways thinking, agency thinking, and overall level of hope. This instrument took approximately five minutes to complete. Reliability coefficients ranged from .70 to .84 for the agency thinking scale and .63 to .86 for the pathways thinking scale. Validity includes a correlation indicating that higher hope scores predict more routes to completing personal goals [12]. Concurrent validity has shown the scale to correlate positively with several instruments designed to measure similar outcomes [11]. While there were no African American or Latinx males indicated in the population for the validation sample of this instrument, adequate internal consistency reliability scores for each scale were reported by Ciskowski et al. [36] for a sample of college students from an institution designated as serving a diverse population, overall,  $r = .80$ ; agency,  $r = .77$ ; pathways,  $r = .62$ .

#### School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised McCoach & Siegle [26]

The School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised McCoach & Siegle [26] was also administered using an online format. The instrument contains 35 questions in a 7-point Likert scale format ranging from "definitely false" to "definitely true." The five subscales include academic self-perception (7 items), attitudes toward teachers (7 items), attitudes toward school (5 items), goal valuation (6 items), and motivation/self-regulation (10 items). Mean scores are calculated for each subscale. Higher scores indicate students who achieve at their expected level and lower scores indicate students who underachieve. Reliability coefficients and validity are reported by McCoach and Siegle [26].

#### Qualitative Interviews

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to obtain qualitative data. The questions provided the researcher with the opportunity to dive deeper into each participant's responses and reveal inner beliefs [37]. There were 12 items in the researcher created interview protocol. It took approximately 45 minutes to conduct each interview. Questions in the interview included the following:

- i. Tell me about yourself. What kinds of things do you like to do?
- ii. What is it like to be a student in your high school? (a) Describe a typical day. (b) What do you think about coming to school? (c) Do you think school is important? Why or why not?

- iii. What is it like to be an African American/Hispanic male in this school?
- iv. How do you learn best? For example, do you learn best when you see or read information, when you hear about it, when you take notes, when you have a model? Or do you use another method to learn? (a) What do you do to help yourself learn? (b) Does anyone else help you?
- v. How are you doing in school? (a) What is your GPA or what kind of grades are you getting? (b) How do you know when you are doing well or not? (c) If you are doing well, what do you do to get the grades you want? (d) If you aren't doing well, what do you do about it?
- vi. Tell me about the classes you take now. Do you like them? Why or why not? (a) Describe a lesson or activity that you enjoyed in school. Why did you enjoy this activity? (b) Describe a lesson or activity that you did not enjoy. Why didn't you enjoy this activity?
- vii. You explained in your survey the kinds of activities you have been involved with. I would like to know more information about your responses. (a) What do you typically do after school? (b) Tell me about each of the activities you are involved with.
- viii. What are your plans after graduation? (a) How does school connect to your future plans? (b) Do you think that what you are doing now is necessary for your success later? (c) Where do you see yourself five years from now? (d) How will you get to where you are now to where you want to be in 5 years?
- ix. Is it important to have role models? (a) Who is a role model or are role models in your life? (b) How did they become your role models? (c) How does this help you?
- x. How do you relate to your teachers? Explain. (a) Do you feel teachers and administrators understand you? (b) Is this important? Does it matter to you if you relate to a teacher? Why or why not? (c) Is there a particular teacher who has influenced you? Explain.
- xi. If you could make some changes to this school to help all African American or Hispanic males do better, what would you add, change, or take away? (a) What would you keep the same?
- xii. What else can you tell me about your school experiences?

#### Data Collection Procedures

Demographic surveys and instruments were administered in a virtual manner during the school day without interrupting instructional time. All target students in the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades were contacted during an extra help time slot in their English and English Second Language (ESL) classes to ensure every student had access to participate. After parental consent and student assent were received, teachers were given a script to read to students when collecting data. Surveys and quantitative instruments were translated into three languages: (a) English, (b) Spanish, and (c) Arabic for ease of student interpretation. A three-week timeframe was given to teachers to collect all data.

#### Analyses

A Multivariate Linear Regression procedure Meyers et al. [38] was conducted to examine research question one. The quantitative question of this study examined the predictive power of the subscales measuring hope (agency and pathways) and attitudes related to school (attitudes toward teachers, attitudes toward school, goal valuation, and motivation/self-regulation) to predict the students' academic self-perception. The statistic was tested at  $p < 0.05$ . All data were measured at the interval level.

The qualitative questions for this study were examined using axial coding as a means of analysis [39]. Open coding is the first step to axial coding and identifies a central idea which is used to streamline the concepts until a common theme is found [39].

#### Limitations

There are four major sources of error in survey research: coverage error, sampling error, measurement error, and nonresponse error [40]. A coverage error occurs when individuals do not have an opportunity to participate in the study. The survey was administered to all students during a free time related to their English/ESL class. It is possible for a sampling error to take place when the sample does not reflect the population. We are confident that the sample is representative since 69% (262/390) of the students in grades 10-12 completed the surveys. Both instruments had high validity and reliability. They represented 14/11% of the African American and 54/63% of the Latinx population, diminishing the possibility of a measurement error or a nonresponse error, respectively.



Representation in the qualitative aspect of the study was limited. While 10 participants were identified to be interviewed, six were students who were no longer engaged in school or declined to participate. In addition, participants who were identified and willing to be interviewed knew that they were in a study and could have given answers that they believed the researchers wanted to hear. To address this potential limitation, participants were assured that their identities would be kept confidential and time was taken to establish rapport with each interviewee.

### Trustworthiness

Credibility speaks to the findings of the research and how congruent they are with reality [41]. All transcribed interviews were member-checked to ensure the accuracy of the statements. The researchers provided a detailed description of the setting, participants, and analyses to support transferability. The dependability of the results and conclusions was examined by an auditor within the research group. The researchers also checked and re-checked data throughout the study to support confirmability.

### Results

#### Research Question 1

The data were screened Meyers et al. [38] resulting in 12 univariate and 3 multivariate outliers. After these cases were removed, there were 247 participants in the study. The variable of goal valuation, a component of the SAAS-R was removed from the study since the data did not meet the assumption of normality. Subsequently, all assumptions were met.

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for each variable, while Table 3 indicates the multiple correlations among the variables. Tables 4 and 5 reveal the ANOVA statistics and Stepwise Regression results, respectively.

**Table 2:** Descriptive Statistics for All Variables in Research Question 1 (n=247).

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Range
Academic Self-Perception	4.74	1.07	1.86-7.00
Pathways	23.79	4.81	12.00-32.00
Agency	23.24	5.26	9.00-32.00
Attitudes Toward Teachers	4.71	1.44	1.00-7.00
Attitudes Toward School	4.7	1.58	1.00-7.00
Motivation/Self-Regulation	4.67	1.31	1.50-7.00

**Note:** The Hope subscales used an 8-point response format, producing scores from 4-32. The SAAS-R used a 7-point response format, producing subscale averages.

**Table 3:** Pearson Correlation of Variables.

	Academic Self-Perception	Pathways	Agency	Attitudes Toward Teachers	Attitudes Toward School
Academic Self-Perception					
Pathways	0.461***				
Agency	0.559***	0.598***			
Attitudes Toward Teachers	0.539***	0.300***	0.254***		
Attitudes Toward School	0.510***	0.272***	0.255***	0.774***	
Motivation/Self-Regulation	0.634***	0.341***	0.493***	0.645***	0.632***

**Note:** Correlations \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001; (1-tailed)

**Table 4:** Stepwise Multiple Linear Regression Summary for Variables Predicting Academic Self-Perception.

Model	B	SE B	$\beta$	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	R Square Change	F Change
1	0.517	0.04	0.634	.635 <sup>a</sup>	0.403	0.401	0.403***	165.532
2	0.066	0.011	0.325	.695 <sup>b</sup>	0.483	0.479	0.080***	37.612
3	0.192	0.043	0.26	.722 <sup>c</sup>	0.521	0.515	0.038***	19.347
4	0.027	0.012	0.121	.729 <sup>d</sup>	0.532	0.524	0.011 <sup>e</sup>	5.436

<sup>a</sup>Predictors: (Constant), Motivation/Self-Regulation

<sup>b</sup>Predictors: (Constant), Motivation/Self-Regulation, Agency

<sup>c</sup>Predictors: (Constant), Motivation/Self-Regulation, Agency, Attitudes Toward Teachers

<sup>d</sup>Predictors: (Constant), Motivation/Self-Regulation, Agency, Attitudes Toward Teachers, Pathways

<sup>e</sup>Dependent Variable: Academic Self-Perception

The results of the multiple linear regression indicated that the criterion, academic self-perception, was predicted by motivation/self-regulation, agency, attitudes toward teachers, and pathways,  $R = .729$ ,  $R^2 = .532$ ,  $F(4, 242) = 68.256$ ,  $p = .001$ , effect size = 1.137, large [42]. A Durbin Watson analysis was also conducted as a test of independent errors. With a criterion of 2.00, a value of 2.00 was acceptable [43]. These results suggest that Black and Latinx males with higher scores in the predictor variables were more likely to score high in academic self-perception. The variable of attitudes toward school may not have entered the equation due to its initial relatively high correlation with motivation/self-regulation.

#### Qualitative Results and Discussion: Research Question 2

Ten participants were initially identified to be interviewed based on their having the highest and lowest composite scores from the Hope survey (composite scores were summed for the two subscales) and the SAAS-R survey (composite scores were averages of the five subscales) (Table 5). Subsequently, four students consented to be interviewed. Separate subscale scores are indicated in Table 6.

**Table 5:** Descriptive Information for Interviewees.

Name	Total Adult Hope Score	Total School Attitude Mean	Composite Score	Interpretation of Composite Score
Richard*	36	3.33	19.67	Low
Frank*	64	6.54	35.27	High
Damari*	64	6.57	35.28	High
Hezekiah*	64	4.87	34.43	High
Paul**	20	3.46	11.73	Low
Matthew**	16	3.5	9.75	Low
Samson**	39	3.92	21.46	Low
Tyrone**	40	3.13	21.57	Low
William***	62	6.93	34.47	High
Weston***	64	6.85	35.42	High

**Note:** \*students interviewed, \*\*students not available to be interviewed, \*\*\*students who graduated before the interview process began. High scores were indicated at a composite score of 49 or higher.





Table 6: Participants' Subscale Scores, Self-Reported GPA

Student	Pathways	Agency	Academic Self-Perception	Attitudes Towards Teachers	Attitudes Towards School*	Goal Valuation*	Motivation/ Self-Regulation	Self-Reported GPA
Richard	18	18	5.29	1.14	1.6	4.83	3.8	1.5 to 1.99 (More Cs than Ds)
Frank	32	32	5.29	7	6.4	7	7	3.0 to 3.24 (Mostly Bs, some As, Cs)
Damari	32	32	6.71	6.71	5.8	7	6.6	3.75 to 3.99 (Mostly As)
Hezekiah	32	32	6.57	4.86	2.2	7	3.7	3.75 to 3.99 (Mostly As)

**Note:** \*These variables did not enter the equation to predict academic self-perception. Summed scores for pathways and agency ranged from 4-32. Means for all scales on the SAAS-R ranged from 1-11 (Academic Self-Perception: 1-5, Attitude Towards Teachers: 1-4, Attitudes Towards School: 1-4, Goal Valuation: 1-6, and Motivation/Self-Regulation: 1-7). GPA refers to overall Grade Point Average.

Table 6 indicates that students with higher attitudes and hope tended to report higher GPAs. This pattern was supported by the responses during their interviews, which addressed research question 2: What are the perceptions of African American and Latinx males regarding their education? Four resulting themes and related categories are included in Table 7.

Table 7: Themes and Categories for the Qualitative Data.

Theme	Category
1. Black and Latinx males rely on intrinsic motivators that allow them to surmount the issues they feel stand in the way of their success.	Being an African American or Hispanic male in school
	Perseverance
	Student GPA
2. Black and Latinx males want to be supported by educators to succeed.	Perception of School
	Teacher Impact
3. Role models, including family, educators, and community members, are essential to the overall growth of Black and Latinx students.	Role Models
4. Schools must connect to male students of color by offering courses and resources that engage them (e.g., clubs, internships, and career options, etc.).	Learning Strategies/Student Interests
	Future Plans

### Theme 1: Black and Latinx males rely on intrinsic motivators that allow them to surmount the issues they feel stand in the way of their success.

The four interviewees in this study shared the belief that they “can and will make it” in life even if they had complaints about school. They expressed both optimism and doubts when they described what it was like to be an African American or Hispanic male in high school. They also explained the meaning of perseverance and their perspectives of academic achievement.

**Being an African American or Hispanic Male in High School.** In his interview, Frank described his disappointment in his environment when he said, “Well, being a Hispanic male it’s just like it’s very it’s very hard because like when you’re in class you have those people who start with those immigrant jokes and oh, you are Mexican.” Frank perceived that his being Hispanic and male, specifically of Mexican descent, caused him to be viewed in a negative light from those around him. This was coupled with his constant worry about being judged by peers and school staff for being a Hispanic male. It was clear during the interview that being a Hispanic male was difficult for Frank. He expressed a recommendation when he stated, “I would change like [to] make a policy where you can’t judge people. I feel like bullying is like a big topic in high school, so .... I feel like I will add an anti-bullying movement. I would take away bullying and racial profiling. I feel like that’s a big issue here.”

Contrary to Frank’s perception of being singled out for his Mexican heritage, Hezekiah perceived that being a Hispanic male in school was normal. His perception about “fitting in” was similar to Damari’s, who stated, “I mean in this high school there are a lot of Hispanics so it’s really no different [for me] because there’s a lot of other people who [I] can just hang out with ‘cause I usually surround myself with other Hispanics.” Being a Hispanic male within a school that has a majority of Hispanic students allowed Hezekiah and Damari to fit into the culture.

Richard, however, spoke to the lack of a familiar and supportive culture in the school due to an absence of African American representation. He explained, “I feel like ... I didn’t get to learn about being African American because I didn’t have a lot of African American teachers...I feel like, ... stuff that I was supposed to learn...I didn’t learn here yet.” Richard explained that he could not relate to his culture as much as he would like.

It became evident during the interview that Frank and Richard lacked relationships with educators within the school. Relationship-building is crucial for helping students attain their goals. Jackson [44] indicated “It’s a simple concept, but one that is too often overlooked. Building relationships with students is the key to their success. Our goal as educators should be to educate, activate, and motivate students regardless of their background otherwise we fail them” (p. 41).

**Perseverance.** Frank’s perseverance stemmed from his goal to have a job. He explained, “So, I just wanna do that. I just wanna be successful when it comes to school and getting a job supporting my family when they need help paying bills ... and that’s about it.” Throughout the interview, Frank said he wanted to do well in school to be able to attend college. He also believed that being successful in school would translate to a better circumstance for his family. Although he admitted to having several obstacles in his immediate environment, Frank believed that being successful in school would translate to a better circumstance for his family. Frank also spoke of using the resources, such as summer school programs and internships, to accomplish his goals.

Hezekiah was a student who was behind in the number of credits he needed to graduate from high school on time. He said, “Truthfully, I am trying to regain my credits....do what I have to do to get out get out of school. ... It’s all based on your mindset and what you want to do.” Damari viewed perseverance as the trait necessary for success in the classroom. He stated, “I prefer classes like Chemistry and stuff like that where I can see what we’re doing or like [computer] programming ‘cause I can see the difference, the little difference, that everything I do makes.” Damari spoke of taking classes that challenged him. This opportunity to undertake challenges and work hard, regardless of any other circumstances, demonstrated his intrinsic motivation. Richard, unfortunately, did not express a willingness to persevere.

Hope, and the agency to succeed, inspired three of these students to look forward to the future [11,13]. Frank also expressed a desire to take care of his family, which is noted by Abalos [45] as a characteristic of Latinos.

**Academic Achievement.** Richard knew that he needed to improve his academic grades when he stated, “I could be getting better grades, but I am working [on] that.” Unlike his peers in this study, Richard did not express a specific plan to do better in school. It became clear that Richard’s GPA was not at the forefront of his mind. He acknowledged that he could be doing much better in school and was trying to do so, but, in essence, did not offer much more information about his pathway to succeed. In contrast, Damari cared about the status of his GPA. He took it very seriously. During his interview, it became clear that the Covid pandemic had a significant impact on him



and his overall school success. He acknowledged that last year he had all As and now he only has Bs, but he had a plan to improve. Hezekiah, who needed to earn more credits because he had failing grades in the past, recognized that to earn credits he needed to get passing grades. In his interview, he stated the following, "My grades are bad man. I used to be a really good student, but it all changed after Covid. That's pretty much it." Because of Covid he became less motivated to succeed and did not respond well to remote learning. He recognized the grades he was receiving at the time of the interview were not a reflection of how he wanted to portray himself, and he had a plan to get more passing grades.

The aspiration to attend college was on Frank's mind. This attitude pushed him to believe that greatness is within him and can be attributed to a mindset of perseverance, regardless of the circumstances that stood before him. Throughout the interview, Frank expressed a legitimate concern for his GPA. He stated the desire to be active in many programs that he perceived would be a benefit to his future, but had not yet taken actions to commit to a plan. These young men of color believed that they could utilize many different tools within the school system to be successful in their lives. All four students had agency regarding their academic standing and everyone, except Frank, expressed specific plans for making improvements.

These comments support the research that Black and Latino male students can strive for high academic goals that will lead to opportunities for success [46]. Emdin [47] indicated that students of color will utilize many different tools, including education, to be successful in their lives.

### Theme 2: Black and Latinx males want to be supported by educators to succeed.

**Perception of School.** These participants looked forward to being supported by educators to reach their highest potential. Richard stated the following, "I feel like people should be in school and they should come to school because that's how you socially interact with others, and you can better yourself here. There are people who can actually encourage you to do things [to] be better than who you are now. They can encourage you and influence you." This statement exemplifies the impact of teachers.

Although he was not in the best academic standing, Hezekiah liked school. He stated, "I mean.... I like school... I like to go to school...but I don't like the classes that I am in. I just don't feel like it's right for me." Hezekiah's perception of school was one that had some importance to him, yet he did not form the relationships necessary for full engagement. He also perceived that the students should not behave inappropriately. Their actions bothered him and made him feel further disengaged from school.

Damari's perception of school was markedly different from Hezekiah's. Damari enthusiastically stated, "Yeah, I think school is important because since freshman year everyone has been telling us that high school is important. This is where colleges start looking at you. This is your opportunity to shine to make colleges interested to gain scholarship opportunities and all that." Damari viewed school as an opportunity in his life. As a Hispanic male, he saw hope for the future within the college system and believed academic success would be the gateway to his attainment of college acceptance.

Frank's perception of school was connected to a worry that he would not be able to do well in his future without his high school education. Based on media reports, he also perceived school as a potentially dangerous environment. Frank stated the following, "so, when I come to school as a Hispanic male, you have worries that something is going to happen. In the school I do feel safe, then at the same time you never know what's gonna happen... When I go to school now and I come on the bus, the only worries I have is if there's going to be a lock down or not, if the school is going to have a shooting or not, and then I think school is important because it's my education. [It] is something that I'm gonna have for the rest of my life." Frank's perception of school was based on stressors that he saw within the media or heard within the community. Frank, however, believed that education was important and was something that could never be taken away from him. Throughout the study, it became clear that the participants perceived that school was of value.

Contrary to the belief that Black and Latino males are unmotivated Emdin [47], Harper & Davis III [10], these participants looked forward to being supported by educators to reach their highest potential. In fact, these students came to school to receive encouragement from their teachers [18].

**Teacher Impact.** Each student was asked the following interview questions: How do you relate to your teachers? Is there a particular teacher that has influenced you? Students spoke of some teachers as role models and others as being supportive. High quality teachers were respected. Their responses indicated that teachers have an impact, through their words and deeds, to empower students [15,48]. When teachers are able to relate to their students, it shows that they care about them [49].

### Theme 3: Role models, including family, educators, and community members, are essential to the growth of Black and Latinx students.

**Role models.** Frank believed that his family, specifically his mother, provided him with the support necessary to be successful in school. Due to the support of his family, he perceived himself as successful and stated that his mother was his role model because she cared for him. He also mentioned that teachers could be role models. Richard responded to the same question by stating, "My middle school art teacher really convinced me to do art 'cause she really encouraged me to draw. She encouraged me to continue drawing."

Damari described his single mother as his role model. She made the sacrifice to leave her five children in Honduras to provide a better life for them when she moved to the United States. This enabled her to subsequently move her family to her new home. Damari also described a role model in the form of a teacher. Hezekiah referred to his brother as a role model because he was smart and stayed on task. Hezekiah saw his brother's doing well in school as a result of making smart decisions. Richard described fellow African American celebrities as role models for what he wanted to do in his life. He mentioned their creativity and called it an inspiration to him. Richard also spoke of teachers being role models by being available for him when he needed help in class.

In communities of color, collectivism and familial gatherings are key to the success of the individual [15]. Frank stated that his mother was his role model because she cared for him. Care is a trait that allows the recipient to believe that they can achieve anything in life [18,50].

### Theme 4: Schools must connect to students, specifically Black and Latinx males, by offering courses and resources that engage them (e.g., clubs, internships, and career options, etc.).

**Student Interests.** When asked about some of the things that he liked to do, Hezekiah stated that he was involved in sports and fitness. He worked out every day; however, he did not work out at the high school he attended since it was not a supportive environment for physical fitness. Frank was another student who pursued his interests outside of the school building. He stated, "Well, I am a person that likes to play video games and that's like my hobby. My hobbies are video games, going to the gym, and that's about it. I just go to the gym, play video games." Damari and Richard also played video games in their spare time. These two activities, working out and playing video games, could become after school clubs to help students relate to the school environment as well as to their teachers and peers. The schools should be equipped with the necessary resources so that students can stay engaged, specifically those schools serving students of poverty [5].

**Learning Strategies.** When asked how they learn best, these young men were quick to describe their favorite subject areas because the teachers knew how to support them in their learning. Hezekiah preferred physical activity when learning. Frank described himself as a visual learner who also needed information explained to him in a way that he understood. He preferred it when teachers came to his desk and showed him an example of the class activity. Damari also liked to see the information when it was explained to him. That's why he enjoyed chemistry and computer class because he could easily see examples of the content and understand what was happening. Richard learned best by seeing, doing, and having positive relationships with teachers. He also focused on his learning by listening to music. When the content was adjusted to their learning style, these students commented that they learned best and had positive attitudes toward their teachers and classes [26,51].

**Future Plans.** Richard loved art and saw this as his future. School, in his eyes, had a moderate connection to his pursuit of art. He could see a future that included graduating from high school and eventually attending art school. Damari's plans included majoring in computer science in college so he could get a good job. He elaborated on his plan to reach the goals that he set for himself. Frank related his future to earning money and attaining a master's degree, where there would be no reason to question his success. Frank



looked forward to some of the “rewards” that come with attaining an education. Hezekiah mentioned that he would like to go to college to receive his bachelor’s degree. Hope is the connection between aspiration and the belief that it will manifest itself [13]. Each participant had their own story indicating hopefulness about their future [52].

## Theoretical Foundations Related to the Outcomes

### Hope

Hope indicates a belief that something can be attained; however, a plan must be devised and activated to achieve it [11,19,53,54]. Hope is an asset that is foundational to positive outcomes in life, and it has a distinct positive effect on academic performance Keerthana & Nayak [55], Rubens et al. [3], Wong & Cheung [56], as well as on physical and psychological health [19]. For research question 1, the subscales of agency and pathways thinking entered the regression equation to positively predict academic self-perception. This result was corroborated by the interview responses from the participants (Frank, Damari, and Hezekiah) who had above average levels of hope based on the Adult Trait Hope Scale Snyder et al. [12] and average to above average self-reported GPAs. Not only did they have immediate and long-term goals, but they also described realistic steps to reach their dreams. The student with the lowest scores regarding hope, Richard, also had a low self-reported GPA. He did express intentions for the future but only vague ideas for how to achieve his goals.

### Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy relates to an individual’s belief in their ability to regulate their own learning [24,57]. Therefore, it is understandable that the variable of motivation/self-regulation was a significant predictor of the students’ perceptions of their academic abilities. This result also agrees with researchers who report that performance is directly correlated to self-efficacy beliefs [25,58]. Another significant predictor of academic self-perception was attitudes toward teachers. These predictors were supported by student comments about strategies they use to motivate themselves to do well in school and their descriptions of teachers who encourage them to succeed.

## Implications for Educators

### Caring Is Valued by Students.

Students indicated they were most comfortable in classrooms where teachers were supportive and caring. Participants also believed educators should take the time to get to know them, believe in them, and hold high standards. Attitudes toward teachers were also significantly correlated with academic self-perception, meaning that a student who has a positive bond with at least one teacher will be more likely to have a higher perception of their academic capability. Hammond [15] indicated that members of the Black and Latinx cultures regard relationships as the connector or foundation of academic success. Teachers who take the time to develop relationships will make an impact on their students’ academic performance, inspire them to believe they can achieve more, hold them accountable, and still implement the curriculum in the classroom [59].

### Students Can Meet High Expectations.

Participants indicated that due to low expectations from others regarding their capabilities, the negative behaviors of other students, and the lack of interesting course materials, they were not always motivated in school. Students live up to the expectations that are placed upon them Denton [48]; Emdin [47] and these expectations should be set high. Students are aware of the expectations that are set for them. High expectations promote student engagement, while setting the bar low will push students out of school [10].

### School Should be Both Relevant and Culturally Relevant.

School should be an inviting place, one that removes barriers to learning. These barriers could be social, emotional, physical, and/or cognitive. A combination of concerns impacted each of the interviewees. For example, Frank spoke about attending a school that had a majority of Hispanic students, but he was uncomfortable there because he was bullied for being Mexican. Richard lamented that he was not learning about his African American culture. While Hezekiah liked school, he felt his classes did not match his interests. Dimari needed time to think about the content of his courses because he was a visual learner. These students explained what was and was not relevant to them as well as how high school could be useful to achieve their future goals.

To reach their students, teachers must know them and incorporate their values into the curriculum in a culturally responsive manner [15]. Regrettably, the students who chose not to participate in the interview aspect of this research were already disengaged from school. It would be helpful for all students if they were paired with a caring staff member who could advocate for them and keep them connected to the educational environment [60-62].

### Role Models Can Help You to be Great.

All participants mentioned a role model in their lives. These included parents, family members, teachers, and entertainers/artists. There was a consensus among the participants around the importance of role models. Each participant recognized the influence their role models played in their lives. As circumstances arose in their lives, the presence of these role models compelled them to push through towards the success they saw within reach. Having a positive role model has a critical impact on the development of youths [63-69].

## Suggestions for Future Research

### Research Question 1

Motivation/self-regulation, agency, attitudes toward teachers, and pathways explained 53% of the variance in academic self-perception. The only variable that was not a significant predictor was attitudes toward school. Additional research could be conducted to understand other variables that influence academic self-perception and to investigate why attitudes toward school was such a weak predictor.

### Research Question 2

There has been limited scholarly research on the perspectives of Black and Latinx males regarding their academic engagement [22]. A future study could include students who decided to leave school before graduation to understand the components of attitudes toward school and hope that lead to that decision. Related to this idea, the students with both low attitudes and hope scores could be encouraged to participate in a future study, perhaps by using an incentive.

Since students named specific role models, a future study could be used to examine the influence these individuals have on Black and Latinx males by also interviewing both the student and their role model. This would provide insight to support these youths.

## Conclusion

The perspectives of Black and Latinx males were at the forefront of this study. The variables known to impact academic self-perceptions, including motivation and self-regulation skills, agency thinking, pathways thinking, and attitudes toward teachers, should be incorporated into school programs. With these tools, along with high expectations, educators will bolster the path to student success!

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