
Becoming High Academic Achievers: What are the Supporting Factors for African American/Black Male Students that Make the Difference

by Cassandra Corbin-Thaddies, PhD

Introduction

When discussing issues in the K-12 school system, there is often a focus on the achievement gap, a deficit-based approach to the academic performance of students of color, especially Black male students. Dr. Cassandra Corbin-Thaddies, in her groundbreaking dissertation, *Becoming High Academic Achievers: What are the Supporting Factors for African American/Black Male Students that Make the Difference*, shifts this common paradigm by offering an asset-based focus on the factors that lead to successful academic achievement for Black male middle and high school students. Her findings offer critical insights into how we can transform our educational systems to better serve Black male students and support their high academic achievement.

The most important takeaway for education practitioners and policymakers is that to foster more academic achievement among Black male students, we must create learning environments where they feel a sense of connection and belonging. When educators

create environments where these students feel seen, heard, and understood, they begin to feel like they belong. Educators who create these environments of acceptance also are effective at building trust with Black male students. These are essential foundational elements that allow the students to more deeply engage with content and achieve academic success. It is challenging for Black male students to show up ready to engage in learning in classrooms where they don't experience psychological safety.

Dr. Corbin-Thaddies' study helps us to understand the meaningfulness and essence of African American/Black male middle/high school students' lived experience of being high academic achievers. The results of this research study can benefit K-12 systems by establishing actionable strategies that shift outcomes in classrooms and school systems for Black male students. These primarily center around creating safe environments for Black male students and cultivating intentional connections and trust with them. Educators should reflect on how they can shift their instructional

and pedagogical practices and educational environments and consider possible solutions to the miseducation of Black male students. In addition, educators must examine how their own culture and biases influence the academic success of these students. The findings of this study can also assist pre-service and in-service teachers and education leaders in reimagining teaching practices. These practices must incorporate culturally responsive strategies that support and cultivate connection, belonging, and trust with Black male students.

Purpose/Background of the study:

Dr. Corbin-Thaddies used a phenomenological research approach in her dissertation. A phenomenological design explores how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and the meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The key question she addresses in her study is how African American/Black male middle/high school students perceive the essence and meaningfulness of lived experiences as high academic achievers.



She employed three leading theoretical frameworks to guide the study:

- **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy:** A theoretical model that focuses on multiple aspects of student achievement and supports students to uphold their cultural identities. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy also calls for students to develop critical perspectives that challenge societal inequalities.
- **Critical Race Theory - Counter Narratives:** an academic and legal framework that states that systemic racism is part of American society — from education and housing to employment and healthcare. Critical Race Theory recognizes that racism is more than the result of individual bias and prejudice. It is embedded in laws, policies, and institutions

that uphold and reproduce racial inequalities. Counter-narratives draw on the experiences and voices of people of color. A counter-narrative challenges perceived wisdom or the shared understanding of persons in the dominant race.

- **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:** A theory that suggests there is a general pattern of human needs, recognition, and satisfaction that seem to follow a sequence. Maslow uses the terms "physiological needs," "safety needs," "love and belonging," "social needs," or "esteem," and "self-actualization," to describe the pattern through which human needs and motivations generally move. These needs are usually depicted in a pyramid with the lower level or deficiency needs of physiological and security starting at the bottom.

These frameworks provide important underpinnings to Dr. Corbin-Thaddies' key findings discussed below.

Method of data gathering:

Dr. Corbin-Thaddies employed a sampling selection procedures method for her data gathering. The selected participants for her study were Black middle and high school students at traditional schools who achieve a grade point average of 3.0 or higher. The research methods included focus groups, individual interviews, and demographic surveys.

Key Findings:

There are several essential conditions necessary to support Black male students in achieving high academic achievement.

These foundational conditions are critical to shift the trajectory of systemic racism and other barriers to the achievement of Black male students.

Dr. Corbin-Thaddies' research finds that when Black male students feel seen, heard, understood, and accepted by teachers, they begin to feel psychologically safe to engage more deeply in their learning and the content being presented. This sense of belonging allows teachers and school leaders to build trust with Black male students. In turn, the students can develop deeper connections with teachers and other students. When these elements, **connection, belonging, and trust**, are present, these students thrive, engage with the content, and achieve high academic success.

Some of the specific factors that the selected students reported that made a difference in the essence and meaningfulness of their lived experiences as high academic achievers include:

- Experiencing high expectations from parents, teachers, and school leaders
- Feeling safe and cared for within their classrooms and schools
- Engaging with culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogical practices
- Being offered opportunities to use their self-efficacy and self-advocacy skills
- Having a strong family and friends network, particularly active moms

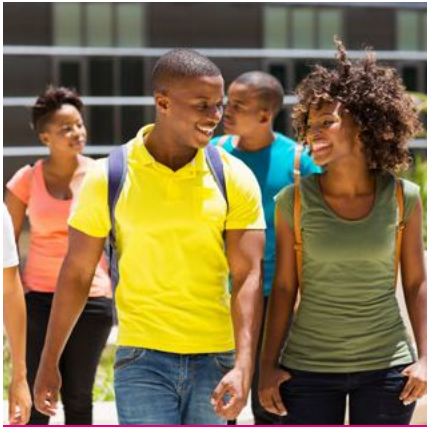
Other common themes that emerged from this research are that the participating students all had a vision for their future and that college was an important path forward. Having support structures such as family, friends, and community mentors was key to overcoming the social/cultural/emotional challenges these students sometimes faced during their academic journey. These students are deeply aware of existing negative stereotypes and prejudices about them and expressed a need to work daily to maintain a positive self-identity to counter these narratives. When these students

experience authentic, trusting relationships with teachers and school leaders, they can thrive and succeed academically. Also, having other Black male peers in rigorous classes helps them find community and is another lever in achieving academic success.

Call to Action/Recommendations:

Dr. Corbin-Thaddies' research offers insights into how educators, school leaders, community organizations, families, and students can all learn how to provide essential support to help Black males achieve high academic results. All stakeholders should understand that it is very challenging for Black males to achieve high-academic success without the foundational conditions of connection, belonging, and trust with their teachers and families. Dr. Corbin-Thaddies offers recommendations for each stakeholder group as a starting point for shifting the classroom environment into one that creates a supportive "container" for Black male students, allowing them to thrive and achieve high academic success:

- **Students:** Create a community of like-minded Black male students at your school and seek opportunities to share your voice and needs with teachers and school leaders.
- **Community organizations:** Offer mentors/coaches to Black male students and create safe spaces to build these essential relationships.
- **Families:** Provide unwavering support for your Black male students and prioritize their mental health.
- **Teachers:** Prioritize creating a classroom environment that fosters a sense of belonging for these students. Make efforts to build trusting relationships with your Black male students and let them know you have high expectations for their academic performance. Reflect on your personal bias and make shifts in your instructional approach, pedagogical practices, and personal interactions so that they are asset and strength-based with Black males.
- **School/District Leaders:** Engage Black male students in the examination of the barriers to their academic achievement and commit to making shifts to address those barriers.



making shifts to address those barriers. Examine the school environment and the access, inclusion, and support of Black students in rigorous academic opportunities, such as Advanced Placement courses. Commit to making improvements where necessary. Create high-quality professional learning opportunities that embed deep metacognitive work and build new knowledge and skills to foster asset-based instructional and pedagogical approaches to work with Black male students.

- **Instructional Designers:** Leverage culturally relevant pedagogical practices to create learning environments that celebrate the lived experiences of Black male students. Foster more personalized learning experiences that promote learner agency and collaboration. Design learning experiences that require critical thinking, writing, and higher-order thinking skills.

Conclusions

Dr. Corbin-Thaddies's findings provide educational leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders with a roadmap for how to better support Black male students who are high academic achievers and those who are thriving to become academically successful. She hopes to achieve a sustainable impact by informing relevant stakeholders about her research and sharing her recommendations with the K12 educational field. Her goals include:

Shift the deficit-based educational conversation about Black male students to a counter-narrative that positions them as thriving high academic achievers.

Create educational equity by giving voice to Black male students' lived experience as high academic achievers while educating educators about the impact of their limited, deficit-based perspective about these students.

Celebrate Black male students as high academic achievers creating an educational counter-narrative and a more equitable society.

Dr. Corbin-Thaddies is available for conference presentations, speaking engagements, and other panels to discuss this important topic and educate decision-makers about how to cultivate educational experiences that lead to more Black male students achieving high academic success. Connect with her on <https://www.linkedin.com/in/cassandra-corbin-thaddies/>