

IN THEIR OWN VOICES: AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ADOLESCENTS AND THE  
ACHIEVEMENT GAP

by

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ABSTRACT

The educational status of African American male youth is in a crisis that threatens to unravel the educational advancements of the past 50 years (Howard, 2008). With the passing of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Americans were afforded the rationale for racial equity in education and African American students benefited. African Americans saw gains in college attendance and graduation; African American law school enrollment grew; and the percentage of African American medical students increased (Zirkel & Cantor, 2004). These noteworthy accomplishments may be overshadowed if the inadequate achievement of many African American young men is not addressed and rectified. In all sectors of the United States, young African American men are overwhelmingly represented in the arenas of poverty, incarceration, disease, and violence, but underrepresented in the area of academic success. Closing the achievement gap between African American males and their White counterparts is imperative for the U.S. and helps ensure that those traditionally marginalized improve their access to an economically advantageous quality of life while strengthening a democratic society (Bainbridge & Lasley, II, 2002). While much literature has been devoted to theorizing about the supposed deficits of African American male youth and their inability to perform at the level of their White

counterparts, few studies have included the voices of the African American adolescents experiencing the achievement gap. This qualitative study uses a phenomenological paradigm to describe the perceptions African American male youth have of African American students who achieve academically and why there continues to be an achievement gap. The study was conducted within a social justice framework and seeks to better inform school counselors of the increasing challenges African American male youth experience as they navigate through the educational systems. This study advocates for all counselors to create more culturally relevant interventions which meet the particular academic needs of African American male youth.

**INDEX WORDS:** Achievement gap, African American adolescent males, Education disparities, School counseling

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## DEDICATION

For all of the young African American males whose unique voices have traditionally been ignored in the realm of scholarship; I salute you for your tenacity, courage, and ability to succeed in spite of the social injustices encountered daily in the arenas of education and life.

*“I am overwhelmed by the grace and persistence of my people.” -Maya Angelou*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Closing the achievement gap between African American males and their White counterparts has been the subject of much discussion by educators and policy makers (Allen, 2008; Berliner, 2009; Carter, 2008; Duncan, 2002; Evans, 2005; Garibaldi, 2007; Wilkins, 2006). Some improvement was noted during the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, but progress slowed in the 1990s and today, significant disparities remain between African Americans males and their White peers (Olneck, 2005). The achievement gap describes instances when groups of students with comparative equivalent ability do not achieve at the same levels academically; especially when one group greatly exceeds the achievement level of the other. Achievement gaps are usually found between wealthy and poor students, inner city and suburban students, and boys and girls to name just a few examples (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Interestingly, the most persistent gap among students from various racial/ethnic groups is between African American males and their White counterparts. An African American will be defined as a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. The category of African American includes people who indicate their race as "Black, African American, or Negro," or provide written entries such as African American, Afro American, Kenyan, Nigerian or Haitian (U S. Bureau of the Census, 2001).

Why are African American male youths lagging behind academically? A continual achievement gap based on race is a troubling social justice issue that merits attention and debate, especially when African Americans have been told that obtaining a good education opens the

doors of possibility and creates a more level playing field in a society where, traditionally, racism is inherently entrenched (Fram, Miller-Cribbs, & Horn, 2007). If African American male adolescents are not successful in school, the long-term social and economic consequences will be dire and further the cycle of poverty and inadequate income for marginalized students.

Admittedly, there have been advancements in academic achievement for African Americans males; however, there is still a large gap in their educational attainment in comparison to White American male students that is quite alarming (Howard, 2008).

Although African American male students have similar or greater ambitions, their White counterparts acquire higher academic achievement and graduate with higher grade-point averages, lower dropout rates, and higher levels of completed education than African American students (Graham, 1994). African American males also continue to have low standardized test scores, high representation in special education classes, low high school completion rates, and low college enrollment, placing them most at risk for academic underachievement (Sirin, 2005). Some explanations for the achievement gap between African American males and their White peers are environmental factors, low teacher expectations, racism, cultural bias, and cultural deficits (Davis, 2003). In addition, theories that highlight the family and home environment, the community, and the individual student have been explored (Epps, 1995).

While much literature has been devoted to theorizing about the supposed deficits of African American male youth and their inability to perform at the level of their White counterparts (Love, 2004), little research can be found discussing the higher achievement levels of other ethnic/racial groups when compared to Whites especially Asian Americans (Evans, 2005). It is also evident that the tendency is no longer to discuss the unequal educational opportunities that those who are marginalized incur, but the unequal performance. Little regard

appears to be given to the fact that it has been only 57 years since unequal education for African Americans was outlawed by the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Can researchers continue to compare African Americans males to White Americans males when the educational starting points for both groups were so different? Are scholars and researchers still contributing to the erroneous literature that implies White male students are educationally superior to African American male students by comparing achievement levels and not addressing opportunity and resources gaps? Educators, policy makers, and scholars should acknowledge that there are low and high performing students in all ethnic and racial groups.

It is important to remember that while the achievement gap defines equity in the terms of groups, true equity should be established one student at a time (Murphy, 2009). More importantly, few reports have explored the achievement gap from the perspective of the young African American adolescents. Who better to provide insight into the academic challenges and obstacles African American male youth encounter in school than the young men who daily are required to learn with the shackles of racism, poverty, violence, inadequate schools, poorly trained teachers, fatherless homes, and low expectations all around them? As Pakula (1962) wrote in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view--until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.” Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the perceptions African American male youths have of the achievement gap and students who are high academic achievers. The questions that guided this research study were:

- 1) What does it mean for African American male youth to be considered a “good student” academically?

2) How do African American male youth describe the achievement gap in their own voices?

A phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007) was used for this study because the researcher wanted to describe the phenomenon of the achievement gap from the observations of those intimately acquainted with the achievement gap (Groenewald, 2004). A phenomenological approach relies on individual experiences told in the participants' voices. Phenomenological researchers believe it is impossible to detach the researcher from the research and one should not indicate otherwise, but should rather identify and discuss biases, setting them aside - which is termed "epoche" (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Authentic discussion about influential biases and how the researcher will deal with them is a significant aspect of staying true to the research process. Also, utilizing a research team and auditors assists in a process known as triangulation (Yeh & Inman, 2007). The researcher employed the semi-structured interview method of questioning, capturing the lived experiences of five African American male adolescents and a focus group of seven young African American men (Wertz, 2005).

Critical Race Theory was the analytical framework selected for this study. Critical Race Theory is an appropriate theoretical lens to use because it focuses on the effects of race/ethnicity and racism in society, and the achievement gap is connected to a legacy of racism in the educational system. Critical Race Theory provides a suitable structure to examine the experiences of African American males who have been participants in America's educational systems (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Critical Race Theory also balances phenomenological research and promotes counter narratives to deconstruct the prevailing narratives of those in traditional power positions and offers alternative views for examining cultural identities while confronting the dominant culture (Stanley, 2007). Importantly, Critical Race Theory acknowledges that

racism is so woven into the fabric of America that it is often unrecognizable. It also challenges the experiences of White Americans as a form of oppositional scholarship and uses narratives as well as story-telling to provide counter stories of African American experiences. In addition, Critical Race Theory recognizes that justice is not blind and accepts the continual fight to ensure that those marginalized are given a voice and injustices addressed (Carter, 2008). Therefore, Critical Race Theory is a theory the researcher selected to illuminate the voices of the African American male adolescents and their lived experiences of the achievement gap.

The researcher desires to challenge the scholarship that has consistently presented African American males as less than, and not measuring up to, the dominant society's standard of 'normal' without providing opportunities for counter storytelling (Lynn & Parker, 2006). This in itself further marginalizes African American male youths, even if unintentionally. Constantly hearing that one is inadequate can lead to decreased levels of performance in school for African American males and magnifies the oppression they experience daily in American schools and society. It is essential that scholars continue to show that all cultures have capital and speak on behalf of those who society has silenced with institutional racism. The researcher acknowledges that more interventions should be executed to provide additional significant support to African American male adolescents in schools across America, but the burden must not only lay at the feet of the students themselves. Those who claim to believe in the tenets of social justice must ensure that all students are given the tools they need to obtain a quality education and go on to successfully participate occupationally, economically, and socially, in a global society.

Just as the focus of this research seeks to disrupt the historical legacy of studying African American male youth through surveys and assessments alone, this dissertation itself deliberately uses a non-traditional format in order to facilitate the process of this scholarship being published

so participants' voices may inform future practice, research, advocacy, and policy. Chapter One is the researcher's introduction to the study and overall description of the research focus.

Chapter Two is a conceptual article or a "call to the field" with a comprehensive literature review which calls for school counselors to develop more specific interventions to address the achievement gap between African American adolescents and their White counterparts and references. Chapter Three is a qualitative study with review of the literature, findings, and references. Chapter Four is the conclusion and reflections of the researchers' experience and processes during the study in order to bring to life the impact of participants on the researcher and the future research implications of using authentic and ongoing researcher reflexivity in a qualitative study, in addition to a summary of the previous chapters as an entirety. The intent of the researcher is to submit this research to counseling journals that focus on the professional development of the school counselor practitioner, researcher, and advocate.

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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW: AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ADOLESCENTS AND THE  
ACHIEVEMENT GAP<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Moon, N. To be submitted to the *Journal of Professional School Counseling*.

The educational status of African American male youth is in a crisis that threatens to unravel the advancements of the past 50 years (Howard, 2008). In all sectors of the United States, young African American men are overwhelmingly represented in the arenas of poverty, incarceration, disease, and violence, but underrepresented in the area of academic success (Boyd, 2007). Overall, African American male youth are not receiving an equitable education in the United States. National reports highlight Black males face incredible barriers as they strive to achieve and overcome the social injustices that are an inherent part of America's legacy of racism and discrimination (Whiting, 2009). Nowhere is this more evident than in our nation's schools where African American male youth are disproportionately represented in almost every category of academic failure (Martin, Martin, Gibson, & Wilkins, 2007). This disparity has been termed the achievement gap and describes the difference in academic performance between different racial/ethnic groups (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The achievement gap that was decreasing between African Americans and their White counterparts 20 years ago has reversed course and been steadily escalating over the past 10 years. African American male youth are frequently labeled as "a lost generation," "endangered species," "at risk," or "victims of their environments" (Matthews & Williams, 2007). National Urban League President, Marc H. Morial, in the 2007 "State of the Black America" conference stated:

Empowering Black men to reach their full potential is the most serious economic and civil rights challenge we face today and ensuring their future is critical, not just for the African-American community, but for the prosperity, health and well-being of the entire American family (National Urban League, 2007).

Such intense sentiments emphasize the seriousness of the current situation for African American male adolescents and a vast amount of literature documents the achievement gap between African American male youth and their White counterparts.

The achievement gap has been described as the persistent racial and socioeconomic inequalities in student achievement and is linked to social capital, individual and family resources, school quality, and educational opportunity (Lavin-Loucks, 2006). In education, it usually refers to when one group of students with comparatively equal ability do not achieve in school at equivalent levels of the other groups. It is most often used to explain and discuss statistical differences between groups of students of different races, ethnic backgrounds, languages, socio-economic status (SES), or gender. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) produces the nation's report card to inform citizens about student achievement in elementary and secondary schools across the United States. NAEP gathers disaggregated test data to detect correlates of student achievement that may be perpetuating an achievement gap in mathematics, science, and reading. NAEP scores are analyzed, documented, and tracked to tabulate the constant trends of student performance (Barton, 2009). Based on the NAEP data, the most persistent achievement gap can be found between races, especially African American males and their White counterparts (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

There is much literature in the field focusing on the "deficits" of young Black men; however, little research is devoted to exploring the role the U. S. educational system has played in failing to adequately support the academic needs of young Black men and other marginalized groups (Chambers, 2009). African American males bear some responsibility for their academic achievement, but they are not solely responsible. A myriad of reasons exist as to why they do not always attain academic achievement: racism, negative prejudicial judgments about African

American adolescents, poverty, lack of resources, segregation, exclusionary practices, gender oppression, stereotype threat, family dynamics, lack of cultural understanding, governmental institutions, educational systems, and the criminal justice system (Harper, Terry, & Twiggs, 2009). Regrettably, all have historically played a role in contributing to the current status of African American males in the United States. With a legacy such as this, it is not surprising that many African American adolescents are not reaching their academic potential and choose to disengage from their school environments.

Fortunately, school counselors are distinctively qualified to address marginalized students areas of weaknesses within a cultural context and can provide interventions that empower and positively impact young Black men. School counselors are vital in creating a resilient school environment and attacking obstacles that impede academic success for young Black men (Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009). School counselors are also called to be change agents within their schools on behalf of minority students by identifying barriers to student success and creating an atmosphere where African American adolescents can evolve educationally. This may necessitate attacking curriculums in which African American males are not represented, challenging disciplinary actions in which African American males are particularly targeted, and being the voice for African American males that have been silenced (McMahon, Mason, & Paisley, 2009).

School counselors are specifically trained in the areas of counseling, consultation, coordination, program development and delivery to support the achievement of underserved and underrepresented students (Isaacs, 2003). Ethically, school counselors must address the disparities in achievement and works towards decreasing and closing the gap; one way to do so is through advocacy. The training of school counselors should prepare them to advocate for all

students in a number of ways, but particular attention has been paid lately to school counselors assuming more of a leadership role in their schools and communities. According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Model, one of the themes that should encompass and impact all school counseling programs is school counselor leadership. Nationally, school counselors are encouraged to step beyond their traditional positions of support and assume leadership roles in the school to ensure and influence student success. Tackling underachievement among marginalized and underachieving students and their more privileged peers provides a measureable means of counselor impact on student learning (Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010). School counselors should challenge the status quo and use available data to increase access and equity for marginalized students (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007).

Using the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies (2003), school counselors can begin to spearhead systemic change on behalf of the African American adolescents and other students of color not reaching their academic potential. In addition, special attention needs to be given to ensure all students are equipped to graduate and attend college. Those in the helping profession should be ever-vigilant to ensure that what is done on a daily basis on behalf of African American male students is making a difference in their academic achievement. Working together with parents, schools, students, and communities, school counselors can be pivotal in addressing the inequities that African American males encounter with achievement.

Towards that end, this article explores some contextual factors related to the achievement gap and examines practice implications to the achievement gap within a social justice framework for school counselors, who by the very nature of their roles, are in a pivotal position to advocate on behalf of students in regards to equity, access, and discrimination. Following is an

examination of the related literature concerning education and achievement issues encountered by African American male students, and recommendations for future research and practice.

### **Review of Literature**

Interestingly, 50 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to integrate public schools in an effort to increase educational opportunities for all students; research shows that African American male achievement continues to spiral down as opposed to their White counterparts (Fashola, 2003). Although African American students comprise approximately 15% of the public school enrollment, as a subgroup, African American male youth have the highest rates of discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (West-Olatunji, Baker, & Brooks, 2006). Discipline issues create a domino effect, leading to other devastating consequences such as grade retention, school dropout, and academic failure that broaden the existing achievement gap between African American males and White male students (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003).

Why should there be concern for African American male youth? With one of the highest dropout and incarceration rates, and low college enrollment, the future may hold limited opportunities for advancement of young African American males with less than a high school diploma (Duncan, 2002 & Fashola, 2003). The changing job market has markedly reduced the availability of jobs for those without postsecondary education, especially males. More than half of 16 to 19-year-olds dropouts had no paid employment in 2007 (Bloom, 2010). In addition, those who dropout position themselves to have an higher incidence of health issues, poverty, criminal activity, mental health issues, and an increased demand for welfare assistance (Campbell, 2003/2004). Yet, there are inroads being made daily and in spite of the obstacles, there have been great strides in academic achievement for African Americans since the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in which separate-

but-equal education was found unlawful (Jones & Hancock, 2005). African Americans are better represented in higher education degree attainment, increased attendance in elementary and secondary schooling, and improved standardized test scores compared to 15 years ago (Rovai, Gallien, & Withing, 2005). This is a step in the right direction; however, there is still a large gap in the educational achievement for African Americans students in comparison to White Americans students that merits review, especially African American males (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008).

### **African American Male Youth and Inequities in U.S. Education**

In recent years, the educational attainment of African American male youth has received much attention. This, in part, can be attributed to the fact that in many national and local measures of academic achievement, African American male youth have consistently underachieved in comparison to other groups (Coklely, 2002; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, D'Andrea, 1995; Garibaldi, 2007). According to the Schott Foundation (2006):

Over the last 25 years, the social, educational and economic outcomes for Black males have been more systemically devastating than the outcomes for any other racial or ethnic group or gender. Black males have consistently low educational attainment levels, are *more* chronically unemployed and underemployed, are less healthy and have access to fewer health care resources, die *much* younger, and are *many times* more likely to be sent to jail for periods *significantly longer* than males of other racial/ethnic groups. On average, Black males are more likely to attend the most segregated and least resourced public schools (p. 1).

These social justice issues restrict their ability to successfully maneuver through the educational system, and later productively participate in the workforce, perpetuating the cycle of

poverty and long-term social and economic consequences. There are many reasons provided why African American male youth do not perform well in school (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008). Researchers have identified substandard schools (Boyd, 2007; Berliner, 2009), lower socioeconomic status (Whiting, 2006), inadequate resources (Walker, 2007), single parent families (Bernak & Chung, 2005; Somers et al., 2008), and prejudice and racism as explanations for the disparities (Tyler & Belter, 2008). Additional factors attributed to the academic achievement gap include: low-income households; parents' education, and under-funded schools (Sirin, 2005). Poor and lower socioeconomic status African Americans are more likely to experience academic problems in school and the literature reveals that African American males pay a heavy penalty when it comes to being disciplined in local schools.

Throughout the United States, African American males are suspended and expelled more than any other group. They represent 17% of the United States public school population, but account for over 30% of all expulsions and 32% of all suspensions (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). African American males are more likely to be labeled as having a learning disability, as mentally disabled, are more likely to receive special education services, and are more likely to not take honors and advanced placement classes (Gibson, 2005). African American young men who live in poverty also face stark inequalities in terms of their social resources and educational opportunities (Kozol, 1991), and unfortunately, more than half of all African American men in inner city schools drop out of high school (Bryant, Jr., 2000; Epps, 1995; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995; Klugman & Xu, 2008; Muwakkil, 2006).

Racial gaps in test scores are undisputed facts. The NAEP measures achievement levels for various subject areas for the nation as a whole and for individual states (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009). During the past decade, the NCES data shows that a

majority of African American males in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades did not reach grade level proficiency in key subject areas such as reading, mathematics, history, and science. Also, less than one-quarter of African American males were at or above grade level in these same subject areas and fewer than 3% of African American males performed at advanced levels in these areas. Performance at advanced levels qualifies students for Gifted and Talented or Advanced Placement (AP) courses, which most college admission committees use as a contributing factor in the selection process for post-secondary education (United States Department of Education, 2007). Moreover, AP participation by African-American students nationally is half that as would be expected from African-American total school enrollment (Holzman, 2006).

The percentage of African American, non-Hispanic, male students scoring at or above the Basic level in Reading in grade 8 was 46% in 2007. A student must score at least 281 to fall into the Basic level and must score at least 323 to fall in the range of Advanced. The national percentage of White, non-Hispanic male students scoring at or above the Basic level was 78% during the same period. The percentage of African American, non-Hispanic, male students scoring at or above the Basic level in Grade 8 Math was 46% in 2007, whereas the national percentage of White, non-Hispanic male students scoring at or above the Basic level was 82% (Schott Foundation, 2008). African American males continue to lag behind on most standardized tests. It is relevant based on the fact that test scores are closely related to college admittance and attendance which impacts career choices and future earning potential. It is important for educators to gain a better understanding of the factors that impact the educational achievement and aspirations of African American males if they are to change the trajectories of this group and ensure that they graduate from high school.

## **African American Male Youth and the Testing Gap**

Although there are many ways to measure academic achievement; the United States utilizes standardized testing more than many other curriculum tools, even though standardized testing emphasizes disparities between marginalized and those of the dominant race. African American adolescents consistently have lower scores on standardized tests than do White adolescents. Over the past 30 years, the gap has narrowed to some degree, but it is still considerable and at the current rate, it may take another 50 years to close the gap (Orr, 2003). This is unfortunate for African American males because test scores deeply influence the ability to attend and choose a college, earning potential, and job assignment. Statistics also show that African American males finish college at a much lower rate than their White counterparts and while approximately 23% of African American students graduate from college, the majority of those are African American females. Many African American males who attend college often find themselves behind academically. Nearly 25% of African Americans who go to college, most of them male have to take remedial reading as compared to 7% of White students (Education Trust, 2009). Continual racial disparities in educational achievement create relentless gaps in academic achievement for African Americans and more needs to be done to ensure a seamless pipeline from high school to college for African American adolescents.

## **African American Male Youth and Low High School Graduation Rates**

Currently, African American male youth are not graduating with their cohorts and some are not graduating at all (Schott Foundation, 2008). Comparisons of the high school graduation and dropout rates of African American males and White male students provide another viewpoint from which to investigate the academic achievement gap. African American males are dropping out of high school at alarming rates. During the academic year 2007-2008, the

national graduation average rate was 47%, however, Georgia, Indiana, Alabama, District of Columbia, Ohio, Nebraska, Louisiana, South Carolina and Florida had graduation rates which were lower than the national average and New York came in last place with only a 25% graduation rate for Black males (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). As a result of the poor academic performance, some students will choose to drop out of high school, thereby increasing the likelihood of being underemployed or unemployed (Lavin-Loucks, 2006).

The U.S. Census (2006) estimates that the lifetime earning potential of high school dropouts is \$270,000 less than that of those who graduate high school. Census data also suggest that over the last two decades, the earnings gap between high school graduates and dropouts has grown. Those who drop out are a strain on the nation's economy and result in decreased local, state, and national tax revenues. The United States economy and competitive ranking also suffer when there are high dropout rates (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2007).

The Center on Education and the Workforce, *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018*, shows a significant decline in the earning power of those who do not graduate from high school and the negative impact of not graduating may be more severe for African Americans males than for other groups. Projecting current trends for the future provides a bleak picture of escalating educational disparities that will be detrimental to the overall potential of the nation's economy and continue to restrict the life chances of subsequent generations of America's Black male citizens (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010).

Records have also shown an inverse relationship between the amount of education an individual obtains and incarceration. According to NCED in 2003, 52% of African American males who dropped out of school had served time in prison by their 30s (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). At an absolute minimum, adults need a high school diploma if they are to have

any reasonable opportunity to earn a living. In addition, most businesses are in need of workers with technical skills (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004) The need to raise academic achievement of African American young men is necessary because the global society is dependent on having and maintaining an educated and skilled workforce (House & Martin, 1998).

### **Sociopolitical Issues and African American Male Achievement Gap**

Previous research suggests that African American males are excluded more from the educational system than any other ethnic group (Graham & Anderson, 2008). Furthermore, the literature proposes that the unequal proportion of African American males struggling academically is linked to sociopolitical issues within school contexts such as cultural differences, zero-tolerance policies, and exclusionary disciplinary practices (Milner, IV, 2007). The achievement gap has been called a part of a legacy based on race and class division that intersects family and individual resources with educational opportunity, social capital, and school quality (Fram, Miller-Cribbs, & Horn, 2007). Schools have been blamed for the achievement gap, families failing to adequately prepare children for rigorous class work, and policymakers failing to address the social injustices that pervade the school systems, especially in urban areas. It has been reported that as some African American young males in middle and high school progress through the educational pipeline, they appear to become less academically engaged, learn to underachieve, devalue education, and reject school as a place to develop their sense of self-worth and self-efficacy (Whiting, 2006). Middle school is a time when social contact is vastly important and is characterized by a larger environment, less structure, higher

teacher expectation, and sometimes less emotional support from parents (Toldson, 2008). These types of changes may challenge African American males and other minorities and create an environment for academic decline to begin.

Many attribute the academic problems found in middle school to a curriculum that has not determined whether to strive for an academic focus or to attend to the psychological, emotional, and social needs of the students (Tyler & Boelter, 2008). Middle school sets the stage for future success of African American male youth in high school and few schools actually work closely with local high schools to ensure smooth transitions for students (Clark, Flower, Walton, & Oakley, 2008). Overall, studies suggest that academic success for African American male youth comes at a high price, imagined and real, and the literature frames the issue of their schooling in terms of a dilemma where Black male students are “damned if they do and damned if they don’t achieve academically” (Duncan, 2002, p. 132). Unfortunately, African American males who find little success in middle and high school set the stage for the quality of life they will experience later in life with little educational preparation.

### **Theoretical Explanations for the Educational Disparity of African American Male Youth**

Widespread explanations for the achievement gap exist. They include theories that highlight the family, genetics, cultural deficits, racism, home environment, the community, and the individuals (Comeaux & Jayakumar, 2007). Research from these related theories indicate that for many African American students, academic achievement is strongly linked to career ambitions, support from parents, and teachers (Slaughter & Epps, 1987). Theorizing from a family perspective, African American students conceive that education is not necessarily the door for upward mobility for them and, in response, foster pessimistic attitudes toward education. In addition, African Americans are oftentimes unwilling, “caste-like” members in

American society, and through this historic condition have developed distrust for schools and other institutions because they do not deliver as promised (Tucker, Herman, Pedersen, Vogel, & Reinke, 2000).

In comparison, White American students frequently obtain higher academic achievement and graduate with higher grade-point averages, lower dropout rates, and attain higher levels of education than African American students (Burney & Beilke, 2008). African American students from wealthy, educated families also have lower Advanced Placement (AP) scores than White and Asian Americans (Gibson, 2005). Furthermore, African Americans with substantial SAT scores drop out of college at much greater rates than their White American counterparts (Irving & Hudley, 2008). These statistics show the issues are not bound totally by socioeconomic status. Interestingly, the ethnic gap between the highest achieving African American and White American high school student has remained the same over the past 30 years (McMillian, 2003). These patterns persist after variables such as status, preparation level, socioeconomic status, and educational goals have been controlled.

In the 1970s, the underachievement of African Americans was connected to the absence of the father in many homes. In the 1980s, much research was devoted to the distinctive learning styles of African American males believed to have developed in response to racial discrimination. It was stated that traditional American educators were not appreciative of the different learning manners of African Americans (Howard, 2008). Recently, research has taken more of a lifespan perspective; exploring the total environment in which African American adolescent males develop and learn (McMillian, 2003). However, the theories have not adequately explained why some ethnic groups perform better than others. The widening achievement gap for African American males is a matter of social justice and safeguards need to

be put in place to ensure that access, equity, and equality are made available for these students. When African American males fail to achieve and succeed in school, the impact will be felt later with high unemployment, lower salary earnings, increased crime, poverty, and possible dependency on assistance from social services (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

To explore the underachievement problems of African American students, greater attention needs to be paid to African American males (Milner, IV, 2007). Educational studies focusing on the achievement between the races highlight the fact that when African American male students are compared with White male students, they often rank lowest in scholastic achievement, are most likely to drop out of school, have the worst attendance record, and most often fail to graduate from high school or earn a GED (Martin, Martin, Gibson, & Wilkins, 2007; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). The “acting White” theory as presented by John Ogbu (2004) posits that African Americans and other youth of color do not value education. The concept of “acting White” has been the topic of much research and some scholars disagree with Ogbu, charging that his theory minimizes within-group variation.

### **Academic Disengagement of African American Male Youth**

Another explanation is that African American male youth realize they are devalued by most White Americans, especially in regards to education, and as a means of self defense, begin to devalue educational domains in which they are expected to perform poorly (Chavous et al., 2003). Academic disengagement has also been explored in relation to African American male youth achievement. Academic engagement is the manner in which a student connects to his or her academics. It is a multidimensional construct which suggests two components: participation and identification. When students participate; behaviors such as attending and responding to the teacher, obeying school rules, connecting to the lessons, and showing a vested interest in

learning are observed. Identification is the manner in which a student connects or feels he or she belongs to the school and his or her values of academics and the outcome of those academics (Tyler & Belter, 2008).

The academic engagement model posits that poor school performance leads to decreased self view and subsequent opposition to the academic environment (Miller-Cribbs, Cronen, Davis, & Johnson, 2002). Some researchers contend that academic disengagement is a response to the marginalized groups' reluctance to accept the value of education of the dominant group (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Foster, 2004; Schmader, Major, & Gromzow, 2001). It is also hypothesized that the more ethnic minorities deem that they face racial inequality, the lower their levels of academic engagement (Schmader et al., 2001). Academic disengagement is prevalent in all races; however, disengagement is more noticeable in the African American community, especially with African American males (McMillan, 2003). This academic disengagement, in part, can be attributed to perceptions about ability by educators (West-Olatunji, Baker, & Brooks, 2006). Self-view can be characterized by how students view themselves in regards to educational attainment and whether African Americans believe they have the same future occupational opportunities of White Americans (Tucker et al., 2000). It should be noted that although the disengagement theory is popular, it can be somewhat misleading, because it presents a simplified explanation of some of the factors that lead to African American male students who drop out of school and does not take into consideration the many students who do succeed (Miller-Cribbs et al., 2002).

Although, there are several theoretical explanations for the achievement gap, and the disparities between African Americans and other groups are usually highlighted; one must remember there are high and low attaining students in all groups. The literature on the

achievement gap describes equity in terms of groups; one against the other with the implication that one group is smarter, better, more advanced, capable, etc., but the reality is that equity must be determined one child at a time, despite his or her race (Murphy, 2009). In addition, there are few theories that indicate race and racism impact the present state of affairs for African American adolescents (Howard, 2008). There are many African American male students who are triumphant and thrive despite the barriers they encounter daily. It is essential that research is devoted to giving voice to those stories; identifying the skills and abilities that are commonly found in academically successful students to better inform school counselors about the interventions needed to improve the academic circumstances of African American adolescents.

### **Advocacy Recommendations for School Counselors**

School counselors are well-positioned to assist in decreasing the achievement gap between African American young men and their White counterparts. To do so, school counselors have to create interventions that guarantee African American male youth, and all marginalized youth, have equal opportunities to excel academically. School counselors must initiate systemic change and challenge policies which are designed to benefit and uphold White privilege at the expense of students of color (Crethar & Nolan, 2009). One such project which speaks to the achievement gap between African Americans males and their White peers is the Transforming School Counseling Initiative. This initiative challenges school counselors acknowledge their positions and expertise as culturally competent social justice agents and be proactive in implementing services that ensure equitable treatment for all students, especially those marginalized (Bernak, & Chung, 2008). This may require school counselors to step away from traditional roles and implement more social justice interventions that intentionally impact positive educational outcomes with outcome-based results.

Research indicates that when school counseling program support proactive leadership, strong community ties, performance based standards, rigorous curriculum, and parental involvement; marginalized student achievement improves (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). With school counselors' educational background, they are uniquely trained in these areas and can spearhead these initiatives. Also, school counselors can use data to demonstrate how early counseling interventions are effective and advocate for African American male adolescents to have access to resources that encourage academic success. Biases related to African American male youth cannot be overlooked and must be addressed and school counselors themselves must acknowledge their biases and the impact it may have on the services they provide for these students (Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010).

African American males want to be successful and value education, but some do not have the skills needed to be successful; school counselors as champions of equity can empower African American students to attain academic goals. African American male adolescents acknowledge that adult support is significant to their achievement; therefore, when those support systems are missing at home, efforts to enlist mentors for students of colors should be implemented at school. In addition, school counselors as data experts can also accurately interpret standardized test scores and provide students and parents with important and relevant feedback for academic placement (Koretz, 2008). Counselors should also speak out on behalf of African American males experiencing academic challenges with confidence and boldness because silence only perpetuates the gap and implies agreement with the status quo. There is paucity in the number of African Americans in the counseling profession and this is also true in school counseling. Federal and state funding should be allocated to recruit and train more African American school counselors, especially males, who may have a similar worldview which

would be helpful in recognizing the racial/cultural challenges African American male adolescents encounter and also provide additional positive role models for the young men (Harper, Terry & Twiggs, 2009). Many school counselors are of the dominant race, and it can be assumed that most have been socialized in the same educational systems that fail to meet the needs of marginalized students (Mitcham-Smith, 2007).

## **Conclusions**

If American schools are going to be successful in reducing and eventually closing the achievement gap, more research needs to be conducted on schools in which the gap is decreasing; highlighting the components of schools that are successful in addressing and closing the achievement gap between African American male youth and their White counterparts. According to the research, success stories are found in schools with a commitment to African American students and a coordinated agenda for organizational learning to better address the needs of marginalized students (Kezar & Eckel, 2007). School counselors play a critical role in schools by managing the academic, social, and personal needs of students and collaborating with all stakeholders to eliminate barriers to learning. Additional factors that play a role in the academic success of African American males include peer support which contributes to achieving academic goals and creates a community conducive to learning at school (Horvat & Lewis, 2003); parental encouragement and involvement has also been reported as important, because students whose parents are involved have been shown to achieve more and foster a greater sense of self (Somers et al., 2008). Mentoring programs have been proven a successful method to assist African American males academically achieve (Noguera, 2003).

Social support is also described as a factor in African American male youth success and refers to an individual feeling valued, esteemed, and cared for; this support can come from

teachers, parents, peers, and other significant adults (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002). School counselors play a fundamental role in providing support for marginalized students. According to the National Center for Transforming School Counseling (NCTSC) school counselors must: connect counseling to standard based reform, advocate high standards for all students especially minority students, challenge curriculum and assessments that fail to meet the needs of all students, and provide ongoing support for teachers, parents, and students (Education Trust, 2009). It is not sufficient to ensure that students who achieve academically graduate and attend college but that all students, especially marginalized students, are given the guidance and strategic support needed to fully participate in postsecondary opportunities.

Listening to what African American boys have to say concerning the achievement gap must also be considered. Traditionally, research has not portrayed the voices of African American male youth and their perceptions of the achievement gap (Henfield, Woods, III, & Wood, 2008). Giving voice to the experiences of those directly impacted by educational disparities will provide insight for educational interventions that may assist in decreasing the achievement gap (Lynn & Parker, 2006).

In closing, this article examines issues connected to the academic achievement gap and explores implications for practice for school counselors. Future research should explore specific programs that have been successful in closing the achievement gap for African American males and how those programs and interventions can be made more accessible for all minorities. Eradicating the achievement gap will help ensure more positive life outcomes for those traditionally marginalized and create a more powerful society of access for all, something African American leaders have encouraged for many years

It is precisely because education is the road to equality and citizenship, that it has been made more elusive for Negroes than many other rights. The walling off of Negroes from equal education is part of the historical design to submerge him in second class status. Therefore, as Negroes have struggled to be free they have had to fight for the opportunity for a decent education - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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## CHAPTER 3

# LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE YOUTH: A QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY<sup>2</sup>

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If “education is a precondition to survival in America today,” as Marian Wright, author and founder of the Children’s Defense Fund, stated, and the intention of American public schools is to provide all students with a good education, why are certain students not receiving a quality education? Some students, particularly African American male students, are disproportionately represented among Americans who are encountering academic failure (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Bryant, Jr., 2000; Clark, Flower, Walton, & Oakley, 2008; Garibaldi, 2007; Rowley & Bowman, 2009). From a social justice point of view, accessibility to an equitable education is the right of every student. Unfortunately, the United States has not lived up to its obligation to all students, especially African American males, by providing them with the skills needed to successfully compete in a global economy.

The time has come to sound the alarm because research consistently supports that African Americans males and students from low income backgrounds are not doing well in local schools in America (Evans, 2005; Johnston & Viadero, 2000; Kao & Thompson, 2003; & Leach & Williams, 2007). Closing the achievement gap between African American males and their White counterparts is imperative for the U.S. and will help ensure that those traditionally marginalized improve their chances of a better quality of life, ability to competitive compete in society, and economic growth all while strengthening a democratic society.

Studies on academic achievement among United States elementary and secondary students authenticate an unrelenting gap between African American students and their White counterparts (Boyd, 2007). For instance, less than half of African American males who begin high school actually graduate (Neblett, Jr, Chavons, Nguyen, & Sellers, 2009). According to the research, to be an African American male in U.S. schools places one at risk for a variety of negative consequences including: school failure, special education assignment, suspensions,

expulsions, and violence (Davis, 2003). African American males who drop out of school have an increased likelihood of being incarcerated. Approximately 98% of all prisoners are male with 38% being African American (Garibaldi, 2007). Another contributor to the increase of incarceration of the African American male prison population is the fact that many schools have implemented a “get tough” zero-tolerance policy regarding discipline, which is more damaging to African American males. This approach to discipline in schools is called the School to Prison Pipeline, a universal system of educational policies that drives students out of school and into the criminal justice system. Students of color are especially vulnerable in areas such as high-stakes testing, school discipline, school grading systems, and policing practices (Wald & Losen, 2003). In addition, African American males are overrepresented in special education classes, and underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP), college preparation classes (Wilkins, 2006) and are more vulnerable to criminal activities, substance abuse, poor academic achievement, and early sexual behavior (Wyatt, 2009), in part because many African American males live in poverty or low socioeconomic conditions.

If the U.S. is going to continue to be a world leader in a global society, it is essential that all students are well-educated, especially those who have been traditionally marginalized (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). In order to improve the success rate of African American male youths in school, safeguards need to be put in place. Counselors, educators, parents, and community members must collaborate and advocate for programs that will decrease the achievement gap between African American male youths and their White counterparts. Scholars have explained that academic attainment and educational accomplishment impact adult occupational status and earnings. If African American male youth continue to suffer disparities in academic achievement, the economic cost may ensure a future of second-class citizenship and

perpetuate a cycle of poverty, discrimination, and below-average earnings (Olneck, 2005).

Equity in achievement between the races and different ethnicities is the goal because it assists in diminishing vast economic differences and creates a climate where educational advancement is embraced, encouraged, expected and achieved by all students regardless of race/ethnicity.

The purpose of this study is to describe the perceptions African American male youth have of African American students who achieve academically and why there continues to be an achievement gap. The study explores the achievement gap and perceptions of what a good student is as experienced by African American male youth and seeks to better inform school counselors of the increasing challenges African American male youth experience as they navigate through the educational systems. It advocates for all school counselors and educators to create more culturally relevant interventions which meet the particular academic needs of African American male youth.

### **Sociopolitical Factors with African American Male Youth and Education**

Inequalities between the achievement of African American male youth and Whites continue to present confounding problems in the American educational system. Researchers' explanations focus on a variety of sociopolitical factors including poverty, economics, and family life (Samuel & Penaloza, 2008). While many factors have been identified, there is not one sole contributor to the achievement gap.

### **African American Male Youth and the History of American Education**

During the early 1600s, the U.S. determined that its citizens needed to be educated and established public schooling to teach the three Rs; reading, writing, and arithmetic. African Americans, of course were not the intended student population: White males were the ones

society felt needed knowledge (Allen, 2008). History verifies America's legacy concerning education and African Americans and includes: slavery, Jim Crow laws, Black Codes, separate-but-equal laws, racism, prejudice, and social inequalities. These practices led to inequities with African Americans not having the same educational opportunities as their White counterparts (Noblit & Mendez, 2008).

The landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) by the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that state laws establishing separate public schools for Blacks and Whites were unconstitutional. Although, *Brown v. Board of Education* legally ended educational segregation, it did not attend to the essential disparities in power innate in a society where Whites were in control (Fuller, 2004). In actuality, the U.S. continues to contribute to the achievement gap with institutionalized racism in all parts of society, especially the system of education (Robertson, 2008). According to Lavin-Loucks (2006) "the sheer presence of an achievement gap based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status implies an unequal educational system" (p. 7). Some scholars suggest that Blacks do not enroll in school with a disadvantage, but leave school disadvantaged by institutionalized racism that is as much a part of the fabric of the United States as apple pie (Toldson, 2008). Race and racism are intricately woven in the social and structural forms of subjugation that infuse every institution in the U.S. and education is not excluded. This racism plays out daily across American schools and definitely influences African American males' educational experiences and achievement (Howard, 2008).

African Americans have long faced exclusion from public schools and have experienced much lower quality education than most Whites; which continues today in many urban areas where African Americans have fewer qualified teachers, less textbooks, and limited technology

(Beglau, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Grieve, 2009; Pascopella, 2006). Along with a past riddled with racism, the effects of poverty also play a large part in the achievement gap. Many African Americans are located in large urban areas that, at one time, held high hopes of good jobs and better quality of life. However, over the years, several of these large cities have deteriorated because of poverty and the school systems do not have the adequate resources to educate these children perpetuating the achievement gap (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005).

### **Poverty and Quality of Education for African American Male Youth**

Unfortunately, the economic conditions into which an African American male is born can also be an indicator of how well he will be educated. Fourteen percent of Whites, 29% of Latinos, 10% of Asians, 33% of African Americans, and 17% of all children under the age of 18 live in poverty (Burney & Beilke, 2008). Twenty-four percent of children living in large metropolitan areas also live in poverty and substantial proportions of African American youth are more heavily concentrated in the highest poverty schools (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). Many African American male youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds often enroll in school with low academic skills, resulting in a disadvantage in comparison to their counterparts. Clearly, poverty has a detrimental effect on the quality of education that students receive and African Americans are impacted more than any other ethnic group. In addition, inner city low-income schools are usually poorly-funded, burdened with little parental and community involvement, and African American males who attend these schools are at risk for decreased achievement (Davis, 2003).

Moreover, many African American males living in urban cities contend with issues of destitution, violence, and racism on a daily basis. These environmental factors can negatively

impact them emotionally, academically, and economically (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008). A potentially industrious community relies on the educational success of its people, but uneducated African American male youth are ill-equipped to successfully participate in the job market. Currently the U.S. labor market demands less blue-collar workers because many jobs are outsourced overseas. There is a greater need for advanced education and, at a minimum, the completion of a high school diploma. By earning a high school diploma or post secondary degree, Black young men will acquire more skills that will assist them in competing in the workforce (Ingrum, 2006). However, those without educational skills are often underemployed and unable to adequately provide for themselves and their families.

### **Uneducated African American Youth and Job Readiness**

Unemployment in the African American community impacts African American male youth educationally. Traditionally, the rate of unemployment among African American men has been twice as high as White men and higher in urban areas. In cities such as New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, 35 to 55% of African American males between the ages of 18 and 35 are unemployed (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006). African Americans from low economic backgrounds are more likely to encounter job instability, usually acquire jobs that have limited benefits, low wages, or meager opportunities for advancement (Hughes, Stenhjem, & Newkirk, 2007). The need to confront the problem of out-of-school and out-of work-youth is critical, particularly for African American male youth who are the most at risk because of the state of urban education (Davis, 2006).

### **African American Male Youth Achievement Gap and the Economy**

The rates of educational attainment for African Americans are lower than those for both the total United States population and the White subpopulation. This observation is significant

because of the relationship between educational attainment and future economic status in America. Closing America's educational achievement gap could have dramatic social and economic impact, according to a study by McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm (2009). The McKinsey report analyzed the long-term financial impacts of various achievement gaps. For individuals, shortfalls in academic achievement impose heavy and often tragic consequences, including lower earnings, poorer health, and higher rates of incarceration (McKinsey & Company 2009).

Even more striking is the report's analysis at the national level. The researchers estimated that closing the gap in the United States between White students and their African American and Latino peers could increase the annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by as much as \$525 billion. Further, closing the performance gap between low-income students and their peers could add another \$670 billion. Taken together, that adds up to over one trillion dollars in additional annual economic output. The report concluded by stating, "These educational gaps impose on the United States the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession" (McKinsey & Company, 2009). In an increasingly technology-based economy, average-income jobs for uneducated African American male youth are meager; school dropouts cannot compete and become trapped in destitution and unemployment (Campbell, 2003/2004). Uneducated youth are more likely to become discouraged because of perceived academic deficits, which may result in some participating in gangs, selling drugs, and other illegal activities while in school.

### **African American Males and the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

The achievement gap places African American male youth at risk for being funneled into what has been called the "School-to-Prison pipeline" (Muwakkil, 2006). The School-to-Prison Pipeline refers to the U.S educational systems' trend of criminalizing actions of students in

schools with zero-tolerance discipline and school arrests, which targets at-risk youth, usually minorities and denies them access to education (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Research indicates that there is a steady rise of young African American males in detention centers and prisons. African American males account for over 35% of the prison population; however, they comprise only 6% of the United States population. In 2002, about 12% of African American men in their 20s were in prison. Researchers have gone so far to say that for African American males in urban cities, prison had become a normal part of existence. To intensify the situation, most offenders are also poorly-educated and continue to fuel the achievement gap (Pettit & Western, 2004).

The Department of Justice indicates that one out of every four African American males is in jail or under court supervision (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). In the Federal Bureau of Prisons' institutions, 98% of the prison population is male and 35% are African American males (Harvey, 2004). In the general prison population, African American men are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than Whites. Young Black men who drop out of school are incarcerated eight times more than their college-educated counterparts, and one in 25 college educated African American men were incarcerated as compared to one in three for African American dropouts (Western, 2007). Fifty-four percent of African American males who dropped out of school had prison records in their 30s (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). Additionally, there are more African American men in their 20s under court supervision than enrolled in college. Incarceration disrupts the life course of African American male youth and places them on a spiraling path that interferes with academic, social, and personal goals.

By and large, African Americans are five times more likely to be murdered than Whites, and Black men 25 years of age and under are 15 times more likely to die as a result of murder than their White counterparts (National Urban League, 2007). The escalating statistics draw

attention to the state of concern for African American males and necessitate advocating for safeguards and interventions to be developed in local schools, ensuring that African American male youth graduate from high school and are assisted in post graduation efforts (Rowley & Bowman, 2009).

### **A Phenomenological Exploration of African American Male Youth Education Experiences**

A phenomenological approach was used for this study because it allows the researcher to describe the essence of how African American male youth construe, process, and encounter the achievement gap (Iwamoto, Creswell, & Caldwell, 2007). The phenomenologist researcher is concerned with understanding the social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved (Groenewald, 2004). In phenomenology, the researcher acknowledges the inability to remain totally detached from his/her own presuppositions and it is not necessary to indicate otherwise; instead the researcher indicates how interpretations and meaning have been placed on findings (Wertz, 2005). Phenomenological investigation attempts to gain a deeper meaning or essence of everyday experiences by those experiencing it. The intent is not on simply identifying the factual points of an experience; instead phenomenology seeks to answer the question: “What is it like to live a specific experience?” (Wilson & Washington, 2007). This is particularly helpful when working with African American men whose worldviews are shaped by the intricacy of their life roles as both men and African Americans. The history of African Americans is often shared by storytelling; phenomenology is culturally congruent with this method and places the actual lived experiences of these young men at the center of analysis while also allowing full participation in the research process (Wertz, 2005). Finally, phenomenology is an appropriate research design to pair with Critical Race Theory.

## **Using Critical Race Theory to Understand Educational Inequity**

Critical Race Theory is the theoretical lens selected for this study, because it focuses on the effects of race and racism in society. Most importantly, Critical Race Theory also addresses White dominance while it advocates for change and social justice (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) 2004). Critical Race Theory complements phenomenological research and encourages counter narratives to deconstruct the dominant narratives and offers alternative views for understanding cultural identities while challenging the master culture (Stanley, 2007). Critical Race Theory acknowledges the role of race and racism in America and helps ensure a comprehensive examination of the experiences of African American males (Comeaux & Jayakumar, 2007). Another component of Critical Race Theory is that it investigates how institutional structures, practices, policies, and processes help uphold inequalities for students of color. Unlike traditional scholarly research that examines and/or describes how race and racism are organized and operate, Critical Race Theory seeks to restore social inequalities (Tate, IV, 1997) and is frequently used to examine the effects of racial injustice in schools on minority achievement (Carter, 2008; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Critical Race Theory operates on three principles. The first tenet is that racism is all-encompassing and a fact of life in United States society and the supposed superiority of the majority White race/ethnicity is so embedded in legal, educational, and political organizations that it is almost unrecognizable (Taylor, 2006). The second tenet is that racism is permanent, and although there may be stages of progress followed by stages of resistance, societal forces and the majority dominance will prevail making the civil rights gains appear insignificant. Third, racism must be contested and one way to contest racism is to challenge the experiences of Whites and insist on recognition of the experiences of people of color (Carter, 2008; Lynn &

Parker, 2006; Vaught, 2008). Strengthening the goals of this article, Critical Race Theory links to education by showing how historically racism can account for inequalities such as dropout rates, school suspensions, property value, and quality of schools (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Saddler, 2005).

A major premise of Critical Race Theory is to challenge the majority population's view; it is a good match to counter the single-truth claims from the dominant beliefs concerning African American male youths and achievement (Masko, 2008). Critical Race Theory offers insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies that guide our efforts to identify, analyze, and transform the structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial/ethnic positions in and out of the class (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 63). The merging of Critical Race Theory and the research paradigm of phenomenology allowed this researcher to examine the complexity of race as a conceptual structure within the school system.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the perceptions African American male youth have of African American students who achieve academically and why there continues to be an achievement gap. The researcher aimed to clearly understand experiences from the perspectives of participants (Groenewald, 2004) and give voice to the lived experiences of African American male youth and their thoughts about African American peers who are regarded as "good students." The following questions guided this research study: (a) What does it mean to African American male youth to be considered a "good student" academically? and (b) how would you describe the achievement gap?

## **Method**

The foundation of qualitative research is that the conception of the real world is incomplete and that events can only be comprehended in the context of what they mean, signify,

or imply to the subject experiencing the events (Ponterotto, 2005). There are many types of qualitative research and for the purpose of this study, the phenomenological approach was selected. Phenomenology provides a method of understanding the lived experiences of a phenomenon among a particular group of people or individual (Creswell, 2007). A variety of methods may be used in phenomenological-based research, including interviews, conversations, participant observation, action research, focus meetings and analysis of personal texts. The goal of the phenomenological approach is to ascertain what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience in order to present an inclusive account of it. Researchers gather data after extensive interviews depicting the shared experiences of several interviewees and are able to present a comprehensive description of it (McCaslin & Scott, 2003). In doing so, the aspiration of the researcher is to describe, as truthfully as possible, the phenomenon while avoiding any presumptions and remaining sincere to the facts (Groenewald, 2004).

The researcher selected a phenomenological research tradition because it is considered a rigorous research design and comprehensive paradigm to examine the meaning African American male youth give to same race/ethnicity peers who they consider successful academically (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004; Tekin & Tekin, 2007). This study will also utilize Critical Race Theory (CRT) because it focuses on social inequalities arising through race/ethnicity and racism. There are several goals of Critical Race Theory however,

A primary goal of Critical Race Theory is the transformation of those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominated racial positions in and out of the classrooms. Critical Race Theory seeks to create the circumstances that eliminate the capacity of race to predict schooling and life

outcomes, and is based on a commitment to social justice, racial emancipation and societal transformation (Love, 2004, p. 228)

The aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of these young men's shared experiences regarding the achievement gap and perceptions of what makes up a "good student," enabling school counselors to better advocate for marginalized students based on their stated observations and needs (Creswell, 2007). Another goal was using the findings to challenge change and promote a deeper assessment of the social inequities that African American male youth encounter as they transition through the educational system.

### **Participants**

Purposive sampling was used to interview five African American male adolescents and facilitate one focus group of seven African American male adolescents. According to Creswell, five to 25 participants is an appropriate sample size when conducting a phenomenology study (Creswell, 2007). It is suggested that focus groups between six and eight participants are suitable, manageable, large enough to gain a variety of perspectives and yet small enough to not become fragmented or disorderly (Rabiee, 2004). The participants were males between the ages of 14 and 18 years old who self-identified as African American. All participants were currently enrolled in school and were recruited from the Empowered Youth Programs (EYP) and a metro-area Parent Watch Listserv. The Listserv serves as a means of dialogue among parents, educators, and community members. The Listserv goal is the discussion of ways to improve local schools and create a more equitable education for all students. EYP is comprised of three programs: Young Women Scholars, created for African American females; Project: Gentlemen on the Move (GOTM), designed for African American males; and Parents of Empowered Youth, established to assist parents of the Empowered Youth participants. The goals of EYP are to

cultivate and foster academic and social excellence in adolescents, especially African Americans, through several academic components including: Saturday Academies for students to receive additional assistance and tutoring with difficult subjects, Exam Lock-Ins which prepares students in advance for final exams, and the Summer Leadership Academy. The program focuses on providing developmental and comprehensive support for students along with individual and group counseling (Bailey, 2008). The participants from the interview were selected from the Listserv and those from the focus group were selected from EYP.

### **Procedure**

The participants were selected using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling groups participants according to preselected criteria pertinent to a specific research question (Seidman, 2006). This sampling method allowed this researcher to summarize and explain the themes or “essence” of the participants regarding the achievement gap and how they described a “good student.” Participants met the following criteria: (a) at least 14-years-old, (b) African American males, and (c) currently enrolled in school.

An exhaustive description of the purpose and design of the study was explained to both parents and participants. Informed consent detailing potential benefits and possible risks of the study was also explained and obtained from each parent prior to initial contact with participant. During preliminary contact with the participants, a description of the purpose and design was again discussed. Assent details framing the potential benefits and possible risks of the study were emphasized and obtained from each participant. Five students participated in the three individual interviews, and an independent sample of approximately seven participants formed the focus group, which met twice. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to one hour and the focus group met for 60 to 90 minutes. The researcher acknowledges a small sample size, which

permitted a rich and robust picture of these students' experiences in regards to the academic achievement gap and perceptions of being a "good student."

Participants examined the individual and focus group transcripts to help the primary researcher identify themes and subthemes and determine whether they accurately reflected the meaning of their experiences. This process, known as member checking, was used to strengthen standards and verification of the study (Creswell, 2009). Finally, approval was requested from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) on Studies Involving Human subjects at the University of Georgia. Upon approval, contact was made with the director of Youth Empowerment Program to request permission to conduct the study and possible participants were recruited via the Listserv. The researcher submitted informal consent and assent forms to those who wished to participate.

## **Instruments**

### *Participant Demographic Information Sheet*

Before the semi-structured interview, participants completed a participant demographic information sheet (Appendix A). The demographic sheet took approximately five minutes to complete. Personal identifying information was not included on the demographic sheet. Participants selected a pseudonym, which was used in transcription, analysis, and coding to maintain confidentiality.

### **Individual Semi-Structured Interviews**

Seidman (2006) stated the actions of people become significant and explicable when placed in the content of their lives and those around them. Phenomenological in-depth interviewing entails performing a succession of three interviews. The series of prompts include interviewing individuals over the span of three 60-minute sessions. However, the age of the

participants was considered and, when necessary, the length of the interview was adjusted to benefit the participant. Each prompt was designed to create themes and ideas related to the phenomena (the perceptions African American male youth have of being labeled a good student and the achievement gap) being studied. These prompts provided a structure for the interview sessions, which allowed the participants to reconstruct details of their experiences (Seidman, 2006). The following three interview series guided this research study: a) focused life history, b) details of experience, and c) reflection on the meaning. During the first phase of the study, five participants were interviewed individually over three sessions (Appendix B). The first interview with each participant was a focused life history that asked participants to share their experiences regarding the reason for the achievement gap and perceptions of a “good student.” The second individual interview gathered the details regarding the process, and the third interview asked participants to reflect on the meaning of their perceptions of the academic achievement gap and what they considered a “good student” as African American male youth. The interview process involved a focused conversation in which the participant was encouraged to lead in describing his process in whatever way he desired. The researcher asked clear, open-ended questions to elicit detailed descriptions of the participants’ experience. The goal was to understand each participant’s experiences and perceptions related to the achievement gap and what the males considered a good student, so that meanings emerged (Creswell, 2007). During the third interview, participants reflected on the meaning of their experiences and how they connected to the emotional and intellectual connections between school and life. All interviews were recursive in nature to clarify and expound on responses from prior interviews. Recursivity is a

continual ongoing analysis into the data as the study proceeds, causing the researcher to return to previous data and information, asking analytic questions, making interpretations, and writing the final report (Creswell, 2009).

The interviews took place one week apart to allow the participants to ponder previous interviews, but not allowing enough time to pass to lose the association between the two interviews. This also allowed the researcher to establish rapport with the participants and account for possible distractions during the sessions (Creswell, 2009). To ensure accurate translation of the words of the participant, the researcher recorded, transcribed and collaborated with each participant to clarify the responses from the interview. This process, called member checking, ensured that the voices of the participants was captured by allowing the participants to view the transcripts

### **Focus Group Interviews**

The second phase of the study included one 90-minute focus group with the seven participants. During the first group meeting, group rules and confidentiality issues were discussed and the importance of confidentiality was emphasized for the success of the group. The goal was to understand the process African American male adolescents use to provide a rationale for the achievement gap and their perceptions of a good student in addition to building validity of initial data analyses. Therefore, the participants were asked questions to identify themes from individual interviews. Team-building activities were also used to build trust during the process of the focus group. The participants first took part in an ice-breaker, followed by a getting-to-know-you activity. This allowed the researcher to build rapport with the group, which is particularly important when working with adolescents who respond more sincerely when they feel a connection with the facilitator (Sue & Sue, 2008).

## **Researcher as an Instrument**

Before conducting the research, it was necessary to describe the positionality of the primary researcher (Creswell, 2007), an African American female who identifies as a heterosexual Christian, currently working as a school counselor in a suburban school system in a large metropolitan city in the South. This researcher acknowledged that her prior experiences and beliefs may have influenced the research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Being an insider to the culture that was studied required that the data truthfully mirror the reality of the participants rather than the viewpoint of the researcher (Yeh & Inman, 2007). The race and ethnicity may have caused the researcher to more closely identify with the participants of the study and, having experienced racism and discrimination as a student, may have impacted her interpretations.

The researcher shared experiences of race and ethnicity that enabled a rapport to be established and increased participants' sense of security while sharing their lived experiences. To address these concerns, feedback was requested from the participants (member checks) and triangulation to respond to biases (Creswell, 2009). Another important step in phenomenological research is bracketing, which entails setting aside personal views of the phenomenon and focusing on those views by the participants (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). The researcher accomplished this by suspending prejudice of the phenomena while the individual interviews took place. In addition, the researcher compassionately reflected on the experiences of the participants, and during later stages of the data analysis, integrated insights from previous theoretical positions when necessary (Yeh & Inman, 2007). The primary researcher tried to ensure enough empathic distance between the participants in order for authentic questions, and investigated not shared assumptions.

In an effort to remain mindful of the potential effects of researcher bias concerning the study, a reflexive journal was kept throughout the research process in order to facilitate the disclosure of researcher bias. This process is more commonly known as reflexivity: the project of examining how the researcher and subjective elements impinge on, and even transform research (Finlay, 2002). This process was implemented after each interview and interaction with the participants. The primary researcher recorded thoughts, feelings, and assumptions and these entries were analyzed and discussed during research team meetings. Research team discussions included addressing biases related to race and gender, educational privilege and its impact on the researcher's interpretation, response to sensitive issues presented by participants, and connectivity to the challenges many of the participants shared. The primary researcher works primarily with children of color who have some academic challenges and is heavily invested in removing obstacles that hinder students' academic and personal success. This commitment to fighting the injustices for children of color could have resulted in slanted writing and interpretations made where none truly exist. However, to address this concern, the research team provided frequent monitoring for biases and personal interpretation.

### **Research Team**

The research team consisted of the primary researcher and two African American females currently employed in the counseling field as an elementary school counselor and a high school counselor. Both, at the time of this study, were doctoral students in counseling and personnel administration with an emphasis on social justice, as was the researcher. Prior to beginning the study the research team met to discuss and bracket possible biases and expectations and met throughout the research process as needed (Creswell, 2007). Some of the biases discussed were different definitions of a "good student." Both the elementary counselor and the high school

counselor felt it should include behavior, and all good students should accept academic challenges. The elementary school counselor felt that many students today have low self-expectations and receive little joy in learning for learning's sake. The primary researcher felt that, on some level, educators were not providing all students with an equal education. A code book allowed the research team to identify themes and provided a manner for systematic analysis of data. Each team member individually reviewed the participants' transcripts and independently developed a code book from the transcripts. The code books were discussed during bi-monthly research team meetings and common themes identified by the team were reviewed; clarification and description of the phenomenon continued with comparisons and the phenomenon was then validated (Seidman, 2006).

### **Phenomenological Data Collection and Data Analysis**

The semi-structured approach to individual interviewing was the initial means of data collection in this study (Creswell, 2007). Five participants were interviewed for 60 minutes three times each. Next, two follow-up interviews were used to review the transcripts from the initial audiotape interviews with each participant. The participants were invited to clarify their answers and enhance and/or delete content to ensure accuracy of their experiences. Open-ended questions concerning African American male youths' perceptions of academically successful peers were used during the interviews and it was requested that the participants share their expert knowledge while the researcher observed behavior and responses in an uncontrolled environment.

The second instrument of data collection was the focus group. In order to assist in establishing rapport with the participants, team-building activities were conducted before the session began (Seidman, 2006, p. 97). Seven African American male adolescents comprised the

focus group, and they also answered open-ended questions concerning their perceptions of African American males who are considered academically “good students” and reasons for the achievement gap. A good student was defined as a student with an alphabetical grade average of B or higher (calculated using a numerical grade point average). A camcorder was utilized to capture the responses of the participants visually for accuracy in reporting. As a backup, the focus group sessions were taped using an audio recorder. The data collection and analysis process was recursive in nature in order to strengthen verification procedures in the study.

This research and data analysis process included four steps: Step one consisted of analyzing the individual and group session transcripts using the qualitative method of bracketing to ensure that all biases were being addressed. In step two, a reflexive journal was kept to monitor biases and assumptions throughout the data collection process. In step three, the data analysis included horizontalization to ensure that there were no overlapping or repetitive statements from the participants about the phenomenon by the research team. Lastly, in step four, the statements of the participants’ were clustered (Crewell, 2007; West-Olatunji et al., 2006). Once the preliminaries were finished, the following the seven steps were utilized in the data analyses and included (1) listening to the audio tape of the individual interview, (2) listening and viewing the tape from the focus group, (3) listening to both tapes while reading the transcripts to determine truthfulness, (4) reviewing the transcripts numerous times to underline comments the participants made which described their experiences, (5) clustering highlighted statements into summary statements on the margin of the transcript using the comment feature in Microsoft Word, (5) generating domains of meaning from the clustered summary statements into a code book, (6) recording the field notes from the observation, and (7) reviewing the observational protocol. Verification of content and meaning was conducted with the interview

participant to ensure accuracy of experiences (Farber, 2006). Next, the participant transcripts were presented to the research team for analysis. An audit trail was kept by the primary researcher throughout the study. After the data was collected and examined, it was presented to the auditor who reviewed the results and conclusions to guarantee confirmation by the data. The auditor was a female, African American university adjunct counseling professor and school counselor.

### **Trustworthiness of Study**

This study employed several verification processes in addition to rich and thick descriptions that are intrinsically engaged in qualitative research such as clarifying researcher biases, member checking and external audit (Creswell, 2007). Reflexivity addressed the primary researcher's acknowledgement as a co-constructor of knowledge. It was imperative to balance her life experiences by member checking (Finlay, 2002). For this study, notes from the interviews, transcripts, coding books, research group feedback, reflexive journal, and the auditor's report were used to analyze the assorted data sets. This multi-layered method allowed for structural corroboration, also known as triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The research team permitted consensual validation and included discussions of the research findings, and process (Creswell, 2007).

As an additional source of data for analysis, the field notes and reflexive journal recorded personal observations and impressions. An attempt was made to be open and honest with the participants as to the goals of the study to find out more about the insights and experiences of African American male youths considered academically good students and the reasons surrounding the achievement gap. The participants were also notified that the information

provided would assist in finding additional methods to support African American male youths in their educational experiences (Henfield, Woods, III, & Wood, 2008).

### **Findings**

As stated earlier, this study explored the phenomenological experiences of African American male youth, their perceptions of what constitutes a good student, and why they believe there continues to be an achievement gap between them and their White counterparts. The young men presented counter-stories to what the media and researchers have documented about the achievement gap and their ability. Most desired to challenge the negative stereotypes they consistently hear about themselves. The participants came from three different schools in a large metropolitan area in the southeast United States. The schools would be considered urban/suburban, located in primarily modest-income areas that were largely made up of African American students. The young men were either middle or high school students and participated in individual interviews or a focus group. A description participant sheet for the individual interviews was used to highlight personal facts about the young men (Appendix C). Detailed examination and analysis of the African Americans male youths lived experiences led to an enhanced understanding of their collective experience. The data was collected from interviews, demographic information, focus group, and a reflexive journal. These two research questions guided the study: (a) What does it mean to African American male youth to be considered a “good student” academically? and (b) How would you describe the achievement gap?

Some overarching themes emerged from the analysis of the data. Achieving academically is strongly connected to African American male students’ family socioeconomic status and the ability to secure educational resources. Also, those who have access to financial and educational capital are better equipped to successfully compete, while those who do not are

often unfairly stigmatized as facilitators of the achievement gap. African American male youth desire consistent parental/teacher support as they navigate through the educational system, since they frequently encounter social justice issues as members of a marginalized race. Having this adult encouragement motivates them to continue to try to reach academic goals and provides a sense of security and comfort. Developing resiliency to remain in school is a must for most African American male students in light of the fact that while focusing on academic achievement, some also contend with the influence of fatherless homes, poverty, gang recruitment, poorly-equipped schools, drugs, violence, and racism on a daily basis. Not succumbing to the societal despair that many find themselves engulfed in, simply because of where they were born and the economic status of their family, sometimes presents as a nonchalant attitude to disguise the weariness of trying to tear down the stigmas associated with being African American. The desire to be successful academically, break the cycle of family poverty, prove that they can be as scholarly as the peers they are frequently compared to, and dispel some of the ingrained myths of the inferiority of the African American male race creates motivation and effort in spite of challenges. There is no order of preference to the themes and all themes were articulated by each of the young men in some manner. A subtheme that was prevalent in most participants' responses was the connectedness of achievement and good behavior for African American males. All indicated that academic achievement and success should also incorporate commendable behavior at all times.

### **The Haves versus the Have-nots: Achievement or Resource Gap?**

Unfailingly, when the participants were asked for their perceptions on the achievement gap between young Black men and their White counterparts, the issue of resources was mentioned. The participants stated that it was difficult to successfully match the efforts of their

White peers when many came from low income families and attended schools that were not always in the best communities. They disclosed that although there was no longer legally-forced segregation, economics created an even larger divide between the “haves and the have not’s.” They also acknowledged that most schools in White higher income neighborhoods had the resources to meet the needs of all students better and made it easier for students struggling to seek out assistance. Outdated textbooks, few computers, crowded classes and teachers who often left to teach in better areas or did not believe in the students’ abilities were some of the situations they experienced daily. Most participants indicated that few, if any, in their families had attended college and lack of finances may also prevent them from attending college.

Neal (17-years-old) and a graduating senior said,

When it comes to the achievement gap between White students and African American students, you can relate the situation by saying White students have more financial resources to get tutoring and get extra help outside of school. Where [as] African American students depending on their backgrounds won’t have the resources to get extra help in the areas that they need – it reminds me of my years at my private school because I would think my [White] classmates who were really good in class were really smart – then I remember that those are the same classmates who took extra classes on the weekends, went to tutoring after school or whatever else needed without a financial burden on their families. At my present school, I’m not familiar with anyone here who has the money to receive outside tutoring.

Neal had to leave his private school when family finances no longer permitted him to attend. He acknowledged that at times he missed his former school, especially the variety of AP classes that

were offered and the extracurricular opportunities that were constantly available but that unfortunately his current school did not have the funds to offer the same.

Paul (16-years-old) sophomore simply said,

I think some of us are really behind and I don't want to be racist, but it really is a White man's world. So you can expect an achievement gap. Black males with the most potential are not put in the best classes. Some are placed in lower level classes when they should be placed in higher level classes. So, um some are not being challenged and without exposure to upper level work, the gap remains. Plus we don't have (or most of the people I know) the schools like them or the finances to attend the programs that Whites attend, which would help us in school.

Another 10<sup>th</sup> grade student, Larry (16-years-old), commented that schools with the most money were able to better educate students than those schools with limited resources. He commented,

As a Black male, I can definitely tell that there is an achievement gap between Blacks and White. I have a White friend who goes to a predominant White school on the north side of town. We are in the same grade, but he is like months ahead of me in his math class and what they are doing, and we are taking the same class! And he's not at an academic based [private] school; he's in a public school just like I am. So, you tell me what's going on with what they have there that not's available at my school.

Larry also shared that his friend appeared more positive about his educational opportunities in the future while confessing his optimism was often tempered with the reality of impact of economics on his family and his future.

All of the young Black men indicated that a lack of educational and financial resources played a part in the achievement gap between themselves and their White peers. They acknowledged the ultimate responsibility for obtaining and maintaining academic achievement, but shared that it was sometimes difficult, if not impossible, to get the extra assistance needed in the form of tutoring, extra classes, etc., in order to adequately participate in the arenas of academics as many of their White peers' financial positioning allowed. However, many of the participants pointed out that strong parental support was more essential for their academic achievement than vast economic resources.

### **Parental Support is Key to the Academic Success**

Those who had strong parental support felt it gave them the extra push needed to keep going and not give up. They also shared it made them feel like their academic success mattered and would allow them to better their parents' financial situations someday. The young men mentioned that many in society had already written them off as “thugs, gangsters, niggers, and endangered species,” and it sometimes made them want to give up and discontinue the effort when the expectations for Black men are so low. However, it was their parents, guardians, relatives, and caring teachers, who encouraged them to keep trying and not become statistics.

A few of the participants admitted little parental support and, sadly, shared that it created a vacuum in them which made it more difficult to strive for academic achievement. Not having anyone to advocate on their behalves, request school assistance from, attend important parental conferences, etc., made them feel alone and vulnerable. Unfortunately, they said teachers

gravitated to students with strong parental visibility and ensured those students were aware of offers for achievement awards, scholarships, and help in general. But those whose parents appeared absent from school, for whatever reason, were frequently ignored, creating a greater chasm for these students needing surrogate support from those charged to educate them and effectively equip them to navigate successfully in society.

Neal (17-years-old) felt that his academic success went hand-in-hand with his continual parental support. He acknowledged that many of the African American males he knew did not have the benefit of having the support of both parents and said it could definitely impact achievement. He shared,

Both my parents have been very supportive of me and my academics. As a child, my mom really pushed me in school and from the start I remember going over workbooks and working on geometry and math problems. It meant a lot to me...there are exceptions of course, because some, not all, of my friends have parental support and some are just keeping up, and it's hard.

Neal's parents had recently divorced and he lives with his father; however both of his parents are committed to his academic success and although the divorce was unfortunate, he felt being able to count on both his parents' continual support and encouragement keeps him on track.

JJ (15-years-old), a junior, added that support is not always present in African American male families and that makes it more difficult. He said,

Most of the Black kids I know don't have dads in their lives to support them academically. Like for me there are only like three guys in my family and one's a crack head, my brother dropped out of high school, and me.

JJ also indicated that although his father lived in the vicinity, he did not have a relationship with him and he was resigned to the situation, although, it was obvious that he desired a more significant relationship. This coping mechanism of not allowing circumstances to “get you down” was apparent in many of the young men.

Mark (16-years-old) agreed and stressed the need to have someone there for that ‘extra push,’ but communicated that many students do not always have that. He volunteered that his parents stressed the value of education and that he tried extra hard because it was important for him to not disappoint his father. He also shared that he had to put forth more effort than a lot of his peers because he was behind in some subjects.

Larry (16-years-old) added it has been hard for him to obtain the support he desired from his family. He commented,

I was raised by my grandmother because my mom left me with my dad and he left me with his mom. My mom just started hanging out with a new person and was gone. Dad was really nowhere in the picture. I have never looked at him as a dad and had no support from neither of them. My mom (grandmother) doesn't help me with nothing. If I ask for help with a project she says she is tired and will go lay down. But, if there is a problem, she is quick to curse me out and jack me up, every time I ask her for help, it's like you got your sister, go ask her. I understand she is tired and all, but sometimes I just need help. Shoot, I have come home from school many times and no one in the house speaks to me. No one, so I just go upstairs to my room. Tell me, how can you come into a house and your mom doesn't speak to you, but it's alright and I make do.

It was disturbing to watch the variety of emotions that played across Larry's face while he spoke about his family and the vital support he felt was sometimes missing in his education; however, he also shared that his story was similar to many African American male adolescents and stated that it was not unusual for grandparents to step in and raise their grandkids. A few participants also shared that some of their peers had dropped out of school because of little parental support and "put downs" of their academic capabilities. Overall, all indicated the importance of meaningful parental support and how encouraging it was to have someone to assure them that they have potential.

A subtheme that the participants mentioned along with parental support was teacher support. Many of young men suggested teacher support assisted in academic success and contributed to academic engagement. For example, if the participants believed teachers cared about their educational success, they also felt more vested in their academics. In addition, many said they were encouraged to seek class work assistance or tutoring when they perceived teachers would be receptive in assisting them.

Larry (16-years-old) added,

It helps when your teachers are passionate about teaching and are willing to work with you until you get it [course content]. It doesn't help when teachers give up easily on a student that may not want to learn. It goes back to if you see a Black student sitting there, you know, not getting it, and he lays his head down and the teacher provides no assistance or directive – what does that say. Some of the teachers are just not connected to the students. I know I try to stay connected

with my teachers and let them know. But it's a big disconnect with a lot of the teachers. Some don't care and we don't feel the need to produce for them. They have no passion for what they are doing.

Larry commented that he could also determine when a teacher was really interested in the success of his or her students and that he had encountered some teachers who he felt were working for a paycheck only. He remarked that one poor teacher could have a tremendous impact on a student's success. Coupled with the impact that positive teacher interaction produced, negative environmental dynamics were also mentioned by the participants as a contributor to the achievement gap.

### **Contextual Factors Influencing Academic Achievement**

All of the participants pointed out that many Black men enter school daily burdened with situations at home that may influence their academics. Indeed, many Black communities are often riddled with poverty, crime, single parents, and racism. Regrettably, the schools become a reflection of society. The participants indicated it was hard to shut out often dismal realities of their day-to-day existences and enter school solely focused on school work. Some come from families struggling financially or move frequently, and others have to work to help out at home. A few participants indicated that they had been approached by drug dealers trying to recruit them because drugs were an undesired, but factual, part of their neighborhoods. All knew of someone who had succumbed to trying drugs, and a few had friends who had spent time in jail. Most were from single parent homes and did not have consistent communication with their fathers. All were determined to one day create a better life for their future children.

Larry, (16-years-old) who is biracial but identifies as Black, indicated that often students were unaware that he was Black, that he was frequently mistaken for a Latino and was all too familiar with the stereotypes given to Blacks and Latinos, but ignored them all

So many Black male students are from single parent families. So you don't know or the teacher may not know what they are going through. Sometimes, we may not want to talk about what we are going through. So, I mean some days I may lay my head down on the desk because I can't put too much on my mind right now, because something bad happened at home. So, you shouldn't just give up on a student if you don't know what's going on. Really, people don't want to know because they don't care.

Many African American men live in urban areas with high poverty levels that are plagued with gangs, drugs, and violence, exposing them to harmful influences.

Marco (16-years-old) commented,

In my school people try to get down with gangs and everything as far as Black kids. I'm not saying White kids don't do the same things, but in the meantime White kids are not in this mess like Black kids. At my school, Black kids do the gang signs with the hands and rap and all this other stuff and you look at the White kids and they are sitting down studying. Yeah, just the fact that you go home and there is always drama going on when you come to school, you are all upset and all. You come here and someone says something bad to you and that's it. You are going home because you will do something you regret and basically

get yourself suspended or in ISS. I know what I'm going through a whole lot of Black young men are going through, and I know a lot of similar Black men who are in jail and all because really they didn't have anyone to talk to.

Mark (16-years-old) also shared his belief that the achievement gap can be linked to African American males' surroundings.

I know you can't blame the achievement gap entirely on the environment, but it does affect how Black men or people in general value education. I mean what they do outside of school can affect their work at school and I guess if you are in a better environment, I guess you have a better chance of becoming a better student.

Larry (16-year-old) commented,

My school last year was all dark and the ceilings were messed up, people drawing on the walls and stuff, and the bathrooms were dirty. Who feels like doing well in a building like that? I would love to attend a school that's clean with a nice cafeteria, Mac computers everywhere, and stuff like that. Many White students get that every day. My school is like 100 years old and you just don't want to walk into it.

Paul (16-years-old) revealed that many Black boys feel invisible in schools.

Imagine cooking a pot of white rice. Now think of the white rice as Caucasians and there is only one Black spot there and you don't notice it. You don't notice it all. That's how it feels sometimes to be a Black male. And they wonder why some Black students feel like failures, because a lot of people don't acknowledge them or give them much attention.

Some participants remarked it was that mindset which sometimes made it particularly difficult when striving to be a good student academically and that drive and determination were necessary for African American young men intent on success.

### **Achieving Academic Success Assists in Maintaining Personal Motivation and Effort**

The participants noted that being successful academically was important to them because obtaining a good education was strongly connected to having a productive career later in life. All tried to maintain strong grade point averages (GPA) and stay out of trouble. They admitted that sometimes keeping the grades up was difficult and a few shared they missed the mark on several occasions but tried to not get discouraged and put forth more effort next time. When the participants were asked what they considered a “good student” academically, it was evident from the responses that many African American young men integrate being a good student with not only academics but behavior. It is appropriate and beneficial to provide a general description of some common characteristics shared by academically good students as told by African American male students. Their conceptualizations did not view achievement based entirely on grade point averages but included other factors such as; behavior, effort, academic and environmental obstacles and classroom achievement. African American young men indicated that traditionally an academically good student would possess at least a ‘B’ average, but maintaining a high ‘C’ average and exhibiting respectful and appropriate behavior at school was also a noteworthy accomplishment because often many African American males also contend with environmental issues that influence achievement and how a student is able to participate daily in class.

The participants indicated that for them, being a well-rounded student was someone who consistently attends class, reports on time, completes assignments and makes an honest effort to earn high grades. It was also noted that the ever-present media representation of them as being

less intelligent due to race was, at times, detrimental to future academic performance (Bainbridge & Lasley, II, 2002). It is a disservice to students of color to continuously be evaluated and ranked academically by the color of their skin. This perpetuates the myth that all students, especially African American male students, are worth less based on race and does not give adequate attention to the more logical factors that impede achievement such as; environment, poverty, parents educational attainment and engagement, and schools.

Upon probing about specific characteristics of a good student, Joey (15-years-old) said at his school a good student could be described as someone who goes to class everyday and makes decent grades, not necessarily all A's and B's, but few Cs, if any.

JJ (15-years-old) shared that a good student should manage his time well, be well-rounded and participate in school activities. He also studies consistently and completes all homework.

Marco (16-years-old) offered this commentary:

A good student is a person that comes to class all the time, takes notes, stays out trouble, mind's his own business and ah, doesn't get caught up with drama and everything. He appreciates when it's time to work and time to play.

Mark (16-years-old) shared his vision of a good student,

Is someone with a good attitude, because you can come with the 'smarts', but I think teachers are willing to work more with someone who's not getting it and has a great attitude and tries to work towards getting it; rather than someone who knows it all and comes in with a bad attitude.

The students also discounted the studies of some researchers which state for many African Americans being a good student put them in a position of being accused of “acting white” by their peers. These counter-stories provided accounts of African American adolescents seldom shared in educational dialogue. For most participants, attitude and behavior strongly correlate with academics, and everyone believed it was important to refrain from discipline charges in school. In addition, the young men disclosed that although grades were the driving force in school for adults, they felt that having a strong character and being respectful and attentive could not be left out of the equation of a good student. They shared that they were committed to academic achievement and steadfast in improving their chances of college attendance.

### **Need to Develop Resiliency to Remain in School When the “Odds are Stacked Against You”**

Although all recognized that being a Black male produced its own unique challenges, they were not bitter with the racism they faced daily nor were they especially hopeful that it would change any time soon. Many accepted that it was simply a matter of fact in America; Blacks were discriminated against and not afforded the same opportunities as Whites. It was particularly more difficult for young Black males and the impact was felt in all arenas, notably in their quest for an education, but all displayed a resiliency and determination that was motivating considering their youth. Marco noted, “even though I have problems at home, it doesn’t mean I can slough around and take a break in class.” Paul (16-years-old) shared that, “many think just because we are Black, we [ain’t gonna] succeed.” “Just makes me want to try harder,” he added. Mark (16-years-old) commented that he has always wanted to do well in school,

When I got into high school, I told my mom I wanted to graduate valedictorian and that was a goal of mine. So, I've been taking AP classes and everything trying to achieve that goal, and I guess giving me a goal, gave me something to work towards.

JJ (15-years-old) noted that when some teachers see an African American male student, they automatically think he is going to be bad. He said,

It's a stereotype that all Black people are like thugs and dope dealers and stuff like that and they are [gonna] be late to class and all. But, I have good grades and I have a clean record at school and a lot of my friends do also. I want to do better for myself and people are depending on me too.

Neal (17-years-old) summed up his perception concerning the achievement gap best as a Black man facing racism, educational disparities, and poverty, low expectations and knowing that the odds are stacked against you when he remarked,

I have learned to work hard and persevere, and I don't give up easy when it comes to my school work. Sometimes, I want to give up, and it gets difficult and it gets to the point where it's an emotional struggle, but the rigor of my classes and the challenges have made me a better person. It's about doing well for me and no one will define my future.

### **Discussion**

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach while focusing on how African American young men frame being good students and the achievement gap. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions African American male youth have of

African American students who achieve academically and why there continues to be an achievement gap. The results of this exploratory study provide relevant insight into the experiences of African American male youth in the educational arena. The encounters of participants in this study were consistent with previous studies highlighting the challenges facing African American male youth. Current explanations of the achievement gap often include cultural shortfalls, student opposition; low teacher expectations, genetics, and environmental factors (Rothstein, 2004). This ongoing study found the following key themes regarding the achievement gap and good student as unequal distribution of resources, parent/teacher support, environmental dynamics, resiliency, and motivation/effort.

As the participants shared their personal experiences in interviews and a focus group, there was a common acknowledgement that African American young men are not privy to the same educational resources as their White counterparts. Lack of equitable social capital, more single-parent homes, less family income, better schools and neighborhoods, more experienced teachers and generational privilege were some of the examples provided by the participants. This study supports the research which indicates that Blacks students are at a disadvantage compared to Whites on several educational outcomes (Orr, 2003). Although some advances have been made, the Black-White disparities are approximately 10 points-wider, measuring about a year's worth of learning, than they were 10 years ago (Wilkins, 2006). The young men said it was hard to compete academically against their White counterparts when there was such an uneven playing field and factors such as economics, neighborhoods, schools, and support also impacted their achievement.

Participants shared that knowing someone was pulling for their success, whether it is a parent or teacher, encouraged them to try harder and stay focused on academics. Therefore, this

study also supports the existing literature by citing the importance of parent involvement in African American males' academic success (Epps, 1995; Somers et al., 2008). As one participant noted, "If I know someone out there has my back and believes in me, I don't notice all of the racism and drama that's out there, well ok, I notice it, but it's easier to ignore and focus on the big picture."

Further, the finding of this study substantiates the literature aligned with African American males and the impact of their environment on academic success. The young men shared how it was often difficult to focus on school work when there were sometimes distressing family issues at home like drugs, single parent homes, unemployment, and poverty to name a few (Whiting, 2006). Participants also shared the frustration they sometimes felt when it appeared that society anticipated their academic failure due to their race (West-Olatunji et al., 2006).

Overall, it was remarkable to note the resiliency of the respondents. Despite experiencing great challenges that could easily impede academic success, the young men were adamant about achieving academic and future career goals. Although, there was scant literature revealing the resiliency of African American male youth, it appears an appropriate conclusion as evidenced in review of the data. There is research that affirms the positive attitude many Blacks have regarding education, despite the disadvantaged educational standing (Downey, Ainsworth, & Qian, 2009). Many shared that their negative experiences only served to strengthen their resolve, acknowledging it was at times difficult, but necessary.

The young men stated motivation and effort were clearly connected to being a good student. When the participants responded to what they considered a good student academically, surprisingly, strong grades were not the only criteria. All shared that behavior and character

were connected to being a good student. In addition, a few remarked that good students did not necessarily earn all A's, and Bs, but a few Cs were acceptable as long 100% effort was being put forth. They disclosed that staying focused and ignoring the negative things said about them as Black young men was important. They also admitted at times they could also be their own worst enemy when they allowed poor decision making and negative peer influences to derail them from constructive behavior. One student said, "It's easy to get caught up and stop doing your homework, hanging out in the street..."

In examining the thoughts of these young men, it is important to note that the African American adolescents discussed the achievement gap and academics from their own experiences and terms. They did not have to concern themselves with refuting what others had said about them nor did they have to tailor their responses to a survey. Instead, they were allowed to name, analyze, and discuss their own realities; thereby providing and validating their cultural capital.

### **Limitations of Study**

While this study's results provide important information regarding the perceptions African American male youth have of the achievement gap and what they consider a good student, there are limitations of this study that may have influenced the interpretations of the findings. First, the small sample size impedes the transferability of the findings to other African American male youth, although generalizability is not the goal of phenomenological research (Creswell, 2009). However, the rich thick descriptions of the phenomenon will assist the reader in determining if the information gathered may be transferred to other settings. Second, the researcher who conducted the interviews is an African American counselor educator, and

although practical attempts of bias awareness were made, the level of influence cannot be deduced. Lastly, the participants may have responded in a manner they felt would please the researcher because of cultural similarities.

### **Future Research and Practice**

The primary aim of this study was to give voice to the experiences of African American male youth who have traditionally been ignored. A deeper awareness of the issues surrounding the achievement gap was provided by hearing the stories from the young men as they described their experiences. To obtain a better understanding of the achievement gap of African Americans, more research needs to be done to explore additional factors that contribute to or hinder academic success. Such research may better inform policy, practice and improve the educational experiences of African American males.

Counselors should incorporate programs which will foster a better understanding of the barriers that African American male youth daily face that may derail their educational ambitions. Programs or workshops should include cultural awareness and information about boys' identity development, since research indicates that some educators are not well versed on the unique cultural and racial needs of this population (Flowers, Milner, & Moore, 2003). Developing a climate where African American male students feel encouraged, supported, and connected is imperative, and preparing educators to better serve African American male youth should improve educational success.

School counselors, as leaders, change agents, and advocates for children in schools and outside of school, are expertly equipped to lead in calling for action on behalf of students traditionally marginalized (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). Realistically, this may require challenging the school systems, which often perpetuate policies that embrace and benefit the

dominant society. School counselors may also have to confront educators who have low expectations for African American male students and tend to place them in less rigorous classes and unconsciously discriminate against them by giving lower grades or fewer demands (Choules, 2007).

In addition, future research should evaluate programs which have proven successful and determine how these programs can be duplicated and implemented in schools with low performing African American male youth. Based on this study, African American young men desire to form connections at school and want positive interactions with teachers. Therefore, tutoring and academic programs in which African American students have the opportunity to foster better relationships should be encouraged (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010).

Recommendations include establishing more race and culture-specific mentoring programs and internships for young Black men. Also, calling on national organizations that have a history of advocating for young people such as Big Brother, Big Sister, the Boys and Girls Club, 100 Black Men, the music industry, the NAACP, and the National Urban League, etc; to create programs specifically geared toward addressing the achievement gap, seamless educational transitions, college readiness and onsite support systems in the schools would be beneficial (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010).

Counselors must advocate that schools continually evolve to meet the growing needs of all students, especially marginalized students. It is a matter of social justice, and until we demand change from our legislatures, educational policy makers, teachers, and school counselors, we are silent co-conspirators to the challenges confronting our African American young men.

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## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL LESSONS LEARNED

This chapter explores my research reflexivity – the defining trustworthiness, credibility and authenticity of qualitative research and summarized the implications of previous chapters. This study has been a journey- looking into the eyes of young Black men who believe that many in society have forgotten about them and their educational aspirations. I walk away from this study amazed at the resiliency and fortitude of young African American men. Also, I am encouraged about the future of young Black men and proud of those participants interviewed. During the conversations, not once did a participant voice bitterness or condemnation as they shared their stories concerning their academics experiences. Hope was echoed for the future, request for assistance, and determination to succeed even when they admit, the odds appear stacked against them. Yes, an achievement gap exists between African American males and White males, but it is not the gap in the data that needs to be repeatedly discussed, but the judgments that are made about young Black men and other marginalized groups based on that data (Love, 2004). African American males have fewer educational opportunities than do their White peers and continue to be at a disadvantage on several academic outcomes. In addition, young African American males frequently come from families with little economic wealth and unfortunately have less access to financial, cultural, and social capital (Orr, 2003).

As a researcher during this study, I confronted my biases at every turn of the research process. In my views at the beginning of the study and throughout the research process, I have held beliefs that not meeting the needs of African American male youth is unacceptable and

could be called one of the great social injustices of the 21<sup>st</sup> century academically. So, where are all of the social justice advocates within the educational system calling for a remedy to this societal ill? Why are we not constantly bombarded with requests for attendance at workshops, seminars, and conferences in which educational leaders, policy makers, and students are dialoguing about successful interventions and how the U.S can begin to address this issue? Throughout this study and especially at its conclusion, I asked myself, “How can I ignite a fire under those who are in the position to create change? “

These are some of the questions that came to mind as I reviewed the literature in regard to African American males and the achievement gap. I was, at times, astonished at the statistics and the negative implications from the data concerning African American males, and at other times I was angry, angry at what appeared to be the possibility of losing a generation of future leaders, future educators, future doctors, and future social justice advocates. But with honest reflection, I also wondered when and how often had I also contributed to the rhetoric of despair concerning young Black men? Were some of my views similar to what I was reading and if so, what in my life had shaped this sort of internalized racism that is so often apparent in marginalized groups? What does it take before the hated begins to hate himself and begins to perpetuate what the dominant society portrays him to be? Have I also at times accepted the doctrine that White is right and sets the standards in achievement? Is self-hatred to be expected in a society where for centuries African Americans have been subjugated to second class citizenry and victims of the propaganda of being the inferior race (Hipolito-Delgado, 2010)? How deeply does this resonate within the Black community and more importantly with the African American young men whom I interviewed? These were some of the questions I frequently pondered.

From my own reflections and an extensive perusal of the pertinent literature viewed through the social justice lens of Critical Race Theory, I acknowledged that American history and events have always been told from the dominant viewpoint and this would also include the presentation of the achievement gap. Being the dominant group that tells the story of another group of people or the plight of some is in itself unyielding power and influence; having the majority of society to accept the story is White privilege at its most powerful. This is the America in which these young men live and this is the frame of reference for the reporting of the achievement gap between African Americans and their White counterparts.

Again these were all parts of my reflection as I dug deeper and deeper into the literature. Using Critical Race Theory, I was able to better understand that standardized testing data, upon which the achievement gap is based and reported, is from the majoritarians' viewpoint. It does not take into account that every student does not begin on a level playing field in education, that all schools systems are unfortunately not created equal, and that it really does matter who you are born to and where you live because it impacts the type of educational services that will be made available to you in the U.S (Love, 2004). Even testing data does not present a total picture of student learning or the potential of a given student; it only captures a snapshot of the learning in a certain school at a certain time. The data that is reported to the masses concerning the gaps in achievement between African American young men and their White peers does not include a disclaimer that some of the data may be impacted by a history that includes slavery, Jim Crow Laws, racism, cultural rape, and continued segregation. It does not request that the reader bear these things in mind when making judgments against African American males. No, instead it heralds that there is indeed something wrong with "little Black boys" who cannot seem to keep

up with Whites boys who, simply by the nature of being born White, have benefited from all of the privileges accorded to one in the dominant and in-power race.

Such began the process of my research voyage. My class readings on the importance of social justice and advocacy within educational settings began to make better sense to me as I acknowledged I could not totally separate who I was as a person and my life experiences from how I interpreted the literature. Being an African American young woman who navigated through the U.S. educational system gave me strong opinions about the role racism can play in academics. It is not the blatant displays of racism that one must contend with in this day and age, but the persistent micro-aggressions encountered on campuses around the country (Sue & Sue, 2008).

I recognized that it would be important that I continue to bracket my biases and discuss my concerns, opinions, and fears with my research team (Creswell, 2009). Bracketing allowed me to continually ask myself what I am taking for granted, and how much of myself and experiences have I failed to filter. My research team often had heated exchanges because we each occasionally saw the issue presented differently. In addition, the other members of my research team brought their biases and beliefs to the table of our discussions too. But, I wanted to be consistent in my quest to accurately reflect the experiences of the young Black men I interviewed, and my research team totally supported me in those efforts. So I had to embrace, at times, being uncomfortable with the feedback I received and challenging myself to view the transcripts from a different perspective. I sometimes would listen to a section of a transcript over and over because I wanted to ensure that the essence of the experience was correctly reflected.

My reflective journal was indispensable in assisting with this (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The journal was beneficial in allowing me to remember issues, and document in a logical

manner. I also practiced keeping my face neutral with non-verbal behavior before each interview. I actively listened to assist in the transferring of the initial meaning from the participants. I would record my feelings and thoughts after interviewing each young man and revisit my notes frequently (Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson, & Poole, 2004). I would note the young men's body language when responding to certain questions, and when I felt they were being evasive, I would reflect on why it might be happening. I also documented how, at times, I felt my heart would break when one question led to personal glimpses of the sometimes less-than-perfect home situations the young men faced. One young man stated that many Black {boys} felt like they didn't really have a future because they were frequently inundated with images of Black boys being killed in the media, Black-on-Black crime, and low expectations from adults. He said, "Some of us feel like I'm not going to be anything anyway, so I might as well throw my life away."

During each stage of this study, I was acutely aware of my own personal feelings when it came to these young African American men. I realized that many of their experiences were similar to mine, and they we had often traveled the same roads because of our shared Blackness. I had to be cognizant of the fact that all of my life I have loved Black men unashamedly beginning with my father, brother, male relatives, and continuing with the man that I currently love. So, I knew I needed to ensure that race and struggle identification did not slant my research. I realized that now was not the time to tell my story or work out some of my personal concerns, but it was the time to highlight the specific and unique challenges these young men faced as they aimed to be good students and overcome the achievement gap. At moments like this I had to remember my role as a researcher because I often found myself wanting to switch roles and become a school counselor who could address what I considered a presenting problem.

But I refrained because that would have only tainted the research process and somehow invalidated their right to be uninterrupted and totally heard without comment or judgment. The young men were not looking for me to counsel them or provide solutions to problems, but were telling their stories; providing counter-stories to what is often portrayed in the literature (Lynn & Parker, 2006).

As I revisit my researcher reflexivity and my reflexive journal, I still ask myself, where is the social justice in a 15-year-old believing that he is not going to be successful in life? What negative messages are being sent to African American young men and how can a different encouraging message be sent? It has been said that words have power and what words are African American young men hearing today from those that are considered the voice of the masses? Some include: you are not as educated as this group of people, your test scores are not as high as this group of people, you can only learn in a small classroom setting, you have more chances of serving time in prison than on a college campus, and most damaging you are an endangered species, as if the Black male race will one day no longer exist (Boyd, 2007; Comeaux & Jayakumar, 2007). How can we expect adolescents who are still figuring out who they are and how they fit in the world to consistently filter through all of the negativity and concentrate on achieving and succeeding? I will now share some of the conversations from this study that left a lasting impression on me. One young man, Larry, revealed that he often felt unsupported at home and wished he could talk more with his parents when he said,

Shoot, I have come home from school many times and no one in the house speaks to me. No one, so I just go upstairs to my room. Tell me, how can you come into a house and your mom doesn't speak to you.

He went on to say that despite the less than perfect home life, he felt he would be successful because he wanted more for himself. This desire to beat the odds was very prevalent in the young men I interviewed. All admitted to having struggled academically and personally at one time or another, and all were steadfast in their commitment to not become a statistic. Marc, another student, said he planned on graduating valedictorian, so he was taking AP classes and doing everything he knew to do to achieve his goals. He shared, “Once you have a goal in mind, it gives you something to work for, and doesn’t give you the feeling that I’m just here to be here.”

I was struck that each of the students I interviewed acknowledged the role that the environment played in a student’s academic success. They commented on how poverty and economics influenced achievement and indicated that for many it was often difficult to concentrate solely on school when the world around you may be in chaos. Larry shared with me,

So many students are from single parent families. So you don’t know or the teachers may not know what they are going through. Sometimes they may not want to talk about what they are going through. So, I mean like some days you lay your head down and you kinda tell the teacher, ‘I’m not having a good day,’ and I need to – I can’t put too much on my mind right now, because something bad happened at home.

This was a reality of many of the young men I interviewed - if not in their own lives, then in the lives of someone they knew. A special conversation occurred when Mark shared with me that he had recently been asked to leave his mother’s home because he was having problems with his stepfather and although he missed his mother, living with his grandmother placed him in a

better school with more opportunities. Another student, JJ, said that many African American young men learn at an early age to not show a lot of emotion at school and with others. He admitted,

Yea, they keep the emotions bottled up, I don't care who you are – like me I keep things bottled up cause I don't want people to know what's going on in my life. I don't show it at school and like you sometimes will say something to a student and he pops off and he's ready to fight and you don't know it's because of all that's going on with him.

Often this desire to not appear weak prevents many of the young men I interviewed from requesting assistance regarding classwork, and they admitted that it occasionally had presented a problem. But, over and over again, I was impressed with positivity concerning the future and the possibilities available for them.

Each participant acknowledged that racism was something that they had to deal with pretty frequently and felt their burden was no different or heavier than any other Black person. Sadly, but realistically, the young men stated they knew that racism was something that would never disappear and always merit challenging. They agreed they it was important to get a good education and that it was definitely a means of ensuring some form of success in life. They shared they did not spend a lot of time focusing on the achievement gap or on the reports that constantly compared them to others and appeared to show them as lacking in some area. Doing well academically was important to them, not because it would make the data on African American male achievement better, but because it would enable them to fulfill the dreams and goals they had for the future. One young man contrasted it to the way Blacks are portrayed in the media as gang bangers, murders, drug dealers and thugs. He said it is difficult to fight the

stereotypes, but luckily in their homes, neighborhoods, schools, and within their family they had individuals who did not fit those images; individuals who excelled academically, athletically, and personally creating a trail for them to follow and widen for others to follow.

As I neared the last entries of my reflexive journal, I began to realize that my journey with these young men had come to an end and my first journey as a researcher had come to an end. My goal was to do meaningful research that would positively impact my community and the education system. I knew I wanted to do research in education, but I initially was not sure what I wanted to study. I am a school counselor by trade and wanted to research something with a social justice leaning and one day while at work we had an academic awards ceremony. I was feeling very proud of the students we were recognizing and I mentioned to a colleague that there were not many African American young men in the audience being recognized. One of the teachers chimed in and said she did not understand why they did not appear to achieve as well as others.

In my reflexive journal, I pondered this statement and reflected on my educational experiences and concluded I wanted to do research with African American young men. Interestingly, I have always had a great rapport with the young men on my caseload and they have always appeared to gravitate towards me also. So, I began to simply do some basic research trying to feel a connection or should I say a marriage to a topic. I begin to come across article after article about the “plight” of young Black men and the achievement gap. I was distressed by what I read and the facts and figures presented. The more I read, the more intrigued I became, and the social justice angel in me began to grow wings. I did not discount the data, but I began to question the data and the way it was presented. Being in a helping profession, I am always concerned with people’s stories and how they came to be where they are

at the present time. I knew that although by all documentation something was going on educationally with African American young men; few researchers had provided counter-stories to the ones that created the bulk of the literature regarding the achievement.

As I look back on the entirety of this research- from selection of my research topic to the final writing of my dissertation, I recognize that I committed to a phenomenological study with the goal of giving voice to the lived experiences of the African American young men experiencing the achievement gap. I wanted to hear their stories, and I felt that those in the educational arena needed to hear their stories also. I believed by providing a platform for rich and robust descriptions of their encounters, educators, school counselors, and policy makers would be able to more appropriately advocate for specific and requested interventions for African American young men. Ultimately, I seek to sound the alarm and challenge policy makers, educators, school counselors, teachers, and parents to design innovative interventions and programs for African American male youth which show results and assist in positioning these young men on a trajectory of success.

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APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Questions (circle your answer or fill in the blanks)

1. Age – Circle one

12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

2. What is your current grade level \_\_\_\_\_

3. What is your current overall grade in school \_\_\_\_\_

4. What school do you attend \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### Interview One

History: Experiences with the Achievement Gap/Perceptions of Being a Good Student

1. Tell me how you would define the achievement gap.
2. Share with me why you believe an achievement gap exists between African American male youth and Whites.
4. Discuss your perception of a 'good student.'
5. How do students perceive/define a 'good student' at your school?
6. How do you define yourself as far as academics or school work goes?

#### Interview Two

Details of Experiences with Achievement Gap/ Perceptions of Being a Good Student

1. Discuss your experiences with the achievement gap at your school for African Americans.
2. Describe any emotions/feelings that you have experienced associated with being considered a 'good student.'
3. Describe barriers/stigmas that you believe are associated with being an African American 'good student.'
4. Are African American male students considered 'good students' treated differently by other students/teachers.

#### Interview Three

Reflection on Meaning of the Achievement Gap/Perceptions of Being a Good Student

1. Given what you have said about the achievement gap previously, why do you believe there continues to be an achievement gap between African American males and Whites?
2. Describe the impact of the achievement gap on your life.
3. Describe what have you learned about yourself as result of these experiences?

## APPENDIX C

### PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS

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Participants Pseudonyms	Description	GPA
Larry, 16- years-old 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<p>Larry is a bi-racial student who identifies as African American; although he is shared he is often mistaken for Latino. He is soft-spoken and quick with a smile. He resides with his paternal grandparent, and has little contact with his father and no contact with his mother. He wishes he had more contact with his parents but stated it's not something he likes to dwell upon. He is musically gifted, and plans to attend college if he can save up enough money to attend.</p>	3.0 to 2.8
Neal, 17- years-old 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<p>Neal is a graduating senior who has resided with his father since his parents' divorce last year. He is very articulate and pensive. Both parents are very involved in his educational achievement and he attributes their support to his success. He previously attended a private school but had to enroll in his community school once finances became an issue. He plans on attending in the fall and hope to obtain a full scholarship.</p>	3.6 to 3.8
Paul, 16- years-old 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<p>Paul admits to having had a rocky school year due to bouts of depression. He is somewhat unsure of himself, but has a warm and engaging personality. He lives with his grandparents and his parents remain in the Caribbean which he is not particularly happy about. He plans on attending college when he graduates.</p>	2.5 to .2.8
Mark, 16- years-old 11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<p>Mark is a very friendly and polite young man. He lives with his mother and is very motivated to be successful. He balances academics and athletics and is working towards graduating as valedictorian at his school. He attributes his academic success to setting goals. He plans on attending college.</p>	3.8 to 3.97

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Marco, 16-  
years-old  
10<sup>th</sup> Grade

Marco enjoys joking and plays sports. He lives with his grandmother because of conflicts with his mother. He admits to know having a great year academically, because he said he became distracted with all that was going on at home and in his neighborhood. He wants to attend college, but is not sure if that will happen.

2.6 to  
2.8