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The Effect of Poverty on the Achievement of Urban African American Male Students

Successfully Completing High School

By

Amy L. Welch

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Dr. Kay A. Keiser

Omaha, Nebraska

August, 2013

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ABSTRACT

The Effect of Poverty on the Achievement of Urban African American Male Students

Successfully Completing High School

Amy L. Welch, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska at Omaha 2013

Advisor: Dr. Kay A. Keiser

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of poverty on the achievement of African American male high school students attending the same large Midwest urban school district. Cumulative grade point average (GPA) at the tenth grade level were compared to the level of poverty provided through census data of African American male tenth grade high school students ($N = 162$) and compared again two years later using cumulative GPA of the same African American male students at graduation. Standardized achievement test scores, PLAN test taken in the fall of the tenth grade year and ACT test taken during the twelfth grade year, were compared to poverty levels to explore if there is a correlation between the scores and poverty level.

The findings of this study indicate cumulative tenth grade GPA had a significant correlation with student poverty level. As the poverty level of the student increased, the cumulative GPA decreased. At the end of the twelfth grade year, cumulative GPA and poverty did not have a significant correlation.

This study provides insight on the impact of poverty as well as other culprits such as stereotype beliefs, school belonging, culture differences, racism, test bias, teacher bias, and low expectations for the poor achievement of African American male students attending urban high schools. An intricate web of issues seems to be snaring America's Black males from reaching the same academic success as White males.

In Loving Memory

Merlin C. Davis

January 26, 1931 – July 11, 2012

Throughout his life, he sought knowledge through books, conversations, travel, and making of friends. His example has inspired his children to do the same in life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with great love and appreciation that I acknowledge my remarkable and perceptive children: Laurie, Joseph, and Brian. Their continued support, encouragement, belief, and pride in me throughout this process fueled my spirit and gave me energy to see my dream become reality. Their insight and inquisitive minds challenged me to open my mind wider to look at society today and the social ills which exist. Many an intense discussion was held around the Welch dinner table through this journey. I am extremely blessed with such loving and incredible children, who make me extremely proud.

I give special recognition to Brandon, a late addition to the Welch family. If it had not been for the multitude of conversations and interactions with him, I would not have been inspired nor driven to write this paper. I learned first-hand about the struggles of urban minority students through him. It is because of Brandon and his young son, Bryson, I have acquired a burning passion to make a difference for others, thus making my work live on and not end with the completion of this dissertation.

There have been several close friends and family members who I would like to thank for being instrumental in giving me strength to carry on through the pains and joys of writing this paper. They confirmed and pushed me to keep my passion alive: to bring

attention to the needs of minority students, in particular high school African American males and ultimately create change which will spur these young men to success.

I am grateful for my loving parents, Merlin and Phyllis, who instilled in me the appreciation for education at an early age and the tenacity to succeed. Their persistence throughout life's hardships and delight in life's blessings has given me the resiliency to overcome obstacles and celebrate success as I embrace each moment of life.

I would like to thank Dr. Kay Keiser, my committee chair, for her reassurance that I would be able to complete this paper and her guidance through the process. I also thank all the University of Nebraska-Omaha professors, especially the members of my committee: Dr. Peter Smith, Dr. Jeanne Surface, Dr. Neal Grandgenett, and the following faculty, Dr. Karen Hayes, Dr. John Hill, Dr. Richard Christie, and Dr. Carol Rozansky, who were not just instructors but were my cheerleaders who challenged and helped to mold my beliefs in urban education and social justice issues. They stoked the fire within me to push forward in making a difference in minority urban education. I bow my head in a big nod of gratitude to Barb Mraz for all her behind the scenes help and support. A special thanks to my colleagues, both at work and in classes, for their continual belief in my success and for their engagement in conversations with me about education, especially in what we are doing to make a difference for minority students in urban settings.

A separate shout-out to all my students, past and present: "You have touched and enriched my life in so many ways and you have given me the courage and determination to continue to fight for your success. THANK YOU!"

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A student strolls into the building with his hood up, rap music blasting through his ear buds, texting on his phone. He ignores the security guard and teacher directing him to remove his hood and turn off the electronic devices. Undaunted, he continues leisurely down the hall to his locker, removes his hoodie and hangs it up. He grabs his English book and saunters off toward the classroom. He enters the class ten minutes late. Unconcerned he meanders through the desks to his assigned seat and plops down. He does not open his book nor does he have pencil or paper. He is disconnected from class yet his face is tense almost daring the teacher to comment. She has learned to leave Brandon alone and continues with the lesson. He does not partake in the discussion because he has not read the book. He simply sits, counting off the minutes until the class is over. Motivated by anger and a profound sense of worthlessness, his behavior will become self-destructive and he will disengage (Adelabu, 2007; McMillian, 2004; Upchurch, 1996) from class and school, placing himself at grave risk of not graduating from high school and thus fulfilling a stereotype belief.

After months of working with Brandon and building trust, he finally opened up to what he faces. Not only is he dealing with the day-to-day of school and peers, but he is on a rollercoaster of emotions trying to fit into two culturally different worlds: school and community. It does not matter how dysfunctional the members of his family are, they are blood and that bond will transcend all good and bad. His mother is employed but off to the bars with her boyfriend as soon as work is done. His sister is busy with two young children and trying to finish high school. One of his brothers is in jail for murder

awaiting trial, while the other is unemployed with a young child. Brandon is left in a house alone to fend for himself, no one around to ask how his day was at school or any other events in his life. There is no one there to make sure he is up in the morning and off to school on time, no one to check to see if his homework is done, and no one to make sure he is home at night and in bed at a decent hour. Yet Brandon will defend each one of his family members because, after all, they are his family.

Brandon has seen more already in his short life than most people will see in their entire lives. He knows how to navigate the streets, where to find drugs, how to shoplift, where to buy a gun, and how to negotiate the courts. He is acutely aware of police profiling and has experienced it several times. He has been interrogated at the police station about a friend involved in a crime. He knows about the local gangs and is tagged as a gang member even though he does not have any ties to a gang. He has been robbed of his childhood and innocence, forced to grow up years before his suburban peers. He has learned to survive the urban projects which are a battle zone like Vietnam, except he does not get to leave after a one year tour of duty (Jones, Newman, & Isay, 1997). Life in the “hood” can eat him up with its depressing and hopeless atmosphere. “This ain’t no Brady Bunch!” He survives and comes to school each day.

During those months Brandon shared another side which many educators do not take the time to explore and learn about their students. Inside his tough “bad boy” exterior is a normal adolescent with the same hopes and dreams as most majority students. He desires to attend college and play football. He does not believe it is a possibility for him as no one in his family has gone to college nor do they talk about college. He quietly accepts the fact he will be working a minimum wage job instead of

enrolling in college. Seeing his desire, I help him register for the ACT test, complete an entrance application for college, and apply for financial aid and scholarships. A remarkable transformation starts to take hold of Brandon when he realizes someone cares enough to see his potential and help him reach for his dreams. He walks with his head up and starts to complete his school work although some days it is not easy and he falls back to old ways. He rallies his grades and makes honor roll for the semester, a feat he has not done since seventh grade.

Brandon beams with pride, grinning ear to ear, when he shows me his college acceptance letter. Two days later deflated, his pride is replaced with anger and frustration. The police had placed him in custody for questioning about a crime which they believed he had knowledge. He endured a lengthy interrogation by detectives and was locked up to await an appearance before the judge. Two days later he was released without having to see the judge, no charges were made. In Brandon's mind the events were like one of his favorite rap songs by Bone Thugs-N-Harmony "You know nothing come easy, you gotta try real, real, hard, I tried hard but I guess I gotta try harder. I try so hard will always be a victim of these street tried to get away but trouble follows me hoping one day they'll come and rescue me But until then It's like I'm taking five steps forward and ten steps back" (2007).

I did not know the impact Brandon was about to have on my perspective as I continued to help him to strive to be successful in a White world. I learned first-hand some of the visible and invisible obstacles Brandon faced and began to understand why many of the hurdles continue to exist when, in my privileged mind, they seem so easy to

avoid. Thus Brandon and I began an extraordinary journey as he completed high school and entered college.

Realities of Life

Many American children live a harsh reality, especially African American males living in urban poverty. Inside each classroom in America's urban public schools exist students with personal stories which will leave us in disbelief and shock. Her dad is strung out on dope. His brother was just sentenced to life in prison. Her uncle just died from AIDS. His cousin is in critical condition after being shot last night in a drive by shooting. She was just beat by her mother's drunken boyfriend. He has not eaten since he left school yesterday. He is living with his Aunt because his mother is in prison. She is living in a car down the street because the apartment complex she lived in has been condemned. For each face in the classroom there is a story, some are positive while others will tear at your heart. Educators must build relationships with their students and get to know their stories so, as educators and caring adults, they are able to understand that on some days, like many days for Brandon, just showing up is all these students are capable of handling. And like Brandon, they do show up to seek a place that is safe even if they appear to be disengaged.

Many minority children of poverty are not prepared for the expectations of school (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Smith, 2004). No child can suddenly become responsible, clean, courteous, respectful, attentive, caring, and cooperative without being exposed to these types of behaviors during the first years of life; it is a process. Many of these children grow up in a world of drugs, pimps, lies, and fights (Upchurch, 1996) emulating what they see daily. Many have parents working two or more jobs so no one is checking

their spelling, reading stories to them, or teaching them how to count. Many days a child of poverty will go to school without breakfast, clean clothes, or proper grooming. A child who is shunned (Upchurch, 1996) because of poverty, whether they are clean, smelly, or dirty knows it, but still has the same desire to be liked and accepted as any other child. These students are not lacking in intelligence. They soon begin to realize the students upon whom the teacher lavishes attention have the freshly laundered clothes, neat hair, and charming smile. Those students are White. Because they are not treated the same, the minority students quickly associate: white means good and black means bad.

Due to the experiences and perceptions faced daily, a majority of Black males will stumble, fall, and give up (Few, 2004) while through a remarkable resiliency others will get up. This is what it means to be an African American male in the United States of America (Fletcher, 2006). It is because of these experiences many Black males do not trust much of society, especially those in authority. Many urban Black males will dis-identify with the academic culture to continue to protect themselves from the low expectations and limited support (Adelabu, 2007). It requires great attention and persistence from educators to develop trust, to build a foundation for success, and to break down the thick protective shell which many Black males have built around themselves as a buffer, a psychological insulation, against the harsh realities of poverty and urban life (Adelabu, 2007).

African American Males in America

Students of African descent have faced and overcome many barriers to education, yet a vast majority of African Americans, especially males, continue to lag behind their

peers as shown through the achievement gap. African American males have more teacher referrals, suspensions, expulsions, irregular attendance, and are more likely to drop out of school than any other group (Fletcher, 2006; Martin, Martin, Gibson, & Wilkins, 2007; Saunders, Davis, Williams, & Williams, 2004; Teasley & Lee, 2006). Lacking in literacy and numeracy, African American males will be at greater risk to drop out of school, be unemployed, involved in precarious social behaviors, or incarcerated. African American males are an endangered group (Anderson, 2010; Fletcher, 2006; Graves, Jr., 2009; Roach, 2000) struggling to survive in an adverse environment marked by hardships and disadvantages such as poverty, substandard housing, large minority population, lower parental education, and other stressful life events (Barry, 2006; Kenny, Gallagher, Alvarez-Salvat, & Silsby, 2002; Noguera, 2008). Adding to the risks are inadequate school funding, inferior technology, outdated textbooks, inexperienced teachers, large class sizes, buildings in need of repair, and a community unable to provide support (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Evans, 2005; Martin, et al, 2007; Miller, 1999). In an attempt to address the needs and struggles of African American males, as well as other minorities, in public schools, the federal government has enacted laws to reform education and improve achievement.

Education Reform

There have been several major policies passed down by the federal government intended to improve education, especially for African American children. In the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously the separation of children attending public schools based on race was unconstitutional. The decision forced desegregation of public schools. Chief Justice Earl

Warren wrote the supporting opinion; stating, “Today education is perhaps the most important function of state and local government . . . it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education . . . available to all on equal terms.” Chief Justice Earl Warren further stated in the supporting opinion, “We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of “separate but equal” has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal”. The ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court ended the 60 year precedent of “separate but equal” established by an earlier decision in *Plessy v Ferguson (1896)* as it applied to education. Legally segregation was terminated, yet it took more than two decades for the walls of segregation to crumble and schools to implement plans to integrate (Blanchett, et al., 2005). Today segregation remains in urban America due to the residential patterns created by White flight to the suburbs (Blanchett, et al., 2005; Kozol, 1991). As such, economic disparities create highly concentrated urban areas of poverty. Due to White fear of Black crime, housing policies created “chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs.” Many minority students attend predominately minority school with inadequate facilities and staffs (Blanchett, et al., 2005).

A Nation at Risk (1983) ignited tough talks about the condition of education in the United States (Toppo, 2009) after it proclaimed the U.S. education system to be dysfunctional and reported an alarming downward spiral of student performance. The blame game ensued. The perceived conditions had everyone pointing at public education as the culprit for the demise and mediocrity of the education of the nation’s youth. *A Nation at Risk (1983)* intentionally ignored all other factors in the report, focusing on education as if it was the sole cause of the declining conditions. For the first time since

the launch of Sputnik, our academic performance was being challenged by other countries with some surpassing America's students (Toppo, 2009) in the areas of science, technology, industry, and commerce. In the report *A Nation at Risk (1983)* it is contended, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we allowed this to happen to ourselves". During the first meeting of the National Commission for Excellence in Education, President Reagan took up the challenge declaring his faith in the American people to do what is right and best for their children and future generations once they are properly informed about one of the nation's most precious resources: public schools and colleges. With this challenge, education is moved to the fore-front and a cry for accountability ensued.

Demand for accountability brought about the passing of *No Child Left Behind (2002)* which triggered increased attention on the downward trend of scores and the gap between various groups especially in regard to African American males. *No Child Left Behind (2002)* was designed to close the achievement gap by requiring all states to implement standards and accountability methods which would ensure all children receive a basic education (Davis, 2008). *No Child Left Behind (2002)* was specifically designed to improve African American male outcomes in education, yet it appears the impact of poverty on a child's capacity to learn was not taken in to account which leaves the nation behind in attempting to close the gap (Lewis, 2004).

During a taped appearance at the American Association of School Administrators National Conference on Education, Colin Powell, then Secretary of State, made the following statement, "The education of our children is a matter of life and death" (Smith,

2005, p. 17). The future of the nation on the global stage depends upon adequate education of all students. Minority students, especially males, are being left behind in school so they seek jobs and rap music which they find more appealing than education (Few, 2004). The plight of inner-city Black males is very grave given earning a high school diploma is the exception, legal work is scarce, and prison or jail is all too routine (Eckholm, 2006; Smith, 2005).

Education is still plagued by demands for accountability as the statistics continue to show the lack of achievement for many students, but in particular African American males. The nation demanded results which they felt were not delivered by previous reform. To address the concerns, President Barack Obama stated in his address to the joint sessions of congress (February 24, 2009): “America will not succeed in the 21st century unless we do a far better job of educating our sons and daughters.... And the race starts today.” Education is no longer an option but is a pre-requisite to success in the 21st century world. The cost of wasted talent and unfulfilled achievement is an enormous cost to the nation (Burney & Beilke, 2008).

Statistics About African American Males

The last thirty years has seen a considerable amount of research focused on the achievement gap between economic class and racial class with particular attention to the achievement gap between minority and majority students (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008). This is the “best of times” (Smith, 2005) given everyone is talking about the dilemma of America’s minority students, poverty, challenges of education, and possible solutions (Roach, 2004). There is a sense of urgency and an active movement by African American men to mentor their “sons” for success in a society where mediocrity will not

cut it for a Black man (Clemetson, 1999). Yet it is the “worst of times” for the African American male in terms of negative factors affecting his life. Where is the public outcry when 38 states in the U.S. graduate less than 60% of their African American males? *The Schott Report 50 State Report (2010)* list the national average graduation rate for African American males at 47% compared to Caucasian males at 78%.

Government policies claiming every child is worth saving (Evans, 2005), have missed or even ignored the potential and needs of the African American male. The statistics create a view for the public which makes the individual invisible especially the Black males not fulfilling the stereotype belief. Black males are over represented in special education, expulsion and suspension rates, dropouts rates, juvenile incarceration, and unemployment, as well as underrepresented in graduation statistics (Barry, 2006; Martin, et al., 2007; Roach, 2000; Saunders, et al., 2004; Smith, 2004; Uwah, et al., 2008). African Americans are the poorest academically and economically as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (Davis, 2008).

Black males are at greater risk from inception into adulthood than White males. A Black male fetus is more likely to abort spontaneously. Mortality rates of Black male infants are double the mortality rates of White male infants (Anderson, 2010; Jensen, 2005). Low birth weights and lack of prenatal and preventative health care for African American children increases the number of chronic illnesses they contract during childhood and places them at a greater risk of delayed motor and social development (Barton, 2004; Rothstein, 2008). African American children are three times more likely to live below the poverty line than White children (Anderson, 2010; Hacker, 1992; Harry, Klingner, & Hart, 2005; Noguera, 2012).

An African American male with a college degree will earn about the same as a White male with only a high school diploma, which translates into earning approximately two-thirds that of a White man (Hacker, 1992). A Black male with no criminal record is less likely to be interviewed for a job than a White male with a felony conviction (Jensen, 2005). Black male unemployment rate is 10.8% which is more than double that of White males at 5.2% (Jensen, 2005). The average net worth of a Black family is ten times lower than the average net worth of a White family.

African American males are incarcerated at a disproportionate rate. Of all juveniles under the age of 18 years being incarcerated, 60% will be African American males (Smith, 2004). The leading cause of death among African American males between the ages of 15 and 24 is homicide, followed by suicide. African American male life expectancy is 66.1 years, compared to 73.8 years for Caucasian males (Anderson, 2010; Mitchell, Bush, & Bush, 2002).

These statistics are the results of a combination of institutional racism (Blanchett, et al., 2008), the inertia of intergenerational poverty, and an inability to execute and sustain meaningful educational reform. Black males are largely viewed and stereotyped by mainstream cultural values (Hutchinson, 1996) using one or more of the following: dumb, deprived, deviant, disturbed, or dangerous.

The inner city projects are a war zone (Jones, et al., 1997). Many Black males see violence as commonplace (Upchurch, 1996) thus they view it as a solution to many of their problems. Black community members must teach their sons that every action has a consequence and how they act will determine the extent of the consequence (Perry, 2005). African American males are expected to embrace the norms, values, and

expectations of the dominate society causing many to resist and rebel in defiance, thus validating the dominate society's predictions for failure (Fordham, 2004; Hutchinson, 1996). They do not buy into the White majority school culture because they will be viewed by other Black males as being an "Uncle Tom" or "acting white" (Fordham, 2004; Harper, 2006, Ladson-Billings, 2001). These students would rather fail academically than to be ostracized by peers and community about their interest in education, falling victim to peer pressure to not achieve (Teasley & Lee, 2006). Due to hardship, frustration, and the prospect of academic failure, many African American males will stop attending school and look for validation amongst their peers on the street making academics secondary and unimportant (Gosa & Alexander, 2007; Kafele, 2009).

Perceptions, Perceptions, and More Perceptions.

"Playing the dozens" is a common exchange of wit, verbal ability, mental acuity, self-control, and personal toughness between African American males as they go face-to-face in a verbal competition of good-natured insults (Hayes III, 2000; McNutt, 2002). It is considered a form of mental exercise with the goal to stupefy their opponent with words. The opponents take turns rattling off quick jabs at the others lack of intelligence, ugliness, poor hygiene, physical defects, alleged homosexuality, or cowardice. The battle of words is about respect and the ability to cope with verbal abuse without becoming enraged.

It is through the release of tensions and stress with the use of "crackin" which allows Black males to laugh instead of cry about their daily struggles. However this banter sounds vicious to those not familiar with the tradition (McNutt, 2002). The exchange is not understood by White culture as they take the words too seriously. It is

this lack of understanding by the dominant society which places the African American male existence in danger (Anderson, 2010; Lancer, 2002) and the impact of perceptions held by: society, teachers, parents and community, and the student.

Perceptions held by society. Media perpetuates and reinforces the preconceived notions surrounding urban areas (Blanchett, et al., 2005). Society is inundated with the negative aspects of African American male activity and struggles such as low achievement in school, high rate of unemployment, and incarceration while glossing over their accomplishments (Hutchinson, 1996; Kafele, 2009; Lancer, 2002). Intelligent African American boys become casualties of public schools, succumbing to the pull of the street (Jones, et al., 1997; Porter, 1998) because of the difficulty of overcoming the perceptions held by society.

Society has been led to believe the cause of African American male difficulties in school are self-created along with being the result of poverty and the broken family structure (Harry, et al., 2005). Hollywood has fed the middle class audience film after film portraying Black males as out of control, loud, disobedient, violent, and addicted to drugs, with no family values and defiant to authority and the establishment (Bulman, 2002). Media and Hollywood fail to portray African American family life as stable with complex conditions. Instead they mock the Black family by depicting the group as irresponsible, nonproductive, lazy, and dysfunctional. If Black males are not being portrayed as violent deviants of society then they are portrayed as jokesters, lazy, and irresponsible.

Many in society fear African American males because they view them as violent, unlawful gang members as painted in rap and hip hop music. This image of brawn with

no mind, has forced educated males to appear to know nothing in a society where a smart Black man risks punishment (Harper, 2006). Society deems African American males may excel in athletics but not at academics (Hutchinson, 1996; Morris & Adeyemo, 2012; Williams, 2006).

Perceptions held by teachers. *No Child Left Behind (2002)* fosters low-expectations by teachers through the racial-gap framework (McMillian, 2004). The low expectations negatively affect student's academic achievements and causes student disengagement thus fulfilling teacher's and society's belief about the academic ability of African American males (Few, 2004; McMillan, 2004). The vicious circle continues to go round. African American males are most likely to attend the poorest schools with the least qualified teachers, will be assigned to the lower level courses (Fletcher, 2006; Martin, et al., 2007) and many will drop out of school which increases their probability of entering the prison system.

Cultural identities are a part of who a student is. If teachers are unaware or misunderstand and react to students' cultural identity, it may lead to stereotype belief and ultimately school failure. African American males have developed a stylized movement (Neal, McCray & Webb-Johnson, 2003) which many White teachers find intimidating because they lack understanding of the movement. Numerous White teachers feel threatened by the loud vocalization used by African Americans, especially the males. This misunderstanding occurs due to the stereotype held by Caucasian Americans that African American males are hostile, angry, and prone to violence (Neal, et al., 2003) as depicted in the theater, television, and news media (Bulman, 2002).

Teachers using a deficit thinking model operate with the belief Black males are less competent, less intelligent, less capable, and less motivated than other students (Walker, 2011). They believe Black students will only be able to achieve when they change their background factors, such as their culture, values, and family structures and adopt the White culture, values, and family structures.

Students must hear and know the teacher believes in them so they in turn can believe in themselves (Gardner, 2007; Kafele, 2009). Teachers must set high expectations for all students and challenge the students to take risks and to learn from failures (Hawley & Nieto, 2010) while at the same time they are leaving their own comfort zone to learn about the culture and community of the students (Landsman, 2004). It seems many teachers beliefs about learning and teaching are etched in stone with little chance of change (Torff, 2011).

Perceptions held by parents and community. African American parents need to be aware of teacher expectations and the implication of these expectations on their young boys. African American parents have blindly placed their trust in the hands of public school teachers and administrators to educate their most precious resource, their children (Mandara, 2006), unaware of the stereotype attitudes and deficit thinking held by the very people they are trusting (Guerra & Nelson, 2007). This blind trust can be a deathblow to their sons' academic success. Teacher expectation of African American male failure in school and the belief parents do not care because they are not actively involved in their child's education is the catalyst for the demise of Black male student success. Many African American parents do not support schools when they feel the

school does not acknowledge or value their heritage and expressions (Martin, et al., 2007).

African American parents unintentionally make fewer academic demands because they view a passing grade as a lesser evil than their son being on the street involved in gangs and drugs (Clemetson, 1999; Perry, 2005). Many African American parents are pushing their sons to graduate from high school, but they are not talking with their sons about post-secondary education or training. African American parents and the community hinder the education of African American males because they lack conviction their child has the ability to pursue post-secondary education so they push their sons to excel at athletics (Harper, 2006; McNutt, 2002). They send a mixed message to their sons about their faith in their academic ability (Williams, 2006). Convinced they cannot excel academically, African American males often times will not try thus fueling the devastating mentality which media feeds society.

Perceptions held by the student. African American males tend to detach self-esteem from academic outcomes and attach the ego to athletic achievements. This detachment, also known as dis-identification, from academic outcomes allows the African American male to mentally insulate themselves from low expectations and protect themselves from failure (Adelabu, 2007; Roach, 2004). Research indicates this does not reflect in a lower self-esteem as African American males tend to use other factors to define their self-esteem (McMillian, 2004). Dis-identification constrains their belief of what is possible in the future. Dis-identification causes African American males to funnel their energies into what they believe they excel at which is athletics instead of academics. They place a high value on athletic ability, basketball in particular, with the

immediate glory and rewards of the made basket, blocked shot, and win (Adelabu, 2007; Anderson, 2010; McNutt, 2002), because of the status it holds in the African American community. Black males will escape to the playground for a game of hoops as a diversion to the struggles of day-to-day survival of hopelessness, invisibility, and low self-esteem (McNutt, 2002).

Society and schools hold lower expectations concerning success for African American males. This stereotype of low academic ability is many times fulfilled by African American students because of their perception and fear of fulfilling the negative stereotype (Uwah, et al., 2008). The negative impact of stereotype threat is low test scores, anxiety, and low expectation of success. If schools do not address the stereotypes they may inadvertently perpetuate the cycle of underserving the students with the greatest need (Evans, 2005; Uwah, et al., 2008). A teacher may exhibit a nonverbal or verbal negative reaction to a student's work. The student may not even know the reason for the reaction but innately knows the teacher has made him feel stupid and worthless (Landsman, 2004; Upchurch, 1996). Instead of nurturing the student, the teacher has made him feel incapable and inferior. As with so many African American males, he reacts in one of two ways he has learned for survival: he retreats deeper inside himself and adds another layer to his protective shell or he lashes out in anger. This reaction is too often interpreted as not caring or threatening when in reality it is about not feeling - because they really do care. Thus begins disengagement.

The perception a student has about being welcomed, valued, and respected as a member of the school community determines the amount of engagement in school (Booker, 2006; Uwah, et al., 2008). School belonging is determined by the number of

positive interactions during the school day with teachers, administrators, and peers. A sense of school belonging can have a powerful influence on academic success (Uwah, et al., 2008). Many African American males believe their teachers do not care about them. They believe their teachers do not hold high expectations for them to succeed (Martin, et al., 2007). When the interactions are felt to be negative the student believes they are not valued as a respected member of the school community and they start to disengage (Adelabu, 2007). Depending on the level of disengagement, truancy will increase, acting out for attention will increase, and eventually it may lead to dropping out. A perpetual cycle begins when African American males believe the school is looking at them through stereotypes. To stop the cycle it may be as simple and easy as the teacher taking a moment to engage in conversation about a topic of interest to the student, or to encourage and invite the student to participate on a class project. The student feels someone believes in their ability to succeed and begins to meet the expectation of success (Uwah, et al., 2008).

The perception or impression of one's own academic abilities and the highest level of education one expects to attain is highly influenced by the experiences and people surrounding the student (Uwah, et al., 2008). Studies show African American males share the same educational aspirations as White males yet they experience lower educational attainment (Burney & Beilke, 2008). It is believed the incongruence with the aspirations and the attainment is due to the concrete realities such as lack of resources, financial and emotional support, prejudice, and other social barriers experienced by African American males along with the preconceived stereotypes beliefs about Black male academic ability (Uwah, et al., 2008).

African American males suffer from a phenomenon called self-depreciation. Self-depreciation is a sense of self-hatred among the oppressed culture. Black students frequently hear they know nothing, are good for nothing, and incapable of learning along with traits of being lazy, unproductive, hostile, and a menace to society. After hearing these labels enough times, Black males become convinced they are indeed unfit. It is a double edge sword since the way to disprove the stereotype requires Black males to show their intelligence in the classroom which then earns them being labeled by their peers as “acting white” (Harper, 2006). To avoid exclusion by peers, the student behaves in the exact manner which fulfills the stereotype.

Responsibilities

There can no longer be two Americas: one America is poor, run-down, crime infested, and inhabited by minorities while the other America is neat, clean, prosperous, and inhabited by Whites (Jones, et al., 1997). Public policies need to be directed at wiping out poverty and providing skills to cope with life stressors (Mandara, 2006) and remove the privilege which is inherent with skin color. There continues to be two Americas as minorities are expected to embrace the norms, values, and expectations of the dominate White society causing many to rebel in defiance which validates society’s view of minorities, especially African American males, as failures. Schools and communities must acknowledge and eliminate the stereotypes and other biases and engage in honest and courageous conversations to remove a culture of blame (Ray-Taylor, 2005). They must work together to produce positive results and success by creating a positive environment and encourage critical thinking without repercussions or risk of failure. Racism in all its forms must be recognized as an existing, pervasive

cancer and must be eradicated from society if America is to unite as one. No student should be prejudged about their academic success by their skin color, financial means, or number of parents in the home (Evans, 2005; Rothstein, 2008). It should be about a student's actual ability to learn regardless of prior knowledge or experiences outside of school.

Purpose of the Study

By placing the blame for the achievement gap on schools through policies like *No Child Left Behind* (2002), politicians are letting themselves and corporate officials off the hook (Rothstein, 2008). The politicians and other officials direct the public to believe good schools and quality teachers alone can overcome the inequalities and shrink the achievement gap thus causing the public to absolve those leaders from responsibility of narrowing and removing the inequalities (Rothstein, 2008). The politicians and business leaders do not want the public or schools to question the effects of poverty on education. To even suggest poverty places children at a large disadvantage is denounced as “making excuses” instead of teachers getting the job done (Noguera, 2011; Rothstein, 2008).

It has been over 50 years since the passing of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the dream of equity in the classroom for all students. During those years there are many articles debating the success of *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) in fulfilling the dream of equity for all. The general consensus is there is still a long way to go in terms of achievement and raises the question about what is behind the gap continuing to persist in achievement. Is it linked to poverty? Although the achievement gap has been under constant review, there are not many studies addressing the impact of poverty on the achievement gap until the last few years, and few which look at poverty within the

minority group. The majority of the studies do not separate poverty from the other risk factors encountered by African American males in urban high schools because it is difficult to disentangle the real effects of poverty and historical discrimination from the continuation of negative stereotypes (Harry, et al., 2005).

The purpose of this descriptive correlational study is to determine the effect of poverty on the achievement of urban African American male students successfully completing high school.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to analyze the correlation of poverty and achievement of urban African American males during ninth through twelfth grade attending one of the high schools in the same large mid-western urban school district.

Research question #1. Was there a relationship between poverty level and tenth grade cumulative GPA for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district?

Research question #2. Was there a relationship between poverty level and twelfth grade cumulative GPA for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district?

Research question #3. Was there a relationship between poverty level and PLAN test scores for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district for:

- a) English
- b) mathematics
- c) reading

- d) science reasoning
- e) composite

Research question #4. Was there a relationship between poverty level and ACT test scores for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district for:

- a) English
- b) mathematics
- c) reading
- d) science reasoning
- e) composite

Definition of Terms

Academic achievement. Academic achievement is defined as the level of actual accomplishment or proficiency the student has obtained in an academic area as opposed to their potential.

Achievement gap. Achievement gap is defined as the disparity in academic success between low-income, minority students and their majority peers as measured by high-stake tests (Uwah, et al., 2008). The achievement gap continues to exist today and is one of the prominent issues in education. It is a central topic of discussion in education reform.

ACT test. ACT test is defined as a standardized test for high school achievement and college admission as well as a predictor of academic success in college. The test consists of four parts: English, mathematics, reading, and science reasoning. Each part is scored individually on a scale of 1 to 36 and a composite score is computed which is the

whole average of the four scores. The ACT test may be taken multiple times generally during the junior and senior year of high school.

Acting white. Acting white is defined as a derogatory term usually applied to African Americans when it is deemed they are betraying their own culture by assuming the social expectations of the White society. It is a term used to label African Americans who are successful in the academic setting (Fordham, 2004).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Adequate yearly progress (AYP) is defined as a measurement established by the *No Child Left Behind Act (2002)* that allows the U.S. Department of Education to determine how every public school and school district in the country is performing academically according to results on standardized tests. Schools must demonstrate annual gains in the areas of mathematics and reading as well as graduation rates.

Adolescent. Adolescent is defined as the stage when a human is developing from childhood to adulthood. The general age range of adolescence is 10 years old to 19 years old.

African American male. African American male is defined as the racial group of male students examined in this study. African American males are U.S. citizens who have origins from Africa. The term Black male is used interchangeably with the term African American male to identify the same group of students.

Assimilation. Assimilation is defined as the forced or unforced adoption of the practices of another group. For generations African Americans have been expected to adopt the White culture in place of their own culture.

At-risk student. At-risk student is defined as a student statistically more likely than others to fail academically because of their circumstances.

Belonging. Belonging is defined as the extent to which an individual perceives themselves to be welcomed, valued, and respected as a member of the community (Uwah, et al., 2008). In this study the term belonging will be in respect to school.

Bicultural identity. Bicultural identity is defined as belonging to two distinct cultural groups which may or may not be compatible (Teasley & Lee, 2006). In this study bicultural identity is faced by African American males as they try to exist in two different cultures: the Black culture and the White culture.

Black. Black denotes the race of the minority group of people who claim their origin is from Africa. Black will be used interchangeably with African American to identify the same group of people.

Caucasian American. Caucasian American is defined as the race of the majority population in the United States of American. The term Caucasian American will be used interchangeably with White to identify the same group of people.

Critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is defined as the educational theory, teaching practices and learning expectations that are designed to raise learners' critical consciousness regarding oppressive social conditions. Critical pedagogy is a teaching approach used to help students think, question, and develop an understanding deeper than the surface meaning.

Culture. Culture is defined as the characteristics of a particular group of people which includes all facets of life; language, religion, cuisine, social habits, and music. Culture encompasses a way of life, traditions, and customs transmitted through learning.

Culture of poverty. Culture of poverty is a theory that suggests the burdens of poverty are systemic and not easily overcome. Children raised in a culture of poverty have been socialized in ways that perpetuate poverty and their status as members of a permanent underclass. The persistence of a culture of poverty results in a learned helplessness and marginality among its members (Gorski, 2008).

Deficit thinking. Deficit thinking is the assumption that a student from particular groups such as African American males are destined to fail in school because of their internal deficits. This type of thinking blames the victim instead of examining the cause and attempting to fix the cause (Walker, 2011). Deficit thinking is a belief in stereotypes about minority students in the academic setting.

Detachment. Detachment is defined as an indifference or attitude which allows students to appear remote and unconcerned with individuals or groups (Adelabu, 2007).

Disengagement. Disengagement is defined as the act of withdrawing from a particular activity, situation, or group. Students may disengage from school (Adelabu, 2007).

Dis-identification. Dis-identification is defined as student's limited school and classroom participation and may negatively influence the student's future success (Adelabu, 2007).

Discrimination. Discrimination is defined as the unjust or prejudicial actions or treatment of different people generally in terms of another person's race, gender, age, or sexual orientation.

Dominant culture. Dominant culture is defined as the culture of people within society which controls the economic and political power and imposes their values, language, and other norms on all other cultures.

Educational aspirations. Educational aspirations is defined as the early impressions of one's academic abilities and the highest level of education an individual expects to attain (Uwah, et al., 2008).

Educational attainment. Educational attainment is defined as the highest level of education successfully completed by a student.

Engagement. Engagement is defined as positive involvement of the student in school as a result of the reciprocal relations or respect and support between students and educators. A mutual feeling of trust and respect enhances the learning and academic success of students and is more likely to help them resist the pull of negative forces such as gangs.

Gender gap. Gender gap is defined as the differences in academic achievement and levels of engagement in school between males and females.

Ghetto school. Ghetto school is defined as a term used to refer to urban schools which are overcrowded, ugly, and wrought with problems due to the misallocation of funds and depleted buildings.

Grade Point Average (GPA). Grade Point Average (GPA) is defined as the average generated by dividing the total number of grade points earned by the total number of credits attempted. Grade point average is used to determine eligibility for academic scholarships and entrance to college.

Hidden racism. Hidden racism is defined as the beliefs and biases people have contained in their being without realizing the views are of a racist nature. An example would be the amazement of a minority person having earned a college degree.

High socioeconomic status. High socioeconomic status is defined in this study as the students living above the poverty line as defined by the guidelines of the United States Census Bureau.

Institutional racism. Institutional racism is a system of inequality based on race which can be found in businesses, governmental agencies, and other institutions such as schools, courts, and banks.

Internalized racism. Internalized racism is the personal conscious or subconscious acceptance of the dominant society's racist views, stereotypes and biases of one's ethnic group. This type of internalized thinking results in a minority person deciding to invalidate, hate, minimize, and find fault with oneself while simultaneously valuing the dominant culture (Harper, 2006).

Literacy. Literacy is the ability to communicate through oral and written word and to comprehend both oral and written word.

Low socioeconomic status. Low socioeconomic status is defined in this study as the students living under the poverty line as defined by the guidelines of the United States Census Bureau.

Minority population. Minority population is defined as the underrepresented population of a community based upon race or other dividing factors.

Non-cognitive Skills. Non-cognitive skills is defined as character traits such as perseverance, self-confidence, self-discipline, punctuality, the ability to communicate, social responsibility, and the ability to work with others and resolve conflict.

Numeracy. Numeracy is defined as the ability to understand and manipulate numbers in response to the mathematical demand of life. Basic numeracy is the ability to use the basic operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) and includes number sense, problem solving, computation, geometry, probability, and statistics.

PLAN test. The PLAN test is defined has a preliminary test which predicts success on the ACT test. The PLAN test measures knowledge in four areas: English, mathematics, reading, and science reasoning. The PLAN test is taken during a student's sophomore year of high school.

Playin' the dozens, Baggin', Crackin', Bustin'. Playin the dozens, Baggin', Crackin', Bustin' is defined as the art of verbal exchange to make fun of or ridicule another person or group. It is a mechanism used to relieve tension and stress from daily struggles faced by many African American males (McNutt, 2002).

Poverty. Poverty is defined as the level at which a family's annual income is considered below what is deemed necessary for the family size to live (Burney & Beilke, 2008). The U.S. Government has set the 2011 poverty level at \$22,350 for a family of four. This number is felt to be too low as it does not account for other major expenses such as child care and transportation.

Prior knowledge. Prior knowledge is defined as the interconnections or networks of the students' identities, schools, families, neighborhoods, communities, and overall lived experiences that have been acquired though life.

Racial identity. Racial identity is defined as a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular group.

Racial self-esteem. Racial self-esteem is defined as the view an individual has on their racial identity. The higher the racial self-esteem of the student, the more successful they will be academically (Saunders, et al., 2004).

Racial socialization. Racial socialization is defined as the developmental processes by which children acquire the behaviors, perceptions, values, and attitudes of a particular culture, generally gained through observation of others in the group. For African American children it requires parents to raise children who will be able to survive in a racist-oriented society.

Racism. Racism is defined as one group having advantages over another group based on race. Racism is the behaviors committed by Whites in the context of a White dominated society and the reinforced notion of White superiority.

Resiliency. Resiliency is defined as the ability to succeed and make positive adaptations despite negative environmental circumstances, setbacks or hardships. It is the ability to bounce back, thrive, and grow in the face of obstacles and adversity (Burley, Barnard-Brak, Marbley, & Deason, 2010). It is a process by which poor, diverse, and immigrant children and their families learn to rely upon their culture, family, peers, and ethnic community as sources of support, frames of reference, and shields from any of the negative attitudes that instill discrimination and foster marginalization.

SES Linked Item. Socioeconomic status (SES) linked item is defined as a standardized test question which is apt to be answered correctly by upper SES students

and incorrectly by lower SES students (Popham, 2004). An example of an SES linked item taken from a 6th grade standardized test: If you wanted to find out if a distant planet had mountains or rivers on it, which of the following tools should you use? a) binoculars, b) microscope, c) telescope, or d) camera.

Segregation. Segregation is defined as the separation of different groups in a country. In the U. S. it is the separation of Black and White America in all aspects of life.

Self-destruction. Self-destruction is actions which harm self, they may be physical harm, mental harm, or giving up on value of self.

Self-worth. Self-worth is defined as the value a person places on one's self in terms of respect and self-esteem.

Silent Racism. Silent racism permeates the institutions of society creating a racial inequality in employment, education, housing, and justice through the attitudes, ideology, and actions to preserve White advantage and power (Trepagnier, 2006).

Socioeconomic status (SES). Socioeconomic status (SES) is defined as the relative standing of an individual or family in regard to income, level of education, occupation, health, and access to resources (Burney & Beilke, 2008).

Stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is defined as the anxiety or fear of being viewed through the lens of negative stereotype or of doing something which would fulfill and confirm a negative stereotype of a social group (Evans, 2005; Uwah, et al., 2008).

“Uncle Tom”. “Uncle Tom” is a term used to identify a Black person who seeks to be accepted by Whites by adapting to their culture. It is a term used by Black students to identify other Black students who are being successful in school.

Unintentional racism. Unintentional racism is defined as the subconscious use of stereotypes or biases in actions or words about a group of people.

White. White denotes the race of the majority population in the United States of American. The term White will be used interchangeably with Caucasian American to identify the same group of people.

White Privilege. White privilege is defined as any advantage, opportunity, benefit, head start, or general protection from negative societal mistreatments, which persons classified or viewed as white will typically enjoy, but others will generally not enjoy.

Assumptions

The design of this study had several strong features. All participants are African American male students who attended the same urban high school district, starting ninth grade in the fall of 2007 and graduating four years later in the spring of 2011. The study urban school district is comprised of several recognized college preparatory high schools and magnet schools, which have routinely met adequate yearly progress as determined by state and federal guidelines.

It is assumed in this study that the PLAN test and the ACT test are an effective measure of student's academic development and success. Grade point average is assumed to be an indicator of student's active learning in high school coursework as determined by the teacher of the course. It is assumed all students in the study received the same content in common courses although they may have different teachers.

Delimitations of the Study

The study is delimited to African American male students from the same urban school district and attended one of the high schools in the district. The students were in attendance without interruption during the 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10, and 2010-11 school years in the research school district and graduated in the prescribed four years completing all coursework to earn a diploma from the research school district. The research school district is a Midwest urban school district with a focus on college preparatory curriculum.

Limitations of the Study

This descriptive correlational study is limited to the high schools of one Midwest urban district. The study subjects, all graduates, ($N = 162$) represented a real world naturally formed group. Using the test results from one school district and the small number of participants may skew the statistical results and reduce the utility and generalizability of the findings. The study focus is the achievement of urban African American male high school students and cannot be generalized to the larger African American community.

Significance of the Study

This study contributed to research, practice, and policy. It is of considerable interest to school administration, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in the community as the groups seek to improve the achievement of African American males in urban high schools.

Contribution to research. The review of professional literature shows very little has been published on the effects of poverty within a racial group, in particular urban African American males. This lack of professional literature to review suggests more

research is needed on the effects of poverty on African American males and the impact poverty has on African American male achievement in public schools. Such research would assist in detangling the causes of the achievement gap and aid in eliminating the gap.

Contribution to practice. School administration and district officials may use the research to design interventions to assist African American males to be engaged in school, stay in school, and find success in school. The administration may decide how to improve curriculum for African American males, adjust policies to encourage engagement instead of disengagement, and develop best practices and staff training to meet the needs and learning styles of the African American male population. The research results can be used as a catalyst for dialog between administration, staff, parents, students, and the community to eliminate bias and understand hidden racism and White privilege.

Contribution to policy. The results of this study provided insight into the effect of poverty on urban African American males. Given the study outcomes the school district may select the best use of available funding to implement programs to increase the achievement of African American males. Given the study outcomes, school districts may target programs, curriculum, and staff development to increase student engagement, increasing the feeling of being a valued member in the academic setting of school.

Organization of the Study

The literature review pertinent to this study is found in Chapter 2. This chapter reviews the professional literature related to poverty, the achievement gap between groups and other barriers to achievement of African American male students.

Chapter 3 describes the research design, methodology, independent variables, dependent variables and procedures that will be used to gather and analyze the data for this study. This includes a detailed synthesis of the participants, a comprehensive list of the dependent variables, the dependent measures, and the data analysis used to statistically determine if the null hypothesis is rejected for each research question. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the data generated from this study. Chapter 5 discusses interpretations of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further study.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

During the last 100 years the public has been enlightened by a host of scholars who have researched and written a multitude of papers documenting the plight of the African American male (Fletcher, 2005). No segment of the U.S. population has been placed under the microscope to be studied, analyzed, and dissected more than African American males who comprise only 6% of the U.S. population (Kafele, 2009). The general consensus is African American males are in trouble (Fletcher, 2005; Noguera, 2008; Perry, 2005) in fact they are an endangered group in American society (Anderson, 2010; Hutchinson, 1996; Roach, 2000).

School performance by African American males is dead last among all racial groups (Perry, 2005). African American males must overcome obstacles caused by poverty, unemployment, inferior housing, second-rate schools, and racism (Miller, 1999; Noguera, 2008). The tenacity, drive, feistiness, resiliency, intellect, and spirit exhibited by Black males in the dominance of the sports arena are the same traits Black males need to surmount obstacles in the classroom (McNutt, 2002). African American males need to hear this message about academics as often and as passionately as they hear the message about athletics. The message needs to be loud and urgent and sent from all venues and people to begin to reverse society's stereotype and to have an impact on the self-perception held by these young men.

African American males navigate between two distinct cultures: the Black culture and dominant White culture (Miller, 1999; Teasley, & Lee, 2006). "Yo Dawg" or "Hey Bro" are common greetings heard between Black males along with the frequent use of

“Nigga” or “my Nigg” (McNutt, 2002). Although the greetings seem to be a part of young Black males communication, to others in the Black community it demonstrates a lack of ethnic pride. One father was concerned when he heard his son greet his friends with “Yo nigger, what’s up.” When questioned about the word choice, the son shared that everyone uses the word. The real question is would the young Black male feel the same if a White male used the same greeting toward them. The use of such words is a negative affirmation of how the Black male is viewed by society in the United States. The word “nigger” is the most hurtful and enduring symbol of Black oppression and for that reason young Black males need to be reminded of the pain. African American families through racial socialization and racial identity along with other creative adaptations and resourcefulness have coped with discrimination and low income while buffering their children from some of the cruel and demeaning messages received from a hostile world beyond the African American community (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002; Miller, 1999; Uwah, et al., 2008).

African American boys are bombarded by the Black community with a loud and clear message: the only way out of the “hood” is through athletics. Whether intentional or unintentional the message does not embrace education as a means out of the hardships of urban life (McNutt, 2002).

In the attempt to overcome, Black males strive to excel and dominate sports and not academics (Adelabu, 2007; Anderson, 2010). Schools and society in general reinforce this view by deleting the majority of the positive role models such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Colin Powell, Malcolm X, Lee Archer, and Neil DeGrasse Tyson from the classroom. Textbooks brush over the accomplishments of

Black people and their struggles with a quick mention, generally as a footnote under a photo. Students learn little tidbits during Black History Month. This lack of role models in textbooks and media leaves the void to be filled by athletes and rappers (McNutt, 2002). At the same time the very real dreams of athletic achievement should not be shattered and dismissed as nonsense, but applauded because there is a dream and a goal. Teachers must support the ambition of a pro-sport career even though they know the odds are against the fulfillment of the dream. Instead of scoffing at the dreams of African American males attaining a pro-sports career, teachers need to persuade African American males to develop several career paths with education being the major component.

A historical perspective (Fletcher, 2006; Hayes III, 2000; Zuckerman, 2004) will shed light affording a glimpse to better understand the plight and near extinction (Fletcher, 2006; Noguera, 2008; Perry, 2005; Roach, 2000) of the African American male and the continued racial divide. The influence of history, society, and other factors has greatly impacted the treatment and image of the African American male today.

Brief History of African Americans

Forcefully brought to the United States and sold, Africans were completely deprived of all rights socially, politically, economically and educationally. For centuries, through slave codes, African slaves were denied their basic rights (Zuckerman, 2004) while being treated as property not human beings (Hayes III, 2000). Owners had blatant disregard for African family values and culture as they heartlessly split families; children from parents, brothers from sisters, and husbands from wives. They deliberately emasculated the males (Hayes III, 2000; Zuckerman, 2004) forcing resignation to slave

life. Males endured great pain as they were forced to watch their wives and children brutally abused or sold, powerless to protect their family (Hayes III, 2000). White society feared an educated African people so to further the oppression and domination of African slaves, they were forbidden to learn to read or write. If caught learning to read or write, Africans were whipped, beaten, or killed (Hayes III, 2000; Morris, 2004). Still they dared to learn in the darkness of night. Despite all the adversities endured, African American people remained strong due to a remarkable resiliency (Miller, 1999). This resiliency allowed them to stand proud each day while enduring countless brutalities and still pray and sing at night instead of being defeated in spirit (Anderson, 2010).

With the end of the Civil War, came the emancipation of all slaves. This ending of slavery caused White supremacy to emerge in the formation of the Klu Klux Klan and the passing of Jim Crow laws which ensured the continued oppression of African American people (Zuckerman, 2004). The Supreme Court sanctioned the oppression of Blacks by upholding *Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)* which declared “separate but equal” was legal and appropriate. African Americans were condemned to separate and decidedly unequal of everything from railcars, diners, restrooms, drinking fountains, libraries, cemeteries, hotels, schools, and even bibles in courtrooms (Zuckerman, 2004). To enforce Jim Crow laws which continued the oppression of Blacks and deny them the same education as White children the Klu Klux Klan spread extreme fear, targeting Black males with use of brutal beatings, castration, and sadistic lynching (Hayes III, 2000). Resiliency would enable African Americans to push forward for equality, even in the face of brutality and death, fighting racism and oppression at every turn. Generations of

African American males have been deliberately betrayed by White male America to believe they are inferior to their White peers especially in intelligence (Davis, 2008).

During this time of segregation and turmoil Booker T. Washington and Mary McLeod Bethune established schools for Black children. Despite the threats of the Klan, the schools for Black children continued to exist. Education in the Black segregated schools not only focused on academic content and affirmed the student's culture, but also made students aware of racial oppression and how to conduct themselves in public for survival in a discriminatory and racial White dominated society (Davis, 2008).

African American families' relentless faith in deliverance from oppression was answered with the *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* decision. Salvation was to be delivered at last. The jubilation was short lived, for it did not create equal schooling for all students, primarily because the implementation was in the hands of the local "White" school boards who made sure to protect the interests of Whites (Morris, 2004). The United States continued to ignore and not educate Black children (Davis, 2008) for there was no interest to educate a mass which did not exist in the eyes of White America. Some districts chose to close the schools (O'Neil, 2004) as opposed to integrating the school. A massive blow came with the "White flight" to suburbia taking financial resources, political support, and quality teachers (Kozol, 1991; Morris, 2004) to the suburbs leaving minorities to survive on meager financial resources in the urban heart of the city thus placing urban education in a crisis (Lalas, 2007).

Many Black males experienced hatred long after the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* as was shared by a Black male entering high school in 1965 (Garrett, 2009). Eight years after the forced end of segregation in Little Rock by the infamous

Little Rock Nine being escorted through the angry crowd by the National Guard, the young Black male entered Little Rock Central High. The guards were gone, but racism was strong as he endured beatings routinely and recalled a teacher telling him: “The law says you have to be here, but I don’t have to teach you” and blocked his entrance to class (Garrett, 2009). This treatment by White teachers was a stark difference from his elementary years with Black teachers and peers who shared and valued his cultural background.

Believed by many African Americans to be the equalizer, the *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* decision further alienated those very people it was intended to help (O’Neil, 2004). Many African Americans found their homes and jobs gone because the Whites held the mortgages, collected the rents, or paid the salaries. Hate activity increased with burning of crosses, protests, beatings, lynching, and murder. It would be eleven years later with the passage of the *Civil Rights Act of 1965* and mandatory busing before there would be true progress toward equality of education for all students (O’Neil, 2004). Down came the “White Only” signs, swinging open doors to all, yet the racism and biases still remained. Fifty years later African Americans are still fighting to undo the terror and harm created by Jim Crow laws (Weaver, 2004). The *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* decision may not have toppled all walls to a quality education for all children as was hoped, but it is a strong beginning in the battle for equal opportunity.

One of the anticipated outcomes of mandated desegregation ordered with the *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* decision was the increased academic success of African American children (Rothstein, 2004). During 1970 to 1988 data showed the achievement gap narrowing as Black students improved their achievement faster than

White students. This shrinking of the gap slowed to a crawl when courts lifted the requirements of school districts to continue with mandated busing.

The last twenty years has witnessed the slowing of the growth and a reversal with the achievement gap widening during the last ten years (O'Neil, 2004; Uwah, et al., 2008; Weaver, 2004). Some would say the culprit is cloaked in *No Child Left Behind* (2002) and the push for vouchers (Weaver, 2004) thus leaving equal achievement around the corner and down the street long out of site (Barton, 2004). School choice gives an advantage to those with the most resources; consequently White students will be able to make effective change to a predominately White school while Black students will be trapped in low-performing schools in economically depressed areas (Weaver, 2004).

Fear of Change

Enforcement of *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* and the *Civil Rights Act (1965)* set in motion dramatic change in society and education. Many teachers lacked understanding due to racial bias and therefore were not ready to educate millions of African American children. Teachers argued separate schools for Black students were needed to prepare Black students to function in the face of segregation throughout life (Blanchett, et al., 2005). Hiding behind the comforts of Jim Crow laws, many teachers looked down as if from ivory towers onto classrooms with the best students with the newest textbooks and most modern amenities (Lalas, 2007) while wagging a finger at African American “ghetto” schools and pretending to not comprehend why the students were not able to compete.

The order to desegregate left many scrambling to avoid teaching African American children (Davis, 2008). What emerged were new ways to re-segregate by

using housing laws to create barriers which would basically not allow African Americans to move out of the urban areas. Re-segregation was continued within the school by placing African American children in special education programs which removed these students from the mainstream classes (Barry, 2006; Blanchett, et al., 2005; Ruffins, 2008; Smith, 2007) or by placing them in the remedial track classes with lower expectations for success.

Achievement Gap

It is well documented that Black males enter school already lagging behind White males (Gutman, et al., 2002; Lewis, 2004; Roach, 2004; Smith, 2004; Saunders, et al., 2004) with the gap widening as they progress through school. By the time the students are ready to graduate from high school the gap will be approximately four grade levels (Roach, 2004) with little likelihood of Black males eliminating the gap nor reaching their full potential (Davis, 2008). Most African American males enter high school so far behind they simply give up (Williams, 2006). Recent studies indicate African American male students compared to other student groups, consistently rank lowest in academic achievement, have the poorest attendance records, are suspended and expelled most often, have the highest dropout rate, and most often fail to earn a high school diploma or GED (Martin, et al., 2007; Saunders, et al., 2004; Uwah, et al., 2008). African American males are disproportionately placed in special education and other restrictive programs of study (Barry, 2006; Ruffins, 2008; Teasley & Lee, 2006). African American males lead the nation in homicides, suicide, arrests, convictions, and incarcerations (Anderson, 2010; Roach, 2000). Urban African American males are more susceptible to criminal behavior, substance abuse, poor academic progress, and early sexual behavior (Wyatt, 2009).

Possible causes of the achievement gap

Fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)*, the gap still exists between lower class students and middle class students as well as between White students and Black students (Lalas & Valle, 2007; Rothstein, 2004). Public outcry over this disparity is placing the blame on the schools, teachers poorly prepared to educate students, and expectations which are set too low. Education has become the scape goat for failure in closing the achievement gap. It is a belief that all students are created equal therefore should achieve equally yet they do not so it must be the fault of the teachers and the schools (Evans, 2005). This is a much easier blame than addressing a biased society in terms of skin color and financial well-being (Evans, 2005; Rothstein, 2004). This is a simplistic and dangerous assumption which neglects to look at the treatment of African American males (Evans, 2005) and the variables which impact socioeconomic status and race (Rothstein, 2004). Different social classes have different ways to discipline their children, different styles for communicating expectations, and different views about education (Gosa & Alexander, 2007; Mandara, 2006).

Schools. All children are created equal with the desire to learn. However, not all children perform at the same level (Evans, 2005). This means the achievement gap is the result of “failing schools” because common sense tells us money and skin color does not determine how well a child reads nor does math (Rothstein, 2004). If the teacher knows how to teach and schools eliminate distractions, stressing the importance of subjects, it should follow children will learn no matter what their family income or skin color. There is a misguided belief that what works for White students will work for Black students if just done enough times (Evans, 2005; Hawley & Nieto, 2010).

This notion of color blindness is dangerous and misleading as it refuses to acknowledge racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences among students (Evans, 2005; Hawley & Nieto, 2010). The fact remains many teachers are subconsciously and subtly racist (Blanchett, et al., 2005; Evans, 2005) as they project their cultural attitudes and expectations on African American males through avoidance behavior or by providing less assistance and more harsh disciplinary actions (Evans, 2005; Ray-Taylor, 2005). Inherently the public education system in the United States is biased as it was founded by White middle class males and continues to be oriented toward White middle class values. To be eligible for the best education in the United States, the student must come from a family with money, books in the home, a desire and training to sit still in one place all day, and an acquaintance with White upper and middle class icons (Landsman, 2004). This is a “hidden” curriculum which allows some students to have benefits and the assistance to maneuver through the educational maze which other students do not receive (Hale, 2004). The powers in charge have determined African American males are not bright enough, have the wrong attitude, and have dysfunctional families so are looked pass for admission to challenging and honors classes, leaving schools full of smart Black males in low track classes (Landsman, 2004).

It is difficult for schools to achieve equality for students when urban schools receive half the budget dollars that suburban schools enjoy (McNutt, 2002). This underfunding of urban schools and lack of responsibility to minority student success is the new form of structural racism and discrimination (Blanchett, et al., 2005). It is also difficult for schools to educate African American males when the teachers and other school leaders continue to buy into the negative stereotype beliefs that African American

parents are neglectful, incompetent and uninterested in their child's education (Barton, 2004; Gorski, 2008; Harry, et al., 2005). The use of a single piece of information causes society to deem many African American families as dysfunctional without any substantiated evidence to justify the label (Harry, et al., 2005).

Racism. The African American male will experience life in an entirely different manner than his White counterpart living in the same neighborhood. He will be subjected to racism and oppression which will affect his academic development (Wyatt, 2009). For many years Black males have been denied education through slavery, Jim Crow laws, institutional racism and silent racism (Gardner, 2007) which has impacted their opportunities for achievement today.

Today there is a hidden racism in the classroom. It is in the choice of words used to address different students, the smiles and greetings for one group but not the African American boys, the handshake with the White parent but not the Black parent. Hidden racism occurs in the strict requirements for entry to honor level courses based on attendance and behavior besides ability (Few, 2004). Hidden racism occurs in the curriculum by the omission of African American accomplishments. This unintended racism is present in the classroom when the teacher calls on White students to answer more difficult questions and calls only on the Black students for easy questions (Landsman, 2004).

Unintentional racism exists in schools largely because teachers are unaware they are behaving in a racist manner. For years teachers would purport they treat every student exactly the same thus they are color blind and cannot be a racist (Gardner, 2007; Hawley & Nieto, 2010). This is a false statement and to continue to believe it is a

disservice to students as they come from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences which makes each student unique and of value in the classroom (Gardner, 2007). This attitude negates the value of the student's racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences, all of which creates a diverse learning environment (Blanchett, et al., 2005; Edmin, 2012). The teacher should respect and build on the enrichment the various backgrounds (Hawley & Nieto, 2010) provide the classroom and incorporate those experiences to enhance student learning instead of ignoring the differences. Teachers integrating Black and other cultures into their classrooms create an environment which demonstrates to the student they are a valued part of the school community and will increase student engagement.

Teachers harbor thoughts about African American students being inherently less capable and less intelligent. The existence of this stereotype mentality cannot be dismissed as nonsense just because this is the twenty-first century. Unfortunately the negative sentiment still exists today. As long as test scores re-enforce this belief of inferiority, teachers will shed the responsibility from themselves to the students. Many teachers go through the motion of educating African American males, pay lip service to fresh ideas, but do not believe anything they do will make a difference for these children, they will never catch up. If the teachers do not believe in the students, how are the students ever to believe in themselves (Gardner, 2007)?

Garrett suggests tough conversations need to be held about hidden racism and White privilege which impacts the attitudes many teachers have about African American males. The belief racism is only the harmful attitudes and actions aimed against another group neglect to acknowledge or do not understand the advantages of White privilege and

entitlements it ensures nor the effects of hidden racism (Garrett, 2009). Most White people have not been educated about the advantages they are entitled to by their skin color thus they are not aware nor do they accept their being White presents to them certain entitlements. Teachers treating White middle class students different than other student shows how engrained White privilege is given neither the teacher nor the students receiving the preferential treatment are aware of its existence. Many teachers hold low expectations for African American males and the expectations become self-fulfilling through the course of their school years (Garrett, 2009).

Internalized racism occurs when the oppressed group accepts faulty negative stereotypes about their aptitude, abilities, and societal place and the stereotypes are allowed to continue to exist instead of being dispelled (Harper, 2006). The minority group knowingly or unknowingly endorses the stereotypes which compels many minority group members to criticize and attack those from the group trying to step up and out of the stereotype by placing the label of “sell out” on the individuals. This label is given to African American males who strive to be successful in school. Internalized racism makes it impossible to determine if the deviant behavior of the African American male is a result of low expectations and poor achievement in school or the poor achievement is the result of the deviant behavior (Barry, 2006).

Social class. Different social classes have different experiences so will have different communication and child-rearing styles. Upper-middle class parents tend to work as business professionals (Rothstein, 2004). They work in a collaborative environment, communicating and exchanging ideas with co-workers to solve issues. These parents will tend to model their child-rearing and discipline to match what is

successful at work. They will tend to talk and problem solve with their children.

Because of the open communication and collaborative environment, these children will have an inquisitive attitude toward concepts and ideas presented at school. On the other side of the coin, lower-class parents are in jobs which require them to follow instructions and not question why. Children in these homes will be raised to simply do the task and not ask questions (Rothstein, 2004). They will miss the opportunities to be curious and to have intelligent conversations with adults (Lewis, 2004). These children will go to school and many times remain quiet during class discussions because they are not prepared for the collaborative environment and thus appear to be disengaged.

Disengagement does not indicate lack of knowledge nor caring but may indicate fear of not appearing intelligent in the eyes of teacher or peers (Few, 2004).

Poverty. A family is considered to be below poverty if the income for the year is below the threshold number assigned the family based upon its size (Burney & Beilke, 2008). Currently in the United States, poverty is determined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Low academic performance by African American students has been blamed on poverty for decades (Davis, 2008; Harry, et al., 2005). Poverty may have a high impact on achievement although it is not always an easily identifiable variable as it is entangled with racism, social status, and stereotypes about minority values (Burney & Beilke, 2008).

Poverty has a direct effect on self-esteem of children. It robs them of a variety of learning opportunities (Lewis, 2004). They lack the experiences of their wealthier peers who are able to go on vacations, visit museums and zoos, attend cultural and fine art events, and access information through the internet and books (Burney & Beilke, 2008).

Through no fault of their own, poor children having not experienced these opportunities cannot compete academically (Hale, 2004; Lewis, 2004). Many times the dominate society does not value the experiences of lower socioeconomic status or minority students who do possess enriching experiences and culture (Gardner, 2007). Devaluation of one's experiences or culture causes students to feel inferior and alienated from peers and teachers, thus they withdraw viewing school as an obstacle and not a ticket out of poverty (Davis, 2008).

Many African American children's realm of social experiences include hard-working role models along with drug dealers, drug addicts, convicts, ex-cons, future cons, unemployed, pimps, and prostitutes (Gosa & Alexander, 2007). They will experience a community vigilant and caring, yet have family members and friends who may be gang members who are carrying and using guns (Gosa & Alexander, 2007). They become a product of their environment doing what they see in the "hood" which is void of successful Black men to be fathers and role models (Sparrow & Sparrow, 2012).

Poverty is prevalent in the life of the African American male as one in three is raised in a poor household. African American males disproportionately attend large, urban public schools located in areas of high poverty (Martin, et al., 2007). Urban schools are underfunded and dilapidated buildings, served by under-qualified and inexperienced teachers, with limited course rigor offered (Uwah, et al., 2008). The opportunity gap created by deficit of access and resources, low teacher expectations, and cultural misunderstanding is a major contributor to the disparity in education which places more African American male students in the lowest academic track or special education classes (Barry, 2006), to be disciplined more frequently, and to be negatively

stereotyped by teachers more often than White students. The combination of race and gender may be a double jeopardy for many African American males (Uwah, et al., 2008).

To assume poverty is equivalent to poor parenting and absence of family strength is an insult to the resilient attitude used by oppressed families in the United States to protect their children from discrimination and to foster family bonds and individual strengths (Gorski, 2008; Harry, et al., 2005). A popular impression gleaned by society is that poor people do not value education, choose not to do well in school, and elect to live in poverty. The portion of society with such views have little connection to the actuality of what living in poverty means as they are geographically and psychologically distanced from areas of poverty (Harry, et al., 2005). Contrary to the beliefs of society, the poor share a reverence for education as well as the knowledge that mobility out of poverty depends on school achievement and attainment.

Socioeconomic Status. Socioeconomic status involves more than income level. It is the level of education, employment, maternal education, parental involvement, health, family size, neighborhood influences, peer interaction, and access to resources (Barton, 2004; Burney & Beilke, 2008; Gutman, et al., 2002; Roach, 2004). Any one of these factors has an impact on academic achievement, behavior, and feelings of self-worth.

African American males from all socioeconomic backgrounds share unique struggles of being underemployed or unemployed, and a higher incarceration rate than any other gender or race group (Uwah, et al., 2008). These struggles not only impact the individual's life but also his family. High incarceration rates leave many homes with a single parent working multiple jobs which takes away time and involvement in raising

their child (Gardner, 2007; Perry, 2005). In these homes the child is responsible for their basic needs of food and grooming. Inadequate nourishment during the prime age of brain development and body growth has a detrimental effect on achievement (Gardner, 2007). Incarceration also impacts the family as financial resources are needed for the incarcerated individual to make phone calls and buy necessities.

Low birth weights, lead poisoning, hunger, and malnourishment affect cognitive development of low socioeconomic children (Barton, 2004; Evans, 2005; Rothstein, 2008). African American children are exposed to these conditions at double the rate as that of White children (Barton, 2004; Lewis, 2004; Rothstein, 2004).

The more time a child spends with books, either by having someone read to them or by reading on their own, their success in school increases (Evans, 2005; Hale, 2004). A three year old child of average intelligence of professional parents has a vocabulary matching a typical parent on welfare (Barton, 2004; Burney & Beilke, 2008). Watching a lot of television is associated with lower achievement. Each hour of television a child watches daily in early childhood increases the risk for attention problems by 10%. Parent child ratio is a factor as common sense indicates the more available a parent is for the child the higher the success of the child (Barton, 2004; Evans, 2005).

The socioeconomic status of a family determines the number and type of experiences a student has before entering school which will impact academic achievement (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002). Frequent moves because of job loss or unable to pay housing costs, causes students to change schools and teachers during the school year. Mobility is hard on a child, placing them at risk of gaps in their education because of lost continuity of instruction (Barton, 2004; Evans, 2005; Rothstein, 2008). Parental

involvement with their child's education decreases the number of behavioral problems and increases academic performance (Barton, 2004; Perry, 2005).

Standardized testing. It is argued the use of standardized tests do not paint a true picture of the achievement gap especially with the increased pressure to demonstrate adequate yearly progress and the bias of test questions (Davis, 2008). The more pressure the less reliable the scores (Rothstein, 2004). As the stakes get higher, teachers are devoting most of their time to drill to match the standardized tests at the expense of higher order thinking skills. Students are capable of learning complex material while at the same time learning basic skills (Hawley & Nieto, 2010). Due to the pressure of high stakes testing and accountability, many schools have neglected to teach non-cognitive skills. The gap in non-cognitive skills mirrors the achievement gap.

No Child Left Behind (2002) law creates testing bias in the use of a test designed to match the standards which are based on upper and middle class American values and disregards and devalues all others (McMillian, 2004; Popham, 2004). The belief that standardized tests measure actual classroom learning is inaccurate as reflected in a gap between subgroups which is wrongly label as achievement gap when in reality it should be labeled as standardized test score gap (Popham, 2004).

As explained by Popham, major standardized tests are norm referenced which necessitates a point spread requiring some students to do poorly and others to do very well creating scores resembling the bell curve with the majority of the students performing in the middle. To obtain scores which create a bell curve, test creators are not interested in actual effective teaching but in creating test items which not all test takers can answer. The easiest type of test items to use to create the spread is to create

test items which affluent students will know the answer and less affluent students will not. This is known as a socioeconomic linked item. Advantaged and disadvantaged socioeconomic status students have varied experiences outside of school thus questions are easy to write which reflects this difference in experiences, making the tests biased against low socioeconomic status students which is generally minority students. This jaded test is measuring the knowledge student's bring to school, not the knowledge gained from school. Schools are being ranked on student performance on the test which does not reflect the teaching (2004).

Power of athletics. African American males have been raised by society, parents, and peers to be a powerhouse on the athletic front but not the academic side (Williams, 2006). It is a far worse disgrace for an African American male to fail on the athletic field than it is to fail in the classroom. To be a successful athlete, the student must possess intelligence, discipline, commitment, and a competitive edge (Williams, 2006) the same qualities needed to be successful in school. Despite the skills for success learned through athletics, schools seem to reinforce the expectations of weak academics. A coach would demand top performance at practice and game time; yet a teacher tends to accept the failure as the norm.

A few months before graduation, African American males realize their "just slide by" attitude will have a major impact on choices after high school. Being encouraged to simply graduate, these athletes do not grasp the impact grade point average has on their ability to play collegiate sports. Athletics will quit on them long before they quit on athletics (McNutt, 2002). Regrettably many African American parents believe their

children are unable to compete academically, thus pushing their children to focus on athletics which helps to fuel this mentality.

Parental support of their student is daunting when it comes to athletics yet appears near nonexistent for academics. These parents will spend endless hours cheering at games and countless dollars buying athletic gear yet they spend just a few minutes checking homework (Graves, Jr., 2009; McNutt, 2002). Student and parents are caught up in the ESPN culture focused on making it to the league like Jordan, Bryant, or James not realizing what a delusion the dream is for most adolescents. Teachers will complain about the support parents have toward athletics and not academics yet the message the school sends is the same; celebrating athletic achievement with banquets and praise while neglecting to have a banquet to celebrate academic achievements. There is not a national signing day for students accepting scholarships to a college for academics like there is for students signing to play athletics at a university (McNutt, 2002; Morris & Adeyemo, 2012;).

Athletics is a great tool to instill discipline, teamwork, leadership, and competitiveness but should not take a seat in front of academic achievement. We need our cheerleading parents at the events but also picking up the pom-poms along the academic path chanting encouragements for their boys to reach their full potential. The Black community cannot afford the “hoops” dream when an entire generation of African American males is at risk (Graves, Jr., 2009; Morris & Adeyemo, 2012). According to *The Schott 50 State Report (2010)*, Black males consistently have low educational attainment levels and are at higher risk of many social ills such as unemployment, drugs,

illness, prison, and death. Simply stated, Black males are in a state of emergency (Graves, Jr., 2009) as academics take a backseat to athletics.

Studies Refuting Poverty

A family's socioeconomic status determines student success in school. Studies are arguing this stance because African American male and female students from the same household achieve at different levels. The females outscore the males (Adelabu, 2007; Uwah, et al., 2008) as early as the fourth grade, rapidly outpacing their male counterparts by sixth grade. In the last 30 years, African American males graduating from high school has increased (Saunders, et al., 2006), yet they are achieving at much lower levels than African American females (Few, 2004). This within-racial group gender gap is the widest gender gap of any student demographic group (Adelabu, 2007; Uwah, et al., 2008).

Maybe instead of achievement gap the focus should be on gender gap (Eckholm, 2006; McMillan, 2004). The gender gap widens as the socioeconomic status goes down. Speculation as to the disparity between genders of the same home is the amount of self-worth the student feels (Saunders, et al., 2006). The difference in African American gender achievement may be attributed to the tendency of elementary teachers to relate better to female students, thus providing more warmth and encouragement than is given to the male students (Adelabu, 2007).

Torff (2011) proposes the achievement gap persists due to a gap in rigor of curriculum provided to Black male students verses White male students. Teachers must break the cycle they create when they provide Black males a watered-down lesson which limits the student's academic growth which in turn places the student farther behind

academically. If the belief is all students can learn then it is time for teachers to provide the academic rigor to all students to demonstrate their belief in the words instead of letting the words ring empty to African American males.

Conclusions

On the whole, equal access has not led to equal achievement. Equal achievement is still around the corner and far down the block (Barton, 2004). Many would believe too much is expected of students. Truth is a child's mind is a sponge with the ability to comprehend and learn many advanced concepts. Society deems young children cannot do a second language and advanced math concepts when in reality the average person is capable of learning five languages with ease. With that in mind, schools are not expecting too much (Colligan, 1999).

Students need to be inspired, knowing teachers care and truly like them (Bainbridge & Lasley II, 2002). The actions of the teachers should reflect dedication, concern, and appreciation for all students (Kafele, 2009; Saunders, et al., 2004). Students are very sensitive to how teachers feel about them by reading non-verbal gestures as well as tone of voice. A solid relationship built on mutual respect will open doors for motivation and ultimately success for the student (Kafele, 2009; Norguera, 2012). A simple confirmation of a positive attribute may be the inspiration needed for the student to strive for excellence (Kafele, 2009). If teachers do not embrace and genuinely care about our Black males, the streets have a way of pulling them in with compliments and expressions of caring teachers didn't show. All children seek belonging.

Teachers must learn the culture of African Americans, discuss African American history, and post articles about African American people (Landsman, 2009). Teachers

must immerse education into the culture instead of inserting small connections to culture into education (Hawley & Neito, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2001). African American students' chance of success increases with cultural identity (Edmin, 2012; Neal, et al., 2003) and classrooms which embrace and celebrate that identity through culturally relevant instruction. Cultures should be enrichment to education not a barrier, validating the value of the African American family in society (Guerra & Nelson, 2007). If the cultural barriers are not identified and addressed, schools may be inadvertently perpetuating the cycle of underserving students with the greatest need and the ultimate result is the fulfillment of the stereotype of low achiever and drop out (Uwah, et al., 2008).

Low expectations kill an education so teachers need to hold the same high standards and expectations for all students regardless of color or socioeconomic status (Blanchett, et al., 2006; Roach, 2000). Teachers, like other people, tend to judge by initial appearance and interaction with a student pulling from their experiences and biases. Students need to be greeted with a warm, caring, and supportive learning environment which embraces individual cultures (Blanchett, et al., 2006; Booker, 2006; Neal, et al., 2003). Biases and pre-conceived ideas teachers harbor about students must be eliminated by opening dialog to gain a better understanding of African American male students (Saunders, et al., 2004). Many Black males dream of the day society will give them a second chance instead of condemning them for prior mistakes as they fight a pervasive sense of hopelessness (Eckholm, 2006.)

A positive view of racial identity by African American males tends to equate with academic success (Saunders, et al., 2004). They view their "blackness" as a positive

attribute instead of falling victim to stereotype threat. The preconceived stereotypes of Black males being intellectually inferior, lazy, and prone to violence lead many young Black males to underachieve and eventually drop out of school thus fulfilling the stereotype (Davis, 2008; Mandara, 2006; Rauch, 2004). African American parents must raise physically and emotionally healthy boys in a society in which being a Black male doubles the negative stereotypes to overcome (Miller, 1999; Noguera, 2012).

Traditional approach to school financial support is funds gathered from property taxes within the boundaries of the school district and state finance formulas to assist school districts. This approach continues the inequalities of education offered to poor and rich districts. Economic resources must be considered in the context of their use. A principal of a suburban school built in 1980 can do a lot more with \$10,000 than the principal of an urban school built in 1930 (Colligan, 1999). Mentoring programs have proven to provide benefits to young African American male students and are expanding rapidly in schools (Wyatt, 2009). A school with strong financial support to offer multiple levels of support to the students allows schools to provide the much needed education to give economically and socially marginalized children the empowerment to change their lot (Davis, 2008).

Need for a Study

Society has the Hollywood mindset about low-achieving, socially troubled urban Black students needing a dedicated “hero” to swoop into the classroom, defeat the ills of poverty, restore values and academic success; never mind the lack of credentials and the unorthodox approach of this “hero” with a mysterious past (Bulman, 2002). Society’s

fascination with Hollywood's depiction of African American male existence must be debunked.

African American males have many challenges to face outside the classroom (Noguera, 2012). Due to the outside challenges, it becomes even more important for teachers to check their attitudes and expectations of Black males in their classrooms. They need to make sure they are meeting the needs of the students instead of taking the easy path of blaming the student and his environment of poverty, crime, drugs, gangs, and other social problems epidemic to the "hood". Creating a school and classrooms to meet the needs of African American males is not an easy task for if it were easy, the achievement gap would have been erased a long time ago (Noguera, 2012).

Years of doing the same thing in the classroom, producing the same results indicates it is time to adjust the methods of teaching and communication with Black males. It is time to stop and realize differences will allow Black males to improve their chances of academic success by using instruction which fits their needs, infusing their culture into lessons and there by producing academic success for the student (Emdin, 2012). Raise the academic rigor in the classroom and adjust to higher expectations demonstrating to African American males a belief in their ability to achieve instead of fueling the flames of the rigor gap (Torff, 2011).

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This chapter includes participants, procedures, independent variable descriptions, dependent measures and instrumentation, research questions, and data analysis.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive correlational study is to determine the effect of poverty on the achievement of urban African American male students successfully completing high school.

Research Design

This study was a descriptive correlational study designed to describe the poverty census data and the achievement of urban African American male students and to examine the relationship between poverty level and achievement among urban African American male high school students. The study constants are all urban African American male high school students ($N = 162$) a real world naturally formed group of subjects starting high school in the fall of 2007 and graduating in the spring of 2011 from the same urban school district. The study dependent measures were:

1. Cumulative grade point average (GPA) at the end of the second year of high school in 2009
2. Cumulative GPA at the completion of high school in 2011
3. PLAN test scores (2009) for (a) English, (b) math, (c) reading, (d) science, and (e) composite
4. ACT test scores (2011) for (a) English, (b) math, (c) reading, (d) science, and (e) composite

Research Questions

Research question #1. Was there a relationship between poverty level and tenth grade cumulative GPA for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district?

Research question #2. Was there a relationship between poverty level and twelfth grade cumulative GPA for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district?

Research question #3. Was there a relationship between poverty level and PLAN test scores for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district for:

- a) English
- b) mathematics
- c) reading
- d) science reasoning
- e) composite

Research question #4. Was there a relationship between poverty level and ACT test scores African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district for:

- a) English
- b) mathematics
- c) reading
- d) science reasoning
- e) composite

Participants

The participants of this study are African American males enrolled in one of the high schools of a large mid-western urban school district during the 2007–08, 2008–09, 2009–10, and 2010–11 school years. Each of the students enrolled in one of the high schools of the large mid-western urban school district in the fall of 2007 and graduated from one of the high schools of the large mid-western urban school district in the spring of 2011.

One hundred sixty-two students were selected for this study by identifying the African American male students who attended one of the high schools in a large mid-western urban school district from ninth grade through twelfth grade. The age range of the study participants was congruent with the research school district's high school age demographics. The age range was from 14 years old to 19 years old. All study participants met the research school district's graduation requirements and received a standard diploma from one of the high schools in the large mid-western urban school district.

Data Collection Procedures

All student achievement data was retrospectively, archival, and routinely collected school information. Permission from the appropriate school research personnel was obtained. Non-coded numbers were used to display individual de-identified achievement data. Aggregated group data, descriptive statistics, and inferential statistical analysis were utilized and reported with means and standard deviations on tables.

The students for the research were identified through registration data. Once identified as a participant in the study, all identifiers were removed from the data. The

study procedures did not in any way interfere with the educational practices of the research school district. The data was collected by the research department of the large mid-western urban school district.

Instruments

The instruments used to collect norm referenced performance data are the PLAN test and the ACT test. Both tests consist of four subtests: (a) English, (b) mathematics, (c) reading, (d) science reasoning. Each subtest of the test is given a score along with a composite score.

The PLAN test measures academic progress in high school in four curriculum-based areas: English, mathematics, reading, and science. Composite scores range from 1 to 32. The assessment is based on the major areas of high school, measures the skills and knowledge needed for success on the ACT test and college. The PLAN test provides insight for parents, students, and teachers about achievement and career paths. The PLAN test is designed to be taken by students in the fall of the tenth grade year of high school.

The ACT test contains four curriculum-based assessments: English, mathematics, reading, and science. The scores range from 1 to 36 with a composite score which is the average of the four subtests. The ACT is a college admissions test which provides an indication of a student's academic readiness and potential success in college. The scores reflect what students have learned in high school.

Cumulative grade point average (GPA) is an instrument of measure for this study. Cumulative grade point average is a calculation of total points earned for each course taken divided by the number of courses taken. Advanced placement courses and honors

courses receive the following points: A – 5, B – 4, C – 3, D – 2, F – 0. All other courses receive the following points: A – 4, B – 3, C – 2, D – 1, F – 0.

Data Analysis

The analysis included descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics including frequency, percentage, range, mean, and standard deviation were used to present the description of the subjects. Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient was used to explain the relationship between poverty levels and assessment data.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive correlation study is to determine the effect of poverty on the achievement of urban African American male students successfully completing high school.

Research Questions

Research question #1. Was there a relationship between poverty level and tenth grade cumulative GPA for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district?

A correlation for the data revealed that the poverty level and tenth grade cumulative GPA were significantly related, $r = -.21$, $n = 162$, $p = .008$ as poverty level increases GPA decreases. Mean scores and standard deviations are displayed in Table 1. The Pearson Correlation data is displayed in Table 2.

Research question #2. Was there a relationship between poverty level and twelfth grade cumulative GPA for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district?

A correlation for the data revealed that the poverty level and twelfth grade cumulative GPA were not significantly related, $r = -.17$, $n = 162$, $p = .03$ as poverty level increases GPA decreases. Mean scores and standard deviations are displayed in Table 1. The Pearson Correlation data is displayed in Table 2.

Research question #3. Was there a relationship between poverty level and PLAN test scores for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district for:

- a) English
- b) mathematics
- c) reading
- d) science reasoning
- e) composite

A correlation for the data revealed that the poverty level and English subtest score of the PLAN test were not significantly related, $r = -.17$, $n = 162$, $p = .06$ as poverty level increases PLAN English score decreases. Mean scores and standard deviations are displayed in Table 3. The Pearson Correlation data is displayed in Table 4.

A correlation for the data revealed that the poverty level and mathematics subtest score of the PLAN test were not significantly related, $r = -.15$, $n = 162$, $p = .06$ as poverty level increases PLAN mathematics score decreases. Mean scores and standard deviations are displayed in Table 3. The Pearson Correlation data is displayed in Table 4.

A correlation for the data revealed that the poverty level and reading subtest score of the PLAN test were significantly related, $r = -.27$, $n = 162$, $p = .001$ as poverty level increases PLAN reading score decreases. Mean scores and standard deviations are displayed in Table 3. The Pearson Correlation data is displayed in Table 4.

A correlation for the data revealed that the poverty level and science subtest score of the PLAN test were not significantly related, $r = -.15$, $n = 162$, $p = .06$ as poverty level

increases PLAN science score decreases. Mean scores and standard deviations are displayed in Table 3. The Pearson Correlation data is displayed in Table 4.

A correlation for the data revealed that the poverty level and composite score of the PLAN test were significantly related, $r = -.22$, $n = 162$, $p = .006$ as poverty level increases PLAN composite score decreases. Mean scores and standard deviations are displayed in Table 3. The Pearson Correlation data is displayed in Table 4.

Research question #4. Was there a relationship between poverty level and ACT test scores African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district for:

- a) English
- b) mathematics
- c) reading
- d) science reasoning
- e) composite

A correlation for the data revealed that the poverty level and English subtest score of the ACT test were significantly related, $r = -.22$, $n = 162$, $p = .005$ as poverty level increases ACT English score decreases. Mean scores and standard deviations are displayed in Table 5. The Pearson Correlation data is displayed in Table 6.

A correlation for the data revealed that the poverty level and mathematics subtest score of the ACT test were not significantly related, $r = -.14$, $n = 162$, $p = .08$ as poverty level increases ACT mathematics score decreases. Mean scores and standard deviations are displayed in Table 5. The Pearson Correlation data is displayed in Table 6.

A correlation for the data revealed that the poverty level and reading subtest score of the ACT test were significantly related, $r = -.23$, $n = 162$, $p = .003$ as poverty level increases ACT reading score decreases. Mean scores and standard deviations are displayed in Table 5. The Pearson Correlation data is displayed in Table 6.

A correlation for the data revealed that the poverty level and science subtest score of the ACT test were significantly related, $r = -.24$, $n = 162$, $p = .002$ as poverty level increases ACT science score decreases. Mean scores and standard deviations are displayed in Table 5. The Pearson Correlation data is displayed in Table 6.

A correlation for the data revealed that the poverty level and composite score of the ACT test were significantly related, $r = -.24$, $n = 162$, $p = .003$ as poverty level increases ACT composite score decreases. Mean scores and standard deviations are displayed in Table 5. The Pearson Correlation data is displayed in Table 6.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Grade Point Average

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Poverty Census Status ($N = 162$)	23.37	13.44
Cumulative GPA Tenth Grade ($N = 162$)	2.44	0.84
Cumulative GPA Twelfth Grade ($N = 162$)	2.52	0.73

Table 2

Pearson Correlation for Grade Point Average and Poverty Census Status

	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Poverty Census Status	162		
Cumulative GPA Tenth Grade	162	-0.21	0.008**
Cumulative GPA Twelfth Grade	162	-0.17	0.03*

** Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for PLAN Test Scores

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Poverty Census Status ($N = 162$)	23.37	13.44
PLAN English Subtest Score ($N = 162$)	14.37	3.55
PLAN Mathematics Subtest Score ($N = 162$)	14.73	3.58
PLAN Reading Subtest Score ($N = 162$)	14.42	3.49
PLAN Science Subtest Score ($N = 162$)	16.29	2.50
PLAN Composite Score ($N = 162$)	15.12	2.65

Table 4

Pearson Correlation Statistics for PLAN Test Scores and Poverty Census Status

	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Poverty Census Status	162		
PLAN English Subtest Score	162	-0.15	0.06
PLAN Mathematics Subtest Score	162	-0.15	0.06
PLAN Reading Subtest Score	162	-0.27	0.001**
PLAN Science Subtest Score	162	-0.15	0.06
PLAN Composite Score	162	-0.21	0.006**

** Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for ACT Test Scores

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Poverty Census Status ($N = 162$)	23.37	13.44
ACT English Subtest Score ($N = 162$)	15.69	5.41
ACT Mathematics Subtest Score ($N = 162$)	16.73	3.33
ACT Reading Subtest Score ($N = 162$)	17.28	4.67
ACT Science Subtest Score ($N = 162$)	17.80	4.09
ACT Composite Score ($N = 162$)	17.01	3.82

Table 6

Pearson Correlation Statistics for ACT Test Scores and Poverty Census Status

	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Poverty Census Status	162		
ACT English Subtest Score	162	-0.22	0.005**
ACT Mathematics Subtest Score	162	-0.14	0.08
ACT Reading Subtest Score	162	-0.23	0.003**
ACT Science Subtest Score	162	-0.24	0.002**
ACT Composite Score	162	-0.24	0.003**

** Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and Discussions

America is a society of people looking for a “magic bullet” solution for its tribulations including those plaguing public education. Reality teaches us it will take more than a one shot solution. Current school reform focuses on urban schools and the need to mend what is viewed as a broken system. Politicians and business leaders are pointing their fingers at teachers and the schools as the fix for the inequalities which exist (Rothstein, 2008). School officials and teachers place the blame on poverty and lack of caring by student and parent. Current research on poverty shows African American females are performing higher on achievement tests than their brothers living in the same household which raises the question about poverty being the lone culprit for poor achievement by African American males (Adelabu, 2007; McMillian, 2004). The literature suggests the cause for low achievement is not so simple to identify as it involves historical discrimination, perceptions held by society, and poverty, all which are deeply entwined (Harry, et al., 2005).

The purpose of this descriptive correlation study was to determine the effect of poverty on the achievement of urban African American male students successfully completing high school.

Conclusions

Research question #1. Was there a relationship between poverty level and tenth grade cumulative GPA for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district?

There was a significant correlation between tenth grade cumulative GPA and poverty level for the study participants ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.84$) as the level of poverty increases, the achievement level as indicated by cumulative GPA decreases.

Research question #2. Was there a relationship between poverty level and twelfth grade cumulative GPA for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district?

There was not a significant correlation between twelfth grade cumulative GPA and poverty level for the study participants ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.73$) as the level of poverty increases, the achievement level as indicated by cumulative GPA decreases.

The data shows the steady improvement of cumulative GPA for African American male students who remain in school and completed courses for graduation in the prescribed four years. This was an unexpected positive result indicating students staying engaged in school have a higher level of success than the students who disengage. The positive results and literature suggest students feel connected to the school through positive relationships with teachers in the classroom and building. The students feel valued which has a positive effect on achievement (Booker, 2006).

Research question #3. Was there a relationship between poverty level and PLAN test scores for African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district for:

- a) English
- b) mathematics
- c) reading
- d) science reasoning

e) composite

All participants took the PLAN test in the fall of the tenth grade. On the PLAN test scores, there was a significant correlation between student poverty level and PLAN composite score ($M = 15.2$, $SD = 2.63$) as well as a significant correlation between student poverty level and PLAN reading subtest score ($M = 14.42$, $SD = 3.49$). This significance in correlation was an anticipated outcome which is uniform to the research literature about poverty and achievement. The other PLAN subtest scores for English ($M = 14.37$, $SD = 3.35$), mathematics ($M = 14.73$, $SD = 3.58$), and science ($M = 16.29$, $SD = 2.50$) did not have a significant correlation with student poverty level. This is an encouraging result showing urban African American males students of poverty are able to achieve in the mathematics and science fields the same as other males. The results in the English scores may be a result of the implementation of district wide focus on improving English scores on the high-stakes standardized tests.

Research question #4. Was there a relationship between poverty level and ACT test scores African American male high school students attending the same large mid-western urban school district for:

- a) English
- b) mathematics
- c) reading
- d) science reasoning
- e) composite

On the ACT test scores, there was a significant correlation between student poverty level and ACT composite score ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.73$) as well as a significant

correlation between student poverty level and ACT subtest scores in English ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.73$), reading ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.73$), and science ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.73$). Although the data results are disappointing, it was not unexpected. There was not a significant correlation between student poverty level and ACT mathematics ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.73$) subtest score. The expectation was to see a significant correlation on all subtests, so was surprised to see a not significant correlation on the mathematics subtest. The results coincide with data showing Black males hold a much stronger belief than their White peers that people can be good at math and they hold a more positive outlook about math being fun and important to learn (Burley, et al., 2010).

Discussion

In the age of accountability, media consistently bombards the public with statistics about the achievement gap, especially the gap showing the nation's African American males are performing lower than all other groups (Lalas, 2007; Martin, et al., 2007; Saunders, et al., 2004; Uwah, et al., 2008). There are a number of studies focused on the achievement of African American male students and a substantial number more on the lack of achievement of African American male students. Although there is a multitude of studies of the short falls of Black males, there continues to be a lack of a real concerted effort to focus on the educational and social needs of Black males to eliminate the gap (Delpit, 2006; Lalas, 2007).

The obsession with the achievement gap and the need to place blame has led to a snapshot view of schools based on their average scores on high-stakes standardized tests. The scores are used to rank and compare America's public schools and determine the status of the schools as failing or not. The score is misleading because it compares

schools based on size and type which does not account for the individual students in the buildings and their prior knowledge (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002). Poor urban schools attended mainly by poor minority students are compared with wealthy suburban schools attended mainly by affluent White students. This type of reporting does not acknowledge achievement by Black male students nor does it show the underachievement of middle class White male students even though both cases exist in schools (Popham, 2004). The students scoring the lowest should receive the most instruction instead policy dictates poor achieving school should receive less funding (Burney & Beilke, 2008; Evans, 2005).

The data from this research has many positive outcomes, especially in the area of achievement in terms of cumulative GPA. An interesting aspect of the study was Black male students increased their mean cumulative GPA of a 2.44 entering high school to a mean cumulative GPA of 2.54 when graduating from high school. Although this GPA will garner most Black male students admittance to college, it indicates potential struggle for success in college.

It is time for the courageous conversations to question the perceptions held about poverty, stereotypes, Black male achievement, and the impact perceptions held by society, teachers, parents and community, and the student have on achievement.

Perceptions Held By Society

The perception of main stream America about poverty and the attitudes of people in poverty have been molded by a collection of stereotypes created by media and politicians. Society has been feed a collection of small stereotypes about poverty which have been stated so many times with such conviction that society takes them as truths

(Gorski, 2008). Myths such as poor children are unmotivated and lazy, poor children are linguistically deficient, poor children abuse drugs and alcohol, and poor children have parents who do not value education abound in society and are fed by media daily. This study indicates poverty does not have a significant correlation with achievement as measured by grade point average as Black male students stay in school and graduate. The culture of poverty theory is not real and must be eliminated from the perceptions people hold about those in poverty (Bulman, 2002; Gorski, 2008).

Perceptions Held By Teachers

Perceptions held by teachers about students have a major impact on student success in the classroom (Booker, 2006). Many teachers unknowingly harbor biases especially about poverty and urban minority students. Teachers will state they believe all students are smart and can learn including African American male students living in poverty. A few moments later the same teachers will complain about the lack of effort and motivation demonstrated by those same students (Gorski, 2008). Teachers fall victim to the culture of poverty theory believing poor people lack strong work ethics, are lazy, do not value education, speak deficiently, and abuse alcohol and drugs.

Teachers, like other people, tend to judge by initial appearance and interaction with a student pulling from their experiences and biases. Students need to be greeted with a warm, caring and supportive learning environment which embraces individual cultures (Booker, 2006; Neal, et al., 2003). Teachers need to engage in courageous conversations about hidden biases and preconceived ideas they harbor about students. Teachers need to adjust their belief that all students should arrive to school with the same standard knowledge even though the knowledge is what the dominate White culture

deems of importance and not what may be of value to other cultures. Educators must overcome the belief that critical thinking skills work only for the upper level students and not those who appear to be disadvantaged, thus unable to think critically (Torff, 2011). Educators must create a safe and accepting place providing all students the opportunity to succeed. A caring teacher can make the biggest difference in the success of a child in school (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002).

A typical urban school is predominately attended by minority students of poverty and taught by majority middle class teachers. Because of this demographic, it is imperative teachers understand the cultural backgrounds of the students and develop methods of instruction which meets the needs of the students.

Perceptions Held By Parents and Community

Parents of Black male students and the surrounding community hold the belief the only way out of the “hood” for their young men is excelling at athletics. Although it is known education is needed, it is not always seen as the ticket out. Many of the young Black men and their families approach graduation with apprehension because no one in the family or maybe even the neighborhood has gone to college so there is a lack of experience in how to navigate the college and financial aid maze.

These various perceptions help by parents and the Black community impact student performance both directly and indirectly.

Perceptions held by student

Black male students know they are viewed as failures before they enter school. They live in a world which expects them to drink. They are supposed to be on the 6 o'clock news shooting or robbing people. They are supposed to smoke weed. They are

supposed to be a basketball player. They are not supposed to be educated. Some will have the opportunity to be viewed different but the rest are not given the chance to make good. The students soon give in to the perceptions deciding it is easier to live what they believe all people see them as instead of striving for success. It is like being in shallow quicksand. They feel like they are being sucked down and don't realize it's not too deep to survive if they stand up. Instead they get scared and give up (Jones, et al., 1997).

When asked about achievement, many young Black men do not place the blame on the schools or teachers. They attribute their poor achievement in school to culture, family, community, and self. They understand the importance of a good education and the value of attentive parents, cohesive families, and positive male role models to avoid the dangers of the rap culture, poverty, and low expectations (Sparrow & Sparrow, 2012; Burley, et al., 2010).

Recommendation for Further Research

The data from the current study indicates African American males who attended high school in the same urban school district and graduated from that district in the prescribed four years showed improvement in their cumulative GPA. The current study focused on African American males who successfully completed high school. A suggestion for future research would be a study of the same participants and their postsecondary success. It would be of interest to see if the success experienced in high school continues with the student through college.

The current study focused only on African American males successfully completing high school. A suggestion for another study would be the impact of poverty on African American male students attending high school in an urban school district to

determine success or not at the end of the prescribed four years needed to graduate from high school.

The size of the current study was limited by selecting participants from one Midwestern urban school district which has a high poverty level. A further study of interest would be to expand the study to include the other school districts in the same metropolitan area to see the impact of poverty on achievement of African American males.

The study indicated a correlation between poverty and all the subtests scores except mathematics on the ACT college entrance exam. Further research is needed to determine if a correlation exists because of culture bias in the test questions or because families of poverty are unable to provide the study sessions offered for a fee to help students learn test taking tips and skills.

In our modern American democracy, access to all resources necessary to a fair and equal opportunity to learn should not be based on a zip code where the student resides (Evans, 2005). Our children cannot be globally competitive if we are to identify race, ethnicity, gender, and zip code to determine who is more likely to have the opportunities to learn and attain post-secondary education. During the civil rights era, Malcolm X understood this need for Black males when he made the following statement in his speech *By Any Means Necessary* (1968): “Without education, you’re not going anywhere in this world . . . Education is our passport to the future.” The call is to reach out to students, to show belief in them, and to help them traverse through a world foreign to their community. Much like Brandon, these African American males need someone

cheering for them and extending a helping hand to assist in maneuvering around the obstacles as they navigate the halls of academia.

Epilogue

Two days before starting his freshman year of college; Brandon and I met on campus to purchase books. Brandon was like a two year old on Christmas morning opening his newly purchased textbooks and marveling at the content. Still in awe and disbelief that he was in college, Brandon stated “Life would be perfect if I had a car or a laptop”. I handed him a shoulder bag which he eagerly opened to find a shiny new laptop. He could not contain his excitement nor stop talking about going to college something he never thought could happen for him.

He started his first semester of college excited and nervous as a young boy starting kindergarten. He rode his bike to campus every day. Brandon’s enthusiasm started to fade being replaced with doubt and fear. He was not prepared for the level of study and did not have the support at home to help him. Before long he was not attending classes using the excuse it was too cold to ride his bike to campus. Somewhere inside Brandon there still was the desire to be successful in college. He stopped by my office one day deflated, ready to drop out and join the military. We talked about options and the need to stay in school. He said he would go back to finish the semester. It was too late for him to salvage any grades but he did attend and the professors noticed. One professor told Brandon after the final how delighted she was to have had Brandon in class. Her only regret was not being able to pass him, if only he had asked for help during the semester. Brandon heard what was said, the message was clear, professors cared about him as a student and his success.

Brandon called asking me to help him register for second semester. We met on campus and selected classes with the assistance of a counselor. With renewed vigor, a car, and a better understanding of expectations, Brandon started second semester. Half way through second semester Brandon's grades were passing and he once again beamed with pride in what he was doing. Life was looking good. He was positive and up-beat.

Brandon sent me a message stating the jury was due back soon in the courtroom with a verdict in his brother's murder trial. Knowing Brandon and the possibility of a guilty verdict, I dropped everything and rushed to the courthouse. Jury found his brother guilty on two counts of murder. Brandon went ridged in disbelief, and then came the heart-wrenching tears and sobs. I was not sure he was hearing my words about the importance of being in school making his brother proud. However a few hours later, he called to tell me he went to class.

A several days later, Brandon called because he had been kicked out of his home by his mother's boyfriend. The bigger hurt was his mother did not say anything. Once again the words of Bone Thugs-N-Harmony echo: "I tried so hard, can't seem to get away from misery . . . it's like I'm taking five steps forward and ten steps back" (2007). He moved in with my children and me. The semester finally ended with passing grades but not a high enough grade point average so he was placed on academic probation and was denied financial aid. Any of these life events would have been enough to cause Brandon or any other student to drop out of college. He had learned to reach out instead of withdrawing into his shell.

Together we composed a letter to petition for reinstatement of financial aid. Reinstatement was granted. Classes selected and books purchased, Brandon was once

again anxious to start classes and to demonstrate his academic ability. Little did we know of the trials and tribulations waiting around the corner as he began a new semester.

Brandon tried to study for his classes and do his homework, but would find many obstacles in his path. Friends not in school calling to hang out, his best friend being shot, his brother's apartment broken into, filling out police reports, his brother being evicted and homeless, his being arrested while assisting his brother, and being profiled by the police as he drove home to a "White" neighborhood were just a few of the obstacles. Yet his desire to earn a college diploma spurred him on through the countless late nights of reading and homework. At the end of the school year he had passed all classes with a high enough GPA to remove him from the academic probation list. He applied for and received a scholarship which provided full tuition and money for textbooks for 5 years.

I had gained a wealth of knowledge about a wide variety of things which minority students encounter all too often. I had overcome many barriers growing up in poverty but had not experienced what it is to grow up Black. Posting bail, court appearances, public defenders, shooting victims, profiling, intolerance, homelessness, despair, and resilience were just a few of the lessons which allowed me to witness first-hand the obstacles encountered by minority students as they try to navigate in a world which gives privilege to White and looks down on a Black male as trouble, devaluing any accomplishments. I was beginning to understand why minorities just stopped trying; giving the impression they don't want to break free from the stereotypes.

A new school year with a renewed sense of worth and accomplishment, found Brandon coming to inform me he was going to be a father. We spent a day talking about the implications and impact of fatherhood. Brandon was determined he would be a

“present” father unlike his own whom he has no knowledge of, not even a name. He gained a new focus and value in his education. He no longer needed to be reminded to do his homework.

Brandon has taken the 0.0 GPA of his first semester of school to an improved 3.6 GPA, earning him a spot on the Dean’s List this past semester. He did this on his own and the pride was huge. He has a son, he has a dream, he has a plan, he has a support system, and he has determination. His remarkable resiliency in the face of adversity has amazed me. He has matured. He still contacts me when obstacles appear, but he also calls to say “Thanks, I could never have done this without your help.” Brandon has forged a path and set a high standard by his example for his nephews and his son. Brandon now understands the importance of “pay it forward” if there is to be a difference in the academic achievement and attainment of African American males, including his son. Because of his life experiences and the knowledge he has gained, Brandon has entered the College of Education to become a teacher and impact the lives of future generations of African American males.

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APPENDIX A

Letter of Approval for Research from the Omaha Public Schools

A letter is on file and available upon request.

APPENDIX B

Letter of Approval for Research from the Combined University of Nebraska Medical
Center/Univeristy of Nebraska at Omaha Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Subjects

A letter is on file and available upon request.