**In Their Own Voices: Adolescent African American**

**Males' Experiences of the Achievement Gap**

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**Abstract**

The authors use a phenomenological research tradition grounded in CRT tenets to describe the daily lived experiences that 12 male African American youth had in relation to the achievement gap. Researchers collected individual semi-structured interviews and focus group data related to the study phenomenon. There were five themes identified in participant data: (a) achievement gap or resource gap? (b) salience of parental support, (c) environmental obstacles related to academic achievement, (d) individual motivation and effort, and (e) resiliency and persistence in the face of racism. Implications for school counseling research, practice, and advocacy with African American male youth and study limitations are discussed.

     *Keywords:* achievement gap, African American adolescent males, school counseling

**In Their Own Voices: Adolescent African American**

**Males' Experiences of the Achievement Gap**

Many scholars have called for closing the achievement gap between African American male students and White students (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Orr, 2003); however, there is little research examining the experiences that African American male youth themselves share about their experiences of the achievement gap. The achievement gap has been defined as when groups of students with comparative equivalent ability do not achieve at the same levels in school; especially when one group greatly exceeds the achievement level of the other (Bainbridge & Lasley, II, 2002). For example, achievement gaps have been found between wealthy and poor students, inner city and suburban students, and boys and girls (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). One of the most persistent gaps among students from various racial/ethnic groups is between African American males and their White counterparts (Neblett, Jr, Chavons, Nguyen, & Sellers, 2009).

Research has also long identified that African American male youth are at risk for a variety of negative school experiences and outcomes including: school failure, excessive and unnecessary special education assignment without data to support placement, suspensions, expulsions, and violence (Howard, 2008; Murphy, 2009; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008). Charged to be advocates for those traditionally marginalized and trained agents of change, professional school counselors are well-positioned to assist in increasing opportunities for African American adolescent males' academic achievement, as well as to help close the achievement gap (Bruce, Getch, & Ziomek-Daigle, 2009). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore

African American adolescent male's perceptions of the achievement gap in order to further understand the systemic barriers they face and what assists them in achieving academic success.

**African American Male Youth, the Achievement Gap, and Counselor Advocacy**

One of the consequences of the achievement gap for African American male youth is the risk of being funneled into what has been called the "School-to-Prison Pipeline" (Muwakkil, 2006). The School-to-Prison Pipeline refers to the trend in United States (U.S.) educational systems of criminalizing actions of "at risk" students in schools (typically students of color) with zero-tolerance discipline and school arrests, ultimately denying these students of color access to education (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Research has indicated that there has been a steady rise of young African American males in detention centers and prisons. African American males account for over 35% of the prison population; however, they comprise only 6% of the population. Young Black men who drop out of school are incarcerated eight times more than their college-educated counterparts, and 1 in 25 college educated African American men were incarcerated as compared to one in three for African American dropouts (Western, 2007).

Professional school counselor educators and scholars have called for all counselors to be social justice advocates who are aware of the impact that systemic racism has had on the lived experiences of African American adolescent males (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Crethar, Rivera, & Nash, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). These scholars argue that professional school counselors can seek to understand the unique challenges that these African American adolescent males face and develop the skills to examine policies and procedures that may contribute to

continuing the achievement gap. In order to effectively advocate for the closing of the achievement gap for African American males, professional school counselors may be generally guided by the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009) to advocate at the micro, meso, and macro levels. In addition, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Model (2012) details clearly that professional school counselors should develop advocacy competence in working with students from historically marginalized groups. Although these ACA and ASCA advocacy competence documents exist, it is important to understand the lived experiences African American males themselves describe of the achievement gap, so that professional school counselors may refine their advocacy skills with these students in order to be most effective (Singh, Urbano, Masten, & McMahon, 2010).

**Using Critical Race Theory to Frame African American Experiences**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) can be a helpful theory to professional school counselors when seeking to develop advocacy competence with African American young men related to the achievement gap. CRT scholars challenge perspectives that do not address racism as a reality for people of color, and they also specifically seek to examine the experiences that people of color have of societal racism. CRT is therefore a helpful theoretical perspective to use in order to counter dominant societal narratives concerning African American male youths and achievement (Masko, 2008). "CRT offers insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies that guide efforts to identify, analyze, and transform the structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial/ethnic positions both inside and outside of the classroom"

(Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 63). In addition, CRT explicitly names White dominance and its related consequences, while simultaneously identifying possibilities for liberation and social change (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Unlike traditional scholarly research that examines and/or describes how race and racism are organized and operate, CRT scholars seek to restore social inequities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, IV, 1997) and examine the effects of racial injustice in schools on minority achievement (Carter, 2008; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). CRT provides a strong foundation to investigate how institutional structures, practices, polices, and processes help uphold inequalities for students of color (Love, 2004).

For example, CRT scholars acknowledge that racism is all-encompassing with White dominance so embedded in legal, educational, and political organizations that it remains nearly unrecognizable (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Taylor, 2006). In doing so, CRT scholars also assert that racism is permanent, and although there may be stages of progress followed by stages of resistance, societal forces and the majority dominance will prevail making the civil rights gains appear insignificant (Carter, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Therefore, CRT scholars also seek to contest racism, and that one way to contest racism is to challenge the experiences of Whites and insist on recognition of the experiences of people of color (Carter, 2008; &Vaught, 2008).

The theoretical tenets of CRT challenge dominant narratives about race and ethnicity, and as such CRT is a helpful guide in countering single-truth claims from dominant beliefs concerning African American male youths and school achievement (Masko, 2008). "In addition, CRT offers insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies that guide efforts to identify, analyze, and transform the structural and

cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial/ethnic positions in and out of the class" (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 63). Therefore, researchers used CRT to frame the phenomenological study in order to examine the complexity of race as a conceptual structure within the school system. The research question guiding the current study was: How do African American male youth describe their daily lived experiences of achievement gap in their own voices?

**Method**

Phenomenological inquiries are typically used to gain a deeper meaning or essence of everyday experiences of a phenomenon that individuals experience (Iwamoto, Creswell, & Caldwell, 2007). The intent is not simply identifying the factual points of an experience; instead phenomenology seeks to answer the question: "What is it like to live a specific experience?" This approach was selected for this study because the research design allowed the researchers to describe the essence of how African American male youth understand, resist, and encounter the achievement gap in their daily lived experiences. This was a particularly important goal of the researchers so that the achievement gap that these young men experienced was positioned at the center of analysis.

The phenomenological method of this study was grounded in three CRT tenets (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). The first CRT tenet entails an assertion that experiences of institutional and structural racism are pervasive realities in the daily lived experiences of people of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1997). This first CRT tenet guided researchers in this study to value and believe the experiences of racism that study participants described having within their school settings. The second

CRT tenet of counter-storytelling asserts that there are racist dominant narratives about people of color in society that are often not countered and become assumed realities for people of color (Love, 2004). In the current study, researchers used this tenet to specifically investigate the counter-stories that participants had of achievement in their schools as African American adolescents. The third CRT tenet grounding this study was a critique of colorblindness. This CRT tenet challenges the assumption that all people are treated equally across institutions within society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1997). The researchers used this tenet throughout the research study to seek to understand the inequities that participants described experiencing within their schools as young African American men.

**Procedure and Participants**

A description of the purpose, design, and potential benefits and risks of the study was explained to both parents and participants at the outset of the study and throughout each of the stages of informant participation. Parental consent and participant assent were secured. Researchers used purposive sampling (Hays & Singh, 2012) to recruit participants who met the following criteria: (a) between 14-18 years-old, (b) African American, (c) male, (d) working or poor class and (d) currently enrolled in school. There were two data collection points. Five participants engaged in individual interviews, and seven different participants engaged in one focus group interview.

**Study Instruments**

There were three instruments in this study. A demographic sheet was used to collect identifying information about participants. The primary researcher also used individual and focus groups semi-structured interview protocols. Finally, the primary

researcher was an instrument of this study. The primary researcher acknowledged that her prior experiences and beliefs may have influenced the research process (Creswell, 2013). Being an insider to the culture that was studied required that the data truthfully mirror the reality of the participants rather than the viewpoint of the researcher (Yeh & Inman, 2007). To address these concerns, feedback was requested from the participants (member checks) and triangulation to respond to biases (Creswell, 2013) and the primary researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process. Research team discussions included addressing biases related to race and gender, educational privilege and its impact on the researcher's interpretation, response to sensitive issues presented by participants, and connectivity to the challenges many of the participants shared.

**Demographic sheet**. Before the semi-structured interview, participants completed a participant demographic information sheet. The demographic sheet took approximately five minutes to complete. Personal identifying information was not included on the demographic sheet. Participants selected a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. This pseudonym was used in data transcription, analysis, and coding.

**Individual semi-structured interview protocol**. Each interview question was designed to create themes and ideas related to the phenomena (see Appendix). These questions provided a structure for the interview sessions, which allowed the participants to reconstruct details of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). The following three interview series guided this research: a) focused life history, b) details of experience, and c) reflection on the meaning. During the first phase participants were interviewed individually three times. Open-ended questions (see Appendix) were asked to elicit

detailed descriptions of the participants' experience. The goal of these interviews was to understand each participant's experiences and perceptions related to the achievement gap and what the males considered a good student, so that meanings emerged (Creswell, 2013). All interviews were recursive in nature to clarify and expound on responses from prior interviews. The interviews took place one week apart to allow the participants to ponder previous interviews, but not allowing enough time to pass to lose the association between the two interviews. This also allowed the researcher to establish rapport with the participants and account for possible distractions during the sessions, in addition to ensuring recursivity of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013). To safeguard accurate translation of the words of the participant, the researcher recorded, transcribed and collaborated with each participant to clarify the responses from the interview.

**Focus group semi-structured interview protocol.** After individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual participants, the researchers conducted one 90-minute focus group with seven participants. Participants were asked questions to explore themes from the first phase individual interviews. Team-building activities were also used to build trust during the focus group opening, which was particularly important when working with adolescents who may participate more when they feel a connection with the facilitator and focus group members (Hays & Singh, 2012).

**Researchers as instruments.** The research team consisted of three African American female school counselors (1 elementary school counselor, 1 middle school counselor, 1 high school counselor), and one South Asian American counselor

educator. Prior to beginning the study the research team met to discuss and bracket

possible biases and explore themes from the first phase individual interview findings.

Some of the biases discussed were different definitions of a "good student." Both the

elementary counselor and the high school counselor felt it should include behavior, and

all good students should accept academic challenges. The elementary school counselor

felt that many students today have low self-expectations and receive little joy in learning

for learning's sake. The primary researcher maintained a reflexive journal recording

initial and continuing research team assumptions of members and to continuously

examine beliefs.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

A phenomenological approach along with the theoretical lens of critical race

theory (CRT) were used for this study because it allows the researchers to describe the

essence of how African American male youth construe, process, and encounter the

achievement gap (Iwamoto et al., 2007). CRT complements phenomenological research

and encourages counter narratives to deconstruct the dominant narratives and offers

alternative views for understanding cultural identities while challenging the master

culture (Stanley, 2007). CRT also focuses on the effects of race and racism in society

and most importantly, addresses White dominance while it advocates for change and

social justice (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

The data analysis included describing the primary researcher's experiences with

the African American males (epoche), distinguishing meaningful statements in the data,

clustering the comments into descriptions and themes, and integrating the themes into

the essences of the young boys' experiences. CRT tenets were used to guide each of

five steps of analysis. For instance, the researchers bracketed assumptions related to the phenomenon (see Study Instruments section above) in the first step of data analysis (Creswell, 2013). In the second step, recursive individual and focus group data was collected. In this step, the primary research conducted the individual (audio-recorded) or focus group interviews (video-recorded) and then transcribed them. This step also included member checking of transcripts. The primary researcher maintained a reflexive journal to monitor biases and assumptions throughout the data collection process in this step and the research team discussed it and changes were made as needed. In step three, the research team analyzed the data using horizontalization, which was a line-by-line analysis of participant transcripts identifying statements from the participants about the phenomenon by the research team that were not overlapping or repetitive (Hays & Singh, 2012). The CRT tenets described above guided the horizontalization of the data. In step four, the statements of the participants were clustered into meaning units and a structural description of the phenomenon using CRT tenets (Hays & Singh, 2012). In step five, an internal audit trail of data collection and analysis was conducted by the primary researcher, and an external audit was conducted by a person outside of the research team to ensure validity and trustworthiness of the study. Each audit was guided using the CRT tenets framing the study. The external auditor was a female, African American university adjunct counseling professor and school counselor.

**Trustworthiness of Study**

The researchers integrated several verification processes in addition to rich and thick descriptions that are intrinsically engaged in qualitative research such as bracketing researcher biases, member checking of transcripts, and external audit

(Creswell, 2013). For this study, notes from the interviews, transcripts, coding books, research group feedback, reflexive journal, and the auditor's report were used to analyze the multiple data sources. This multi-layered approach allowed for structural corroboration, also known as triangulation. The research team permitted consensual validation and included discussions of the research findings, and process (Creswell, 2013). As an additional source of data for analysis, the field notes and reflexive journal recorded personal observations and impressions.

## Findings

The researchers identified five themes in the participant data: (a) achievement gap or resource gap (b) salience of parental support, (c) environmental obstacles related to academic achievement, (d) individual motivation and effort, and (e) resiliency and persistence in the face of racism.

### Achievement Gap or Resource Gap

The first theme in the findings encompassed participants describing the achievement gap related to a lack of needed resources within their academic and personal contexts in order to thrive. For instance, participants described a financial resource gap in comparison to their White counterparts in both academic and personal experiences. The participants shared that it was difficult to successfully match the efforts of their White peers when their families were low-income when they were attending schools that were not as highly resourced as schools is more affluent areas. Participants described that these financial inequities created an even larger divide between the "haves and the have not's." For example, participants described that their schools often had outdated textbooks, few computers, crowded classes, and teachers

they did not believe were invested in their academic futures. In addition, participants described that school personnel did not understand their daily lived experiences of racism. Also, the majority of participants indicated that few, if any, in their families had attended college and lack of finances might also prevent them from attending college. Neal (17-years old), a graduating senior shared,

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

> Another participant, Paul (16-years old) sophomore, echoed the resource gap between White and Black students saying, "…it's a White man's world, so you can expect an achievement gap." Paul was concerned that his Black peers were not placed in the most challenging classes, and therefore lacked the necessary resources to advance. Larry (16-years old) commented that schools with the most money were able to better educate students than those schools with limited resources, which impacted Black student achievement. Larry remarked,

> As a Black male, I can definitely tell that there is an achievement gap between Blacks and Whites. I have a White friend who goes to a predominant White

school on the north side of town. We are in the same grade, but he is like months

ahead of me in his math class and what they are doing, and we are taking the

same class! And he's not at an academic based [private] school; he's in a public

school just like I am. So, you tell me what's going on with what they have there

that is not available at my school.

**Salience of Parental Support**

The second theme, salience of parental support, spoke to the levels of

encouragement they received from their parents related to academic achievement.

Those participants who had strong parental support felt it gave them the "extra push"

needed to keep going and not give up despite challenging circumstance. Participants

also shared that this encouragement made them feel like their academic success

mattered and would allow them to better their parents' financial situations in the future.

Participants described believing that many in society had already written them off as

"thugs and gangsters," which sometimes made them want to give up and discontinue

their efforts. However, it was their parents, guardians, relatives, and caring teachers,

who encouraged them to succeed academically despite low expectations from school

personnel and society.

A few of the participants shared that they had little parental support, which they

described as making it more difficult for them to strive for academic achievement. Not

having anyone to advocate on their behalves, request school assistance from, and

attend important parental conferences made them feel alone and vulnerable. On the

other hand, Neal (17-years-old) felt that his academic success went hand-in-hand with

his continual parental support. He acknowledged that many of the African American

males he knew did not have the benefit of having the support of both parents and said it could definitely impact achievement. Neal shared,

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

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

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

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

> Mark (16-years-old) agreed and stressed the need to have someone there for that additional support. He also shared that he had to put forth more effort than a lot of his peers because he was behind in some subjects. Larry (16-years-old) added it has been hard for him to obtain the support he desired from his family. He commented,

> I was raised by my grandmother because my mom left me with my dad and he left me with his mom. My mom just started hanging out with a new person and was gone! Dad was really nowhere in the picture. My mom (grandmother)

doesn't help me with nothing. If I ask for help with a project she says she is tired and will go lay down. But, if there is a problem, she is quick to curse me out and jack me up, every time I ask her for help. I understand she is tired and all, but sometimes I just need help. Shoot, I have come home from school and no one speaks to me, so I just go upstairs to my room. Tell me, how can you come into a house and your mom doesn't even speak to you, but it's alright and I make do.

**Environmental Obstacles Related to Academic Achievement**

Within the third theme, environmental obstacles related to academic achievement, participants described the variety challenges they faced on the path to academic achievement in their homes and communities. Each of the participants described entering school daily feeling burdened with situations at home and in their communities that influenced their academics. The participants indicated it was hard to ignore the dismal realities of their day-to-day existences and enter school solely focused on schoolwork. Some participants shared that their families struggled financially or moved homes frequently, and other participants describing having a job to help contribute financially to their families. A few participants indicated being approached by drug dealers trying to recruit them as sellers, and that this was a daily part of living their neighborhoods. Each of the participants knew of someone who had succumbed to abusing drugs, and a few participants had friends who had spent time in jail related to drug convictions. Most participants were from single parent homes and did not have consistent communication with their fathers. Larry, (16-years-old) shared,

[I am] from a single parent family…and the teacher may not know what I am going through. Sometimes, I may not want to talk about what we are going

through. So, I mean some days I may lay my head down on the desk because I can't put too much on my mind right now, because something bad happened at home. So, [teachers] shouldn't just give up on [me] if [they] don't know what's going on. Really, people don't want to know [what's going on] because they don't care.

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

Similarly, Mark (16-years-old) asserted his belief that the achievement gap can be linked to African males' surroundings:

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

All of the participants appeared to have an intrinsic motivation to obtain a good education and to desire to dispel the stereotypes that they said are often attributed to them as African American adolescents.

**Individual Motivation and Effort**

The fourth theme, individual motivation and effort, reflected the participants' definition of academic success for themselves. Participants defined an academically successful student as one who maintained mostly "As and Bs, with few Cs" in their classes and avoided receiving any discipline referrals. The participants noted that being

successful academically was important to them because obtaining a good education was strongly connected to having a productive career later in life. All tried to maintain strong grade point averages (GPA) and "stay out of trouble." Participants acknowledged that sometimes keeping their grades up was difficult. A few participants shared they struggled in this regard, but attempted not getting discouraged and putting in more effort the next time they had an academic challenge. It was evident from the responses that many African American young men define being a good student as encompassing not only academic achievement, but also including "good behavior."

For example, participants asserted that being an academically successful student was someone who consistently attends class, reports on time, completes assignments, and makes an honest effort to earn high grades. The participants described that the ever-present media representation of them as being less intelligent due to being African American young men was, at times, detrimental to their academic performance (Bainbridge & Lasley, II, 2002). Marco (16-years old) offered the following:

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

Whereas Mark (16-years-old) shared his definition of being an academically successful student,

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

Participants shared that although grades appeared to be the driving force to determine success or failure in society in relation to their academic performance; they felt that having a strong character and being respectful and attentive were important components of academic success. Overall, participants shared being enthusiastic and committed to academic achievement and steadfast in improving their chances of college attendance.

**Resiliency and Persistence in the Face of Racism**

In the fifth theme, participants described how they were resilient to challenges within their school system with regard to racism, and how they sought to persist in school despite these obstacles. Although all participants recognized that being an African American male came with a unique set of societal challenges, they shared not being demoralized by the daily covert and overt racism they faced, nor were they especially hopeful that their experiences of pervasive racism would change any time soon. Participants accepted that experiencing racism was simply a matter of fact in U.S. society, yet they displayed resiliency and determination despite this. Marco noted, "even though I have problems at home, it doesn't mean I can slough around and take a break in class." Paul (16-years old) shared that, "many think just because we are Black, we [ain't gonna] succeed. Just makes me want to try harder." In addition, Mark (16-years old) commented that he has always wanted to do well in school,

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

However, JJ (15-years old) noted that when some teachers see an African American male student, they automatically think he is going to be bad and that he had to be resilient to those societal stereotypes. He shared,

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

Neal (17-years old) summed up his perception concerning the achievement gap best as a Black man facing racism,

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

## Discussion

In this phenomenological study grounded in CRT tenets, African American male adolescent participants described their experiences of the achievement gap in their own words. Participants shared the perceptions they had of African American male youth who excel academically and why there continues to be an achievement gap in schools. The findings of this study provide initial insight into the experiences of African American male youth in the educational arena, contributing to the current literature with African American students where current explanations of the achievement gap often include cultural shortfalls, student opposition, low teacher expectations, genetics, and

environmental factors (Howard, 2008; Rothstein, 2004; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008).

As the participants shared their personal experiences in their individual and focus group interviews, there was a common acknowledgement that African American young men are not privy to the same educational resources as their White counterparts. Lack of equitable social capital, more single-parent homes, less family income, better schools and neighborhoods, more experienced teachers and generational privilege were some of the examples provided by the participants. Therefore, the findings of this study support previous research indicating that Blacks students are at a disadvantage compared to Whites on several educational outcomes (Bryant, Jr., 2000; Epps, 1995; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Howard-Hamilton & Behar-Horenstein, 1995; Klugman & Xu, 2008; Muwakkil, 2006; Orr 2003). The adolescent African American males in this study shared that they felt it was challenging to compete academically against their White counterparts when there was an uneven playing field and factors such as economics, neighborhoods, schools, and support also impacted their achievement.

Participants also remarked that knowing someone was committed to their success, whether it was a parent or teacher, encouraged them to try harder and stay focused on their academic success. Therefore, this study also supports existent literature by citing the importance of parental and family involvement in African American males' academic success (Epps, 1995; Serbin et al., 2013; Somers et al., 2008). As one participant noted, "If I know someone out there has my back and believes in me, I don't notice all of the racism and drama that's out there…well ok, I notice it, but it's easier to ignore and focus on the big picture."

The study findings also substantiate the literature aligned with African American males and the impact of their environment on academic success (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009; Serbin, Stack, & Kingdon, 2013; Wright & Fitzpatrick, 2006). The participants shared how it was often difficult to focus on school work when there were sometimes distressing family issues at home like drugs, single parent homes, unemployment, and poverty to name a few; which is also collaborated in the literature (Harvey, 2004). Participants also shared the frustration they sometimes felt when it appeared that society anticipated their academic failure due to their race/ethnicity (West-Olatunji et al., 2006).

The resiliency and persistence to achieve academically by the participants was noteworthy; although that often attached it to the systemic and societal racism they shared they encountered daily. Despite experiencing great challenges that could easily impede academic success, the participants were adamant and enthusiastic about achieving their academic and future career goals. Although, there was scant literature revealing the resiliency of African American male youth, there is research that affirms the positive attitude many African Americans have regarding education despite the inequitable educational settings they may experience (Downey, Ainsworth, & Qian, 2009). For instance, many participants shared that their negative experiences of racism within and outside of school settings strengthened their resolve to be academically successful.

Participants additionally reported that individual motivation and effort were clearly connected to considering themselves as a "good student." When the participants responded to what they considered a good student academically, a high grade point

average was not the only criteria. Each participant shared that behavior and character were also connected to being a good student. In addition, a few remarked that good students did not only necessarily earn all stellar grades, but also put forth all of their effort their classes. Participants also described the importance of remaining focused on their academic success, while also being cautious to not internalize the negative societal and schools perceptions of them as young African American men.

**Future Implications**

Although this study elucidated an in-depth awareness of the issues surrounding the achievement gap by hearing the stories from the young men themselves, more research needs to be done to explore additional factors that contribute to or hinder academic success for these adolescents from their own voices. Such research may better inform policy, practice and improve the educational experiences of African American males.

In addition, advocacy continues to be a critical professional school counselor skill in supporting the academic success of African American male adolescents. For instance, on the local school level, professional school counselors can incorporate programs and interventions, which will foster a better understanding of the barriers that African American male youth face daily that may derail their educational ambitions. Programs or workshops may include cultural awareness and information about boys' identity development, since research indicates that some educators are not well versed on the unique cultural and racial needs of this population (Flowers, Milner, & Moore, 2003). Professional school counselors can also assist schools in developing a climate where African American male students feel encouraged, supported, and connected.

Professional school counselors, as leaders, change agents, and advocates for children in schools and outside of school, are expertly equipped to lead in calling for action on behalf of students traditionally marginalized (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). This level of professional school counselor advocacy may require challenging school systems, which often perpetuate policies that embrace and benefit the White students and disenfranchise students of color. Professional school counselors may also have to confront educators who have low expectations for African American male students and tend to place them in less rigorous classes and unconsciously discriminate against them by giving lower grades or fewer demands (Choules, 2007).

In addition, future research should evaluate programs which have proven successful and determine how these programs can be duplicated and implemented in schools with low performing African American male youth. Based on this study, African American adolescent males desire to form connections at school and want positive interactions with teachers. Mentoring and academic programs in which African American students have the opportunity to foster positive relationships with school personnel may be beneficial and foster resilience and encouragement towards their academic achievement (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010).

For instance, professional school counselors can design and implement more race and culture-specific mentoring programs and internships for young African American men. Addressing the achievement gap with culturally specific data-driven interventions from African American male adolescent voices may enhance the chances of developing environments where they may achieve academic and personal success. Additionally, collaborating with national organizations that have a history of advocating

for young people (e.g., Big Brother, Big Sister, the Boys and Girls Club, 100 Black Men,

NAACP, National Urban League) to develop programs specifically geared toward

addressing the achievement gap, seamless educational transitions, college readiness,

and onsite support systems in the schools for African American male adolescents can

be pursued (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010).

**Study Limitations**

While the findings of this study provide important information regarding the

perceptions African American male youth have of the achievement gap, there are

limitations of this study that may have influenced the interpretations of the findings. The

sample was one in the southeastern U.S. and findings may not be transferable to

African American male youth in other geographic settings. The descriptions of the

phenomenon may assist the reader in determining if the information gathered may be

transferred to other settings. In addition, participants may have responded in a manner

they felt would please the researcher because of cultural similarities between

themselves and the primary researcher. Future research might seek to add more

individual interviews and/or increase the number of focus groups to specifically explore

each of the findings within this study.

## Conclusion

The African American adolescent male voices of this study provide a counter-

narrative to the dominant societal discourse about their lives related to their experiences

of the achievement gap. Professional school counselors can develop programs in

schools and community settings to support African American males in academic

achievement, as well as advocate for the removal of structural and institutional racism

that serves as a barrier to their success. Finally, it is critical for professional school counselors to continuously seek to hear and understand the voices of African American male adolescents of the achievement gap in order to be most effective in serving their needs.

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**Appendix**

**Interview One: Experiences With the Achievement Gap/Perceptions of Being a Good Student**

1. Tell me how you would define the achievement gap.

2. Share with me why you believe an achievement gap exists between African American male youth and Whites.

4. Discuss your perception of a 'good student.'

5. How do students perceive/define a 'good student' at you school?

6. How do you define yourself as far as academics or school work goes?

**Interview Two: Details of Experiences With Achievement Gap/ Perceptions of Being a Good Student**

1. Discuss your experiences with the achievement gap at your school for African Americans.

2. Describe any emotions/feelings that you have experienced associated with being considered a 'good student.'

3. Describe barriers/stigmas that you believe are associated with being an African American 'good student.'

4. Are African American male students considered 'good students' treated differently by other students/teachers.

**Interview Three: Reflection on Meaning of the Achievement Gap/Perceptions of Being a Good Student**

1. Given what you have said about the achievement gap previously, why do you believe there continues to be an achievement gap between African American males and Whites?

2. Describe the impact of the achievement gap on your life.

3. Describe what have you learned about yourself as result of these experiences.

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