Against All Odds:
The Story of Four High-Achieving African-American Males
(An Ethno-Case Study)

BY

TONY CURTIS SPEED
B.A., Saint Peter's College, 2003
M.A., Columbia University, 2005

THESIS
Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Policy Studies
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2012

Chicago, Illinois

Defense Committee:
        David Stovall, Chair and Advisor
        Bill Ayers
        Cassandra McKay-Jackson
        David Mayrowetz
        Alfred Tatum

DEDICATION

2 Corinthians 12: 8-10: "[8]Three times I prayed to the Lord about this and asked him to take it away. [9]But his answer was: "My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak." I am most happy, then, to be proud of my weaknesses, in order to feel the protection of Christ's power over me. [10]I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Indeed, He – Jesus my Christ – is the source of my strength, strength supplied through my nucleus – namely, Irma Crumb, Carolyn Weatherspoon, Jasmine Johnson, and extended family and dear friends. Thank you for your supports during this process; my successes are yours – truly, as your supports allow me to fight the good fight.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

ABSTRACT

African-American students, particularly males, achieve at levels below their White and Asian-American counterparts as measured on traditional academic indices (e.g., standardized test scores, high school completion rates, grade point averages, and college entrance and completion rates), which – naturally, impact their life outcomes.

Yet, against all odds – including enrollment in one of the lowest performing high schools in one of the nation's largest school districts – many African-American high school-level boys prove to be high achieving on these same traditional indices. This project is an attempt to capture the school and home-life stories of four such students, capturing that which promotes their high academic engagement and achievement as to contribute to the conversation about narrowing said academic achievement and life outcome disparities.

The theories that the engagement of student narratives and voices is paramount to closing the aforesaid disparities and the working assumption that socio-political forces greatly influence the academic achievement and engagement of African-American male high school students serve as the theoretical framings of this project. Feminist and youth participatory action research traditions inform the research collection design, while ethno-case study is the employed methodology.

Findings suggest that a couple of in-school dynamics (i.e., climate in school and peer relationships) greatly influence the students' academic achievements, while extracurricular influence is minimal. With respect to out-of-school dynamics, only

family has largely influenced said students' academic achievements, while church and community influences are marginal. And, finally, a sense of self-efficacy, however nurtured, bears significant influence on the students' academic achievements.

Such findings can contribute to this ever-important conversation about improving the academic achievements of African-American males and, in doing so, improving their life outcomes.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. **Purpose of the project and research questions**

Improving the academic achievements of African-American students –

particularly males – on traditional academic indices continues to be a significant

quagmire for education professionals. Doing so, however, is critical in ensuring the

positive life outcomes of this population.

On a macro-level, therefore, this project is fashioned to contribute to scholarly

conversations about improving academic achievements with respect to African-American

males – as to improve the life outcomes of this population.

On a micro-level, further, the purpose of this project and the at-large questions

engaged in this project are: (1) how do formal school experiences support the academic

successes of a group of four high-achieving African-American males enrolled in an inner-

city, low-performing public high school, (2) how do church, community, family, and

other non-school constituencies support the academic successes of these students, and (3)

what factors influence these students' resiliency? And again, the findings of these

research questions and at-large study could possibly contribute to conversations about

improving the academic achievements of similar African-American males and, in doing

so, help narrow achievement disparities and life outcome disparities with respect to this

population and their better positioned Asian-American and White peers.

B. **Nature of the problem and significance of the project**

The very language of the academic achievement gap puts forth a false binary

about cross-ethnic/racial disparities in achievement, whereas the onus is on the

underachieving pool – generally African-American males – to catch-up to their more

privileged peers, all without consideration to that which favors the privileged group (e.g., the employed academic indices). So, the *framing* and *popular naming* of cross ethnic/racial achievement disparities are problematic because the employed indices are problematic – more contextualized in the definition of terms and contexts of terms section –, but the *actual disparities* are real and significant. The construct "achievement gap" is absolutely a social construct, but the disparities described by the construct are real as society treats them as real.

With respect to the actual disparities, African-American students – particularly males –, for example, achieve at levels below their Asian-American and White counterparts as measured on traditional academic indices (e.g., standardized test scores, high school completion rates, grade point averages, and college entrance and completion rates) (Christie, 2002; Irvine, 1990; United States Department of Education, 2002; United States Department of Education, 2003; United States Department of Education, 2004; United States Department of Education, 2005; United States Department of Education, 2006; United States Department of Education, 2007; United States Department of Education, 2008; United States Department of Education, 2009; Viadero, 2000).

With respect to standardized test scores, for example, the 2007 national mean score on the SAT Reasoning Test – one of two popularly used college entrance exams – is 1511. When aggregated by ethnicity/race, the data indicate that test-takers who identified themselves as White average a 1579 score, while self-defined African-American test-takers average a 1287 – an 18 percent differential. And, self-defined African-American males score at the very bottom on this particular test; their average score is 1280.

Table 1 indicates that not only are African-American scores on the 2007 SAT far below that of Asian-American and White test-takers, but they also lag behind the scores of every other major ethnic/racial group in the United States. Table 2 points to the significant scoring disparities between African-American male test-takers and their male peers in the other major ethnic/racial groups on individual portions of the SAT and the test at-large (United States Department of Education, 2008).

TABLE I
TOTAL AVERAGE SCORES ON 2007 SAT REASONING TEST BY
ETHNIC/RACIAL GROUPING

Ethnic/Racial group	Critical reading score	Mathematics score	Writing score	Total score
American Indian or Alaska Native	487	494	473	1454
Asian, Asian-American, or Pacific Islander	514	578	513	1605
African-American	433	429	425	1287
Mexican or Mexican-American	455	466	450	1371
Puerto Rican	459	454	447	1360
Other Hispanic, Latino, or Latin American	459	463	450	1372

White	527	534	518	1579

TABLE II
TOTAL AVERAGE SCORES FOR MALES ON 2007 SAT REASONING TEST
BY ETHNIC/RACIAL GROUPING

Ethnic/Racial group	Critical reading score	Mathematics score	Writing score	Total score
American Indian or Alaska Native	490	513	468	1471
Asian, Asian-American, or Pacific Islander	513	592	506	1611
African-American	429	437	414	1280
Mexican or Mexican-American	459	485	447	1391
Puerto Rican	461	472	442	1375
Other Hispanic, Latino, or Latin American	464	484	448	1396
White	529	553	511	1593

Considerable disparities exist between African-American students – particularly males – and their Asian-American and White counterparts on this particular standardized test and on most local, state, and national standardized tests.

Sizeable disparities in high school graduation rates are also widely used to highlight looming cross ethnic/racial academic achievement disparities. Greene and Winters (2006) show a sizeable disparity in the public high school graduation rates between minorities and Whites. Nationally, the report shows, the 2003 graduation rate for White students is 78 percent and 72, 55, and 53 percents for Asian-American, African-American, and Hispanic students, respectively. Additionally, the gender component of graduation rates is especially notable for minority students. While 59 percent of African-American female candidates graduated in 2003, for example, only 48 percent of African-American male candidates earned a high school diploma in 2003 (Greene and Winters, 2006).

Table 3 (Green and Winters, 2006) depicts graduation rates for the three largest school districts in the country (i.e., New York City Public Schools, Los Angeles Unified School District, and City of Chicago School District 299, respectively) and shows apparent disparities among the ethnic/racial groups and within the ethnic/racial groups: the achievement disparity with respect to high school graduation rates is quite significant among ethnic/racial groups, but there is also a sizeable gender gap in graduation rates within minority student populations.

Nationally, about five percentage points fewer White male candidates and three percentage points fewer Asian-American male candidates graduate compared to their respective female students. Also, while 59 percent of African-American female

candidates graduated in 2003, only 48 percent of African-American male candidates

earned a diploma – a difference of 11 percentage points (Greene and Winters, 2006).

TABLE III
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES (CLASS OF 2003) BY ETHNIC/RACIAL
GROUPING AND GENDER GROUPING

School district	Total graduation rate	Asian	African-American	Hispanic	White	Asian male	Asian female	African-American male	African-American female	Hispanic male	Hispanic female	White male	White female
NYC	43%	61%	38%	33%	61%	54%	68%	33%	43%	30%	37%	56%	65%
LA	51%	80%	55%	44%	77%	73%	87%	49%	61%	39%	49%	73%	81%
Chicago	50%	77%	46%	49%	68%	73%	80%	38%	54%	44%	54%	62%	75%

2009 data compiled and disseminated by the United States Department of

Education through its National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicate that the

average grade point average (GPA) of African-American high school graduates has

trailed that of the three other sizeable ethnic/racial groups (i.e., Asian, Hispanic, and

White) since at least 1990. For 2005, for example, the average GPA of White high

school graduates is a 3.05 (i.e., B) on a 4.0 (i.e., A) scale, while that of African-American

graduates is 2.69 (i.e., C). Asian-Americans high school graduates average a 3.16 (i.e.,

B) GPA for 2005, while Hispanics average a 2.82 (i.e., C+). Again, observed disparities

in educational outcomes are apparent between and within ethnic/racial groups.

And finally, with respect to enrollment in degree-granting institutions (i.e.,

institutions that minimally grant associate degrees), data compiled and disseminated by

NCES indicate that the overwhelming majority of students enrolled in such institutions

are self-defined White. For 2005, for example, NCES reports that only 13 percent of

enrolled students described themselves as African-American, while approximately 66 percent of this pool defined themselves as White. A 2003 NCES report depicts an equally grim reality with respect to college completion (i.e., graduation) rates. The report shows that nationally, generally half – approximately 54 percent – of students enrolled in four-year institutions graduate within six years of first enrollment, but it then shows staggeringly lower numbers for African-American males and females; their rates are 18 and 17 percents, respectively. Clearly, college graduation rates for African-Americans remain well below that of their Asian-American and White counterparts, which hover at about 54 and 34 percents, respectively, per this 2009 NCES report.

So, as all of these data indicate, achievement disparities exist – and are pronounced – in American education today. There is, in fact, a "persistent, pervasive and significant disparity in educational achievement and attainment among groups of students as determined by [sic] standardized measure[s]" (Gunning, 2006) and on at-large traditional academic indices. Plainly, compared to Whites, apparent and significant disparities for African-Americans – especially males – are evident in nearly every measure of academic achievement (e.g., standardized test scores, high school completion rates, grade point averages, and college entrance and completion rates) and throughout the American educational pipeline. And, African-American males are generally at the bottom of the scale on these measures and throughout the educational pipeline.

And such disparities, of course, profoundly impact the life outcomes of African-American persons. A higher likelihood of unemployment, a significant probability of attaining low wage-paying employment, and diminished earning potential are just some of the negative social outcomes of these persistent disparities (Caspi, Moffitt, Silva, &

Wright, 1998; Hepburn & White, 1990). Research, furthermore, points to a relationship between low educational outcomes and high-risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol and drug use, and premature sexual activity) (Fleming, Kellam, & Brown, 1982). And such high-risk behaviors, naturally, impact health outcomes.

According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) (2002), a nonpartisan economic think tank, American job losses in the early 2000s disproportionately affected African-American and Hispanic workers and also disproportionately affected workers with a GED, a high school diploma, and/or some college education – compared to those with a college degree – thus underscoring the fact that high educational attainment may serve as a buffer to unemployment and/or underemployment. The achievement disparities as noted via traditional academic indices, therefore, are directly linked to employability.

Similarly, research links the attainment of low-wage paying employment and diminished earning potential to lacking academic successes and educational attainments. Table 4 – per EPI (2002) – highlights this apparent economic value of education; it shows that over the course of their working lives better educated adults are likely to have both a higher annual earning and a higher lifetime earning (i.e., earning potential) than their less educated counterparts.

TABLE IV
ANNUAL AND LIFETIME EARNINGS BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENTS AS OF 2004

Educational attainment	Average annual earning	Average lifetime earning
High school dropout	$22,000	$1.1 million
High school diploma	$31,000	$1.4 million
Associate degree	$38,000	$1.8 million

Bachelor degree	$50,000	$2.5 million

High-risk behaviors and the health outcomes of those behaviors have also been linked to low educational outcomes within the literature. Mensch and Kandel (1988), for example, show that high school dropouts are more likely to use both legal drugs (e.g., cigarettes and alcohol) and illegal drugs (e.g., marijuana and cocaine) than high school graduates. And, naturally, these high-risk activities have serious health consequences as well, suggesting that educational outcomes, high-risk behaviors, and health outcomes are substantially interrelated. Further, seminal research indicates that socio-economic status (SES) – which is oft-times measured by educational attainments – is a consistent predictor of health outcomes, including mortality rates and rates of disease infection (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, Isaacs, 1989).

Thusly, academic achievement disparities are not simply disparities in achievement, but disparities in access to positive life outcomes across multiple dimensions, including economic and health dimensions. Narrowing and/or eradicating these achievement disparities, therefore, not only means equalizing access to educational opportunities, but also ensuring positive life outcomes for traditionally disadvantaged groups. This all suggests that economic, health, and social consequences result from achievement disparities – testifying to the gravity of their existence and persistence.

While the *framing* and *naming* of the achievement disparities are problematic, the disparities are real and have significant bearing – economic, health, and social – on the life outcomes on the "*underachieving*" class. Educational efforts are needed, therefore,

to narrow achievement disparities because life outcomes are at risk – hence the purpose

of this project.

TABLE V
THINKING MAP OF THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM AND SIGNIFICANCE OF
THE PROJECT

Traditional academic indices underscore an academic achievement gap between African-American students – especially males – and their Asian-American and White peers; but, these indices are individually and collectively arbitrary, deceptive, and work to the disadvantage of African-American students (e.g., standardized test scores, high school completion rates, grade point averages, and college entrance and completion rates).	While the *framing* and *popular naming* of the achievement gap are highly problematic – and the employed academic indices that render the language of the gap problematic – the indices are fixtures of American education, thus making the disparities real and significant.
The aforesaid manipulation and deception render the *framing* and *popular naming* of the achievement gap as highly problematic.	The project acknowledges the deceptiveness of the gap, but treats the disparities are real and significant because (1) they have major bearing on the life outcomes of African-American students and (2) society treats them as real as they are products of fixtures of American education.

C.   Theoretical frameworks

This project is informed by the interaction of two theoretical frameworks – the

notion that student voices and student voice initiatives are paramount to narrowing

academic achievement disparities, which is a piece of Positive Youth Development

(PYD) theory (Mitra, 2009) and the working assumption that socio-political factors

greatly influence the academic engagement and achievement of African-American male

high school students enrolled in low-performing, inner-city public high schools.

Although the engagement of student voices is an oft-neglected facet of education

reform and thinking about education reform, research has identified several important

benefits of student voice initiatives for youth, adults, and school. Such efforts can,

firstly, serve as a catalyst for change in schools, including helping to improve teaching,

learning, curriculum development, and teacher-student relationships (Mitra, 2009). The efforts might also, secondly, lead to positive changes with respect to student performance on assessments and teacher training processes (Fielding, 2001; Fielding, 2001). Student voice initiatives, thirdly, also foster student attachment to school and school processes. And finally, student voice initiatives help build a range of different student competencies and skills – including planning complex projects and public speaking (Mitra, 2009). So, not only might the engagement of Mitra's contention with respect to this project contribute to the conversation about closing academic achievement disparities, but it also offers immediate, tangible academic rewards with respect to the academic achievement of the participating African-American students.

Gibbs (1998) contends that African-American males – as a group – are an endangered species as a result of school-contextualized institutionalized racism (e.g., the appointing of undereducated, ill-prepared teachers to teacherships in schools that largely enroll African-American students, the lack of culturally responsive instruction and school practices, low teacher expectations with respect to the engagement and achievement of African-American students, etc.) that persists in our society (on a macro-level) and in American schools (on a mezzo-level). Noguera (2001) echoes Gibbs' contention by asserting that American society has yet to make substantial progress with respect to these issues since the 1980s. The argument of both leading scholars, therefore, is that socio-political factors – systemic ones – are prominent factors that contribute to academic achievement disparities.

The research questions engaged and answered qualitatively in this project – through ethno-case study – and their foundational theoretical frameworks might offer

important contributions to thinking about educational policy for African-American males in at least three ways.

First, as Mitra (2009) points out, very little education reform and thinking about education reform – if any – engages the voices of students, but this very activity is paramount in closing the academic achievement disparities. Secondly, unlike the recent research on the academic achievement gap (e.g., Ladson-Billings), this project concedes that the cultural, economic, and at-large historical underpinnings of the disparities are systemic realities and, further, this project is an attempt to join the conversation about closing these disparities with the understanding that these underpinnings are likely permanent. The vast majority of education reform and thinking about education reform with respect to closing the disparities argue for complete reversals of the cultural, economic, and at-large historical underpinnings that created and spur the disparities. This project, however, represents a small-scale approach and takes aim at joining the conversation about closing the academic achievement disparities on a small-scale level. And finally, thirdly, given Mitra's contention that student voice and student voice and leadership initiatives are mutually beneficial for students and their schools, this project is intrinsically of the action-based research variety, one where the researcher is directly and deliberately involved in the academic achievement of students and their schools; youth participatory action research, therefore, is a peripheral theoretical informant to the project.

D.   **Definition of terms and contexts of terms**

Although African-American students – particularly males – achieve at levels below their Asian-American and White counterparts on traditional academic indices (e.g.,

standardized test scores, high school completion rates, grade point averages, and college entrance and completion rates) (Christie, 2002; Irvine, 1990; United States Department of Education, 2002; United States Department of Education, 2003; United States Department of Education, 2004; United States Department of Education, 2005; United States Department of Education, 2006; United States Department of Education, 2007; United States Department of Education, 2008; United States Department of Education, 2009; Viadero, 2000), these indices are arbitrary, deceptive, and work to the disadvantage of the former population.

The (SAT), for example, was developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) as a means of giving concerned parties the ability to predict the collegiate academic performance of the test-taker. Some studies, however, show that the test and similar tests rarely accurately predict a student's future academic performances. The test and similar tests, moreover, unwittingly favor middle and upper-class students, who have financial and other material resources to prepare for these tests. Also, the test and similar tests have been shown to incorporate culturally biased questions, ones that ethnic/racial minorities and lower-income students might not have the cultural capital to engage (Fleming and Garcia, 1998; Supovitz and Brennan, 1997; White, 1979).

By such accounts, therefore, the SAT and similar tests are representative of academic indices used to distort the conversation about achievement gaps and are, therefore, problematic in their utility for cross-cultural comparisons among test-takers.

High school completion rates, similarly, are problematic. High numbers of students, for example, leave New York City's public schools annually: less than half of the city's high-schoolers earn a diploma on time (Einhorn, 2008). Gotbaum (2002)

shows that some of the said city's school officials actually encourage students to leave regular high school programs, despite their being of school-age and having the right to receive a Free, Appropriate, Public Education (i.e., FAPE). Gotbaum cites that more than 160,000 high school-age students were discharged during the 1997-1998, 1998-1999, and 2000-2001 academic school years in New York City. Cited anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these discharges were forced push-outs, whereas students were counseled out of school; they were encouraged to abandon school. Gotbaum argues that the push-out phenomenon greatly inflates drop-rate rates across the nation, particularly in large school districts that largely enroll African-American students (e.g., New York City Public Schools, Los Angeles Unified School District, and City of Chicago School District 299).

Gotbaum's study, therefore, shows the importance of interrogating popularly noted statistics that supposedly show an achievement gap with respect to the number of African-American students completing high school compared to their Asian-American and White peers. The study reveals that high school completion rates are also problematic in their utility for cross-cultural comparisons among students.

Several in-school factors (e.g., low teacher expectations with respect to the engagement and achievement of African-American students) negatively impact the academic engagement and achievement of this mass of students – particularly males (Haycock, 1998) – and this renders the usage of grade point average data debatable in conversations about an achievement gap.

And, similarly, the above-described biased-nature of the SAT and similar gate-keeping standardized tests render college entrance and completion rates similarly

debatable in pointing to an achievement gap (Fleming, 1998; Supovitz and Brennan, 2009; White, 1979).

So, traditionally used academic indices and their relevant data that supposedly show an achievement gap between African-American students and their peers from other ethnic/racial groups are problematic. Furthermore, the very wording "achievement gap" is problematic in that it does not speak to many of the cultural, economic, political, and at-large historical realities that created and spur the disparities. The language "achievement gap" is ahistorical and acontexual in nature.

For the purposes of this proposed project, therefore, I refer to the popularly named "achievement gap "as "achievement disparity(-ities), as to capture the reality that some of the prior-mentioned factors created the achievement disparities – save occasionally in the literature review whereas the language of the literature is employed.

Some scholars and policy makers, furthermore, use the term "achievement gap" to discuss educational achievement disparities among African-American students, while others utilize the terms *achievement debt* or *opportunity gap* to address the same phenomenon. These key words are used differently within this paper, as they bring forth different connotations. Descriptions and explanations of these key words and the singular phenomenon they describe are outlined in this paper.

II. LITERATURE REVIEWS

This literature review covers popular framings of the *underachievement* of African-American male students, theoretical orientations used to explain said *underachievement*, and new and emerging, and noted scholarly directions for addressing said *underachievement* – including resiliency and other in-school and out-of-school factors.

A. Major tenets, strengths, and limitations of the theoretical frameworks focused on the (under)achievement of African-American male students

The achievement gap refers to observed disparities in academic performance between groups of students on traditional academic indices; it is generally used to describe the performance gaps between African-American students, who occupy the lower-end of the performance scale, and their White peers at the higher-end of the scale. The gap is apparent on a number of indices, particularly on standardized tests, with respect to high school graduation and college completion rates, and even in course-taking patterns of these two masses of students.

For example, while National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) through NCES results indicate that – over time – African-American students have made tremendous strides in narrowing the gap, that progress seems to have flat-lined since the mid 1980s. In 2003, for example, while 39 percent of White students scored at the proficient level or higher on the fourth grade reading portion of the NAEP, only 12 percent of African-American students reached this plateau. Similarly, while approximately 42 percent of White fourth grade students scored at the proficient level or above on the mathematics portion of the exam, only 10 percent of African-American

students hit this mark (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The gap with respect to performance on standardized tests is apparent.

This gap, moreover, is also clear with respect to high school graduation and college completion rates. According to Greene (2003), while 72 percent of White students enrolled in the ninth grade in 2001 graduated from high school on-schedule, barely half of their African-American peers reached the same level of success. Comparably, according to the National Black Caucus of State Legislators (2001), while 30 of every 100 White kindergartners go on to graduate from college, only 16 of every 100 African-American kindergarteners later earn a bachelor's degree; the majority of the latter graduates are female.

Disparities also exist in students' course-taking patterns. Data from the U.S. Department of Education (2004) indicate that approximately 62 percent of 1998 African-American, Hispanic, and White high school graduates were enrolled in an Algebra 1 course in high school. But, the high percentage did not hold with respect to upper-level math courses. While 64 percent of White students who graduated in 1998 took Algebra 2 at some point in their high school career, only 55 percent of African-American students enrolled in the course.

The cited disparities capture the typical framing of the achievement gap. And this framing definitely has its strengths, particularly its highlighting the real disparities in achievement that exist with respect to the performances of African-American students and their White peers; this framing essentially highlights and points to achievement issues that warrant address.

But this framing of the disparities in performances between African-Americans and their White peers – the achievement gap – also has several limitations, most notably its ahistorical, acontextual nature. In other words, this framing of the noted academic achievement disparities does not speak to the cultural, economic, political, and at-large historical realities that created and spur the disparities. It is a deficit-oriented framework, whereas the onus is on the *underachieving* population to catch-up to their more privileged peers without consideration of that which favors the privileged group.

In her 2006 American Educational Research Association (AERA) presidential address, Ladson-Billings argues that the usual framing of the achievement gap unfairly characterizes African-American students as defective and lacking and admonishes and scolds them about catching up. In this same address, Ladson-Billings first proposes framing the academic performance disparities as an education debt.

The achievement gap – as previously framed – Ladson-Billings asserts, is a direct consequence of the education debt.

Ladson-Billings' thesis, which is supported by the research (e.g., Anderson 1989; Bowles and Ginitis, 1976; Fultz, 1995; Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, and Williamson 2002, Tyack 2004); , is that differences in the educational outcomes between African-Americans – especially males – and their White peers are related to the historical denial of vital resources to the former population – cultural, economic, and intellectual capital – through institutionalized slavery, the subsequent Jim Crow laws, and presently through more subtle forms of school-contextualized institutionalized racism. The education debt, she furthers, created and continues to grow the achievement disparities.

For example, Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that scholars in the history of education (Anderson, 1989; Fultz, 1995; Tyack, 2004) have documented historical educational inequalities and inequities in the United States. Those inequalities and inequities, she furthers, were formed around race, class, and gender. In the case of African-Americans, for example, education was initially forbidden during slavery. Even after emancipation, the freedmen's schools' purpose was the maintenance of a servant class and the curricular and overall school structures reflected this reality. And even during the Jim Crow period, African-Americans attended schools where they received cast-off textbooks and materials from White schools. Given these historical realities, Ladson-Billings argues, a gap in the achievement between African-Americans and their White peers should be expected.

In her spelling out of the achievement debt, Ladson-Billings (2006) also points to the relationship between expenditures per student and student achievement. The research indicates that the more the per pupil expenditure in a particular school district, the higher the educational outcomes (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2002). Chicago Public Schools, Ladson-Billings cites, spends about $8,482 annually per student, while nearby Highland Park spends over $17,000 per pupil. Chicago Public Schools serves a student population that is approximately 87 percent African-American and Hispanic, while Highland Park has a 90 percent White population. She continues, such troubling numbers are the case with respect to the spending of monies between city and suburban districts (i.e., African-American and White ones, respectively) across the nation. Why, then, she finals, should one not expect achievement disparities – hence the achivement disparities.

In her analysis Ladson-Billings also speaks to a cultural debt, whereas African-American students are not equipped with the cultural capital to navigate through American schools and argues that this, too, has a positive impact on academic achievement disparities.

Ladson-Billings' aforesaid argument is strong and convincing in that it engages the factual realities (i.e., historical, economic, and cultural, respectively) that created and spur the achievement disparities, however, it is incredibly vast in scope in that it calls for the total upturning of the aforementioned systemic issues that have created and continue to fuel the disparities (Bowles and Ginitis, 1976).

And finally, the opportunity gap is another framing of the disparities in achievement between African-American students and their White peers. The opportunity gap, much like the Ladson-Billings' framing, speaks to the long history of exclusion, low expectations, and at-large racism with respect to the achievement of African-American students. This framing generally addresses the reality that African-American students generally have less access – or opportunity to access – tangibles that spur high academic achievement (e.g., high-performing schools and high-quality teachers there within).

The University of California at Los Angeles' (UCLA) Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) (2009), for example, shows that nearly 40 percent of African-American students in California attend overcrowded high schools – more than twice the proportion of White students attending such schools. Similarly, the Institute shows that, on average, the 107 high schools that enroll half of the state's African-American students have smaller proportions of fully qualified teachers than high schools

where most students are White. These numbers, the researchers indicate, are generally representative of national trends.

Knaus (2007) supports the institute's findings in asserting that not only do the vast majority of African-American students attend low-performing schools that focus more on discipline than academics, but even the African-American students enrolled in high-performing schools have limited access to college preparatory curricula and are tracked into remedial courses that teach the basics and do little to prepare students for the workforce and/or college.

Much like Ladson-Billings' framing, the opportunity gap is strong and convincing in that it engages and reflects realities (e.g., cultural, economic, historical, etc.) that created and spur achievement disparities, however, it is incredibly vast in scope and, therefore, perhaps limiting in that it calls for the total upturning of the aforementioned systemic issues that have created and continue to fuel the disparities (Bowles and Ginitis, 1976).

And, much like the typical framing of the achievement gap, the opportunity gap framing is also strong in that it highlights that real disparities in achievement and access to achievement that exist with respect to the performances of African-American students and their White peers; it essentially highlights and points to issues that need to be addressed.

B.   Major theoretical orientations often used to explain disparities in the educational achievement of African-American male students

Because one of the constant findings in educational research is the *underachievement* of African-Americans – particularly males – at all levels of the

educational ladder (i.e., the supposed elementary, secondary, and postsecondary

achievement gaps), there is, no doubt, a contemporary sense of urgency to identify

reasons for the disparities. A myriad of reasons and theoretical orientations are used to

explain this steady trend; they generally fall into three categories: (1) in-school factors

(i.e., the appointing of undereducated, ill-prepared teachers to teacherships in schools that

largely enroll African-American students (Carter, 2000; Case and Katz, 1991; Emerick,

Hirsch, and Berry, 2004; Ferguson, 1990; Haycock, 1998; Jordan, Mendro, and

Weerasinghe, 1997; Kober, 2001; Missouri K-16 Task Force on Achievement Gap

Elimination, 2002; National Black Caucus of State Legislators, 2001; Stayhorn, 2008;

Stronge, 2002; Tucker and Stronge, 2005; Viadero and Johnston, 2000), the lack of

culturally responsive instruction and school practices (Au, 2006; Dutro et al, 2008;

Howard, 2001; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Lipman,

1997; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest, 2003; Risko and Walker-Dalhouse,

2007; White, 2009; Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 1995), low teacher expectations with

respect to the engagement and achievement of this mass of students (Cohen et al, 2006;

Evan, 2005; Gibbs, 1998; Kober, 2001; Kunjufu, 2001; Stayhorn, 2008; Varlas, 2005),

the supposed natural opposition of African-American students to American ideals,

including education (Ogbu, 1998), the tracking of this group into low-ability, low-

functioning classes and at-large curricula (Oakes and Wells, 1998), and the underfunding

and underresourcing of schools that largely enroll African-American students)

(Grissemer, Flanagan, Kawata, and Williams, 2000)), (2) socio-economic factors (i.e.,

poverty (Toldson, 2008; United States Department of Education, 2006; White, 2009),

poor nutrition (Toldson, 2008), and negative self-esteem and identity (Barton, 2004;

Ogbu, 1998)), and (3) parental factors (i.e., undereducated parents and uninvolved parents (Mandara, 2006; Martinez, 2004; Toldson et al., 2006; White, 2009)).

Haycock (1998) examines the impact of teacher effectiveness on the learning of different types of students – low to high achievers – and illustrates the importance of teacher quality. The study groups teachers into quintiles based on their effectiveness in producing student achievement gains and the results indicate that the least effective teachers produced gains of about 14 percentile points on state standardized tests during the school year. The most effective teachers, however, posted gains among low-achieving students that soared near 53 percentile points. This study illuminates the reality that teacher quality is paramount in raising student achievement; students, therefore, clearly need high quality instructors (Emerick, Hirsch, & Berry, 2004; Kober, 2001).

The research on this topic, moreoever, indicates at least three major links between the relationship between teacher quality and student achievement. First, teacher quality is a fairly accurate indicator of a student's performance in school (Carter, 2000). Second, teachers make long-lasting imprints and influences on student achievement and these imprints and influences can last for at least three years (Stronge, 2002; Tucker & Stronge, 2005, Viadero & Johnston, 2000). And finally, teacher quality has a sizeable effect on how students fare and perform in school (National Black Caucus of State Legislators, 2001).

Despite these critical findings, not all students are privileged with high-quality teachers. In fact, Haycock (1998) finds that students of color, regardless of their socioeconomic status, are more likely to be taught by teachers with lower test scores on

credentialing examinations and less academic preparation than Asian and White students. Similarly, African-American males are likely to attend high schools that employ a greater proportion of teachers who hold provisional licenses, the vast majority of whom teach outside of their content specialty. Past research (Jordan, Mendro, & Weerasinghe, 1997) also notes strong evidence of bias in the assignment of students to teachers of different levels of effectiveness; African-American males, the study holds, are nearly twice as likely to be assigned to the most ineffective teachers. Most broadly, some of the most vulnerable students are often left to be taught by the least experienced teaching professionals (Case and Katz, 1991; Stayhorn, 2008) and this major orientation is often tapped as explaining the differentiated levels of achievement between African-American males and their non-ethnic counterparts.

Focusing on a study from Texas, Ferguson (1990) explores reasons as to why African-American and Hispanic-American students – particularly males – tend to have lower scores than do White students on standardized mathematics and reading tests. Results of the Texas Examination of Current Administrators and Teachers (TECAT) for approximately 900 school districts show that where the percentage of African-American and Hispanic-American children is higher, the average score on the TECAT is generally lower for African-American, Hispanic-American, and White teachers. In fact, Ferguson continues, the teachers in Texas who instruct children of color tend to have weaker language skills and, therefore, are partial producers of the achievement disparities.

In 2001, the state of Missouri launched the K-12 Task Force on the Achievement Gap, which holds that improving teaching quality is the single most important factor in eliminating the achievement disparities between Missouri's African-American K-12

students and their non-minority peers (Missouri K-16 Task Force on Achievement Gap Elimination, 2002). The report highlights the significance of teacher quality on student achievement and emphasizes that the uneven distribution of high-quality teachers throughout the state of Missouri is a primary contributor to the achievement disparities.

Both the Ferguson (1990) and Report of the Missouri K-12 Task Force (2002) are representative of a large body of literature that points to the ill-preparedness and undereducation of teachers as primary contributors to the achievement disparities.

Irvine (1990) argues that "Black students may not maintain constant eye contact with teachers as do White students. Often black children are accused of not paying attention when they are" (p. 30). Oft-times, therefore, these same African-American students in this cultural conflict are chastised by the teacher – possibly punished – for presumably being inattentive and possibly insolent. Irvine's point, however, is that many African-American parents teach their children that looking an authority figure in the eye *is* actually insolent. Thus, in such a situation, the African-American student's attempt to be respectful is interpreted as the opposite, thus fostering a sense of apathy with respect to education among the victimized students. Lipman (1995) offers a similar example of cultural misinterpretations. She cites an example of an African-American student who is suspended for 10 days – a fairly lengthy amount of time out of the classroom – for wearing his overall straps unsnapped; which, Lipman cites, is a fairly common fashion style within African-American communities. This student's White peers, however, wore jeans with large holes cut out in the thighs – a common White style – and yet went undisciplined. Both the Irvine and Lipman anecdotes illustrate that cultural

misinterpretation is common place in K-12 settings and, accordingly, directly impact the underachievement of the victimized students.

In addition to the appointing of undereducated, ill-prepared teachers to teacherships in schools that largely enroll African-American males, the lack of culturally responsive instruction and school practices (e.g., the Irvine and Lipman anecdotes) are also used to explain the underachievement of African-American males in K-12 settings. Culturally responsive instruction and school practices speak to classroom and school-site practices that draw meaningfully on the culture, languages, and experiences that students bring to the classroom and at-large school in order to increase academic engagement and achievement for students of color (Au, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

The research on this topic indicates some important links between culturally responsive instruction and school practices and achievement among African-American students. First, the cultural mismatch between teachers and students, or the propensity of teachers to misunderstand the behavior of African-American males, positively impacts the process of overidentification for special education services and the subsequent underachievement of students (Howard, 2001; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest, 2003). Second, learning styles of particular groups of students require pedagogies that make intentional use of these students' learning styles (Dutro et al., 2008). And finally, school culture in K-12 settings is generally centered around instruction and curriculum-related materials that may not be aligned with Afrocentric cultural elements (White, 2009).

Despite these critical findings, and others, the vast majority of African-American students are still not subject to culturally responsive instruction and school practices. In fact, the opposite generally transpires. For example, Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest (2003) note in their influential work on cultural misinterpretations between students and teachers that stylized moment is a core feature of African-American culture. And one such stylized movement is a certain walking style called a "stroll." Neal and colleagues sought to determine if the stroll walking style of African-American males influence teacher perceptions of the students' academic capabilities, their propensity for aggression, and their potential need for special education services. The results indicate that teachers perceive students who walk in a stroll manner as "lower in achievement, higher in aggression, and more likely to need special education services" (Neal, et al., 2003, pg. 49). In the same respect, White (2009) argues that the home culture of many African-American males consists of a firm parental-controlled environment, whereas African-American parents tend to be more demanding and less agreeable to their child's demands directly conflicts with the disposition of teachers' more permissive, nonassertive style. This conflict, White furthers, results in the students viewing the teacher as lacking and/or undeserving of authority. And finally, Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) argue that because inciting motivation is a key step in the teaching process and that motivation is inseparable from culture, the utilization of culturally responsive instruction and school practice is paramount to engaging minority students, particularly African-Americans males.

Culturally responsive instruction and school practices have a prominent role in the conversation about the contributors of the achievement disparities. In a 2007 article, for

example, Risko and Walker-Dalhouse argue that students whose language, ethnicity, and race are not represented in a school's dominant culture experience varying degrees of success in reading achievement, thus resulting in the persistent gaps in reaching achievement. They further, culturally responsive instruction and school practices can help to close this reading gap, as it capitalizes on the knowledge and literacy strategies students learn in their home and communities, the ways that students reason about and make sense of the world, and the language and communicative patterns of students. Risko and Walker-Dalhouse are not only respected scholars in the field of discrepancies with respect to achievement in reading, but they have been tapped by school districts across the county to transform individual schools into culturally sensitive ones that tap into the culture of their students. The Risko and Walker-Dalhouse anecdote illustrates the education community's attentiveness to the role of culturally responsive instruction and school practices with respect to the achievement disparities.

Evidence exists in the literature to support the notion that teacher expectations and perceptions also directly impact academic achievement disparities (Evan, 2005; Kober, 2001; Varlas, 2005). In schools that grow all of their students academically, teachers have consistently high expectations for all students; the teachers presume that all students can and will learn. But, in schools and school districts where African-American students – particularly males – are left behind, teachers tend to suppose that this population of students is somehow deficient and/or incapable of learning.

The literature describes this phenomenon as stereotype threat, which impacts the way teachers view students and students view themselves. The theory holds that teachers' low expectations for minority students – particularly African-American males –

are based on their perception of the students' current performance rather than the students' potential to perform (Kober, 2001). Further, the theory holds that teachers, in their thinking that African-American males cannot perform on grade level, minimize their expectations of this population of students and the students, in turn, live down to these expectations.

Additionally, the research puts forth the fear of African-American males in confirming stereotype threat has a direct and negative impact on their academic engagement and achievement. Stereotype threat is a fear that a person's own behavior may confirm a negative stereotype about a specific group (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, and Master, 2006). African-American male youth, for example, are often described as dysfunctional, lazy, uneducable, or dangerous and the stress of these students with respect to the possibility of them living up to these disparaging expectations hampers their academic achievement and engagement (Kunjufu, 2001; Gibbs, 1998; Stayhorn, 2008). Cohen et al. (2006), for example, argue that African-American students – on average – experience higher levels of stress in school because they are cognizant that if they happen to do poorly it will confirm the disparaging, negative stereotypes about the intellectual ability of African-Americans. Cohen et al., further, that another playout of stereotype threat is that some students would rather be seen as lazy because they did not complete or did not thoroughly complete an assignment as opposed to being pegged as unsmart for having completed an assignment – effort embedded – and that assignment be of poor academic quality.

Ogbu (1998), in seeking to explain racial stratification with respect to academic achievement in the United States, argues that African-Americans simply choose not to

perform well in school. This cultural opposition theory continues to be a major discussion point with respect to the academic engagement and achievement of African-Americans. The theory holds two primary principles. First, because African-Americans inhabit the bottom rungs of a castelike society, they are expected to work as hard as their White peers (i.e., the favored group) for fewer rewards. As a subsequent result of this paradox, African-Americans – Ogbu furthers – choose not to work as hard as Whites in an effort to quell the dissonance about expending efforts for lacking rewards. The theory also holds that, secondly, African-Americans purposefully underachieve in academic settings as to not "act White," as Ogbu contends that African-Americans equate academic achievement and success with acting white (Ogbu, 1998).

Research also points to the casual relationship between the tracking of African-American males to low-ability, remedial, and oft-times special education classes and at-large curricula and the academic achievement disparities. Oakes and Wells (1998) is representative of the research on this topic; he argues that African-American male students are disproportionately represented in low-ability classes, overrepresented in special, vocational, and general education programs, underrepresented in gifted and talented academic programs, and underrepresented in upper-level mathematics, science, and computer classes. He further argues that these statistical narratives have directly augmented the academic achievement disparities between African-Americans, particularly males, and their White counterparts.

Funding and school resources, the literature also points out, directly impacts achievement. Grissemer, Flanagan, Kawata, and Williams (2002) argue that oft-times the differences in achievement between states and even between school districts in an

individual state are explained by per-pupil expenditures (i.e., funding). In their comparative study, the states with lower per-pupil expenditures had lower achievement results, even though the states share demographic characteristics. They further, African-American and Hispanic students are consistently overrepresented in school districts that lack adequate, proper funding for education.

The aforementioned points speak to the major school-based theoretical orientations that are most often used to explain the disparities in the educational achievement of African-American males. A number of socio-economic and parental factors are also pegged as reasons for the achievement disparities.

With respect to socio-economics, poor nutrition, poverty, and negative self esteem and identity are popular explanations for the achievement disparities. Poverty is a socio-economic factor that is consistently associated with achievement. According to the United States Department of Education (2006), African-Americans have much higher poverty rates compared to other ethnic and racial groups; in 2005, for example, some 30 percent of African-American children under the age of 18 were living in poverty, compared to just 10 percent of White children. According to White (2009), by the time a student enters kindergarten and first grade, math and reading achievement gaps between poor students and their more affluent counterparts are apparent. Those students in poverty, who are largely brown and black kids, are said to have weaker language skills as they enter formal schooling due to a lack of proper exposure to language development and analytic reasoning in their home.

More poignantly illustrating the link between poverty and academic achievement, a Toldson 2008 study – through support from the Congressional Black Caucus

Foundation – found that students whose families reported an annual income of less than $20,000 are twice as likely to report a "D" or less in school, as those from families making $50,000 or more a year. Additionally, Toldson (2008) shows that African-American youth who acknowledged not attending school during the 2007-2008 school year were also overrepresented among those from families making less than $20,000 year.

The same study by Toldson also indicates a link between nutrition and academic achievement. The results indicate that African-American students with low-academic achievement are more likely to eat a lot of junk food (e.g., cakes, candies, and potato chips) frequently and less likely to eat healthy food (e.g., fruits and vegetables). The study also puts forth that raw vegetables rich in enzymes, minerals, and vitamins could improve brain functioning and reduce psychosomatic stressors (Toldson, 2008).

And finally, with respect to in-school factors that fuel achievement disparities, the research indicates that students' attitudes definitely impacts achievement. Ogbu (1998), for example, argues for oppositional bias culture and contends that minority students oft-times equate academic achievement and success with acting white. And, since students who are perceived as acting white (i.e., achieving at a high level in school) are excluded from social interactions or ridiculed by their peers, many African-American youths – particularly males – oppose academic achievement and instead opt for conformity to traditional stereotypes of African-American male adolescents. Another element that influences students' attitudes about academic achievement is school safety. Barton (2004) argues that if an African-American male student attends a school that he feels is

unsafe and dangerous, he is less likely to focus on academic achievement and more likely to focus on his own safety and ways to protect himself.

Parental factors are the third of the triad of orientations that are thought to directly impact the academic achievement disparities. Toldson, et al. (2008) found that parent-child interactions are the most telling predictor of African-American student success (2006). Mandara (2006) furthers in his contention that when African-American parents are actively involved in their sons' academic efforts (e.g., monitoring the completion of homework, limiting nonproductive activities, and creating a constant and positive stream of communication with his teachers and school officials), they increase the odds of their sons succeeding in school. However, the research shows that parental involvement is often hindered by a number of variables; chiefly, mistrust between parents and school personnel, parents' work schedules, lacking transportation on the parents part to and from school events (White, 2009). Further, Martinez (2004) argues that parents – particularly parents of African-Americans and ethnic and racial minorities at-large – may not know how to work with their children and involve themselves in their children's education.

These in-school, socio-economic, and parental factors are among the most popular explanations for the disparities in the educational achievement of African-American males. The chart that follows outlines the major strengths, limitations, policy implications, and effects of interpretation of the aforementioned orientations.

TABLE VI
STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS, POLICY IMPLICATIONS, AND
INTERPRETATIONS OF THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS FUNCTIONED TO
EXPLAIN ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Theoretical orientations	Strengths	Limitations	Policy implications	Effect of theoretical orientation on interpretation of achievement gap
Undereducated and ill-prepared teachers	Substantial research indicates that this is likely a factor with respect to the existence of the academic achievement disparities	Significant blame, perhaps somewhat unwarranted, placed on schools – particularly teachers	The improvement of teacher education programs in preparing teachers and school leaders for urban school teaching and leading	The disparities are framed as school-based problems and the students are victims
Culturally responsive instruction and school practices	Substantial research indicates that this is likely a factor with respect to the existence of the academic achievement disparities	Significant blame, perhaps somewhat unwarranted, placed on schools – particularly teachers	The improvement of teacher education programs in preparing teachers and school leaders for urban school teaching and leading	The disparities are framed as a school-based problems and the students are victims
Low-Teacher Expectations	Substantial research indicates that this is likely a factor with respect to the existence of the academic achievement disparities	Significant blame, perhaps somewhat unwarranted, placed on schools – particularly teachers	The improvement of teacher education programs in preparing teachers and school leaders for urban school teaching and leading	The disparities are framed as a school-based problems and the students are victims

Theoretical orientations	Strengths	Limitations	Policy implications	Effect of theoretical orientation on interpretation of achievement gap
Cultural Opposition Theory	Significant onus is placed on students and families, thus leaving the oft-blamed school as minimally involved in such underachievement	Deficit-orientated model that blames the victim for his victimhood	Few educational policy implications, as the issue exists within the mentality of students and families	Students and families are the cause of their on failure
Tracking of Students into Low-Ability Classes	Substantial research indicates that this is likely a factor with respect to the existence of the academic achievement disparities	Significant blame, perhaps somewhat unwarranted, placed on schools – particularly teachers	Policy oversight with respect to students enrolled in specialized curricula and programs	The disparities are framed as a school-based problems and the students are victims
Underfunding and Under-resourcing of Schools	Substantial research indicates that this is likely a factor with respect to the existence of the academic achievement disparities	Significant blame, perhaps somewhat unwarranted, placed on schools, school districts, and state boards of education	Policy oversight with respect to funding schemes of schools	The disparities are framed as a school-based problems and the students are victims
Poor Nutrition	Substantial research indicates that this is likely a factor with respect to the existence of the academic achievement disparities	Too tangential to be fully plausible	School-based nutrition program in poor communities and schools	The underachievement of students exists outside of the student and school

Theoretical orientations	Strengths	Limitations	Policy implications	Effect of theoretical orientation on interpretation of achievement gap
Poverty	Substantial research indicates that this is likely a factor with respect to the existence of the academic achievement disparities	The orientation offers little room to explore educational policy that might prove effective in narrowing the disparities	The achievement disparities are really issues of poverty, education policy, therefore, is moved to irrelevancy	The underachievement of students exists outside of the student and school
Negative Self-Esteem and Self-Image	Some research indicates that this is likely a factor with respect to the existence of the academic achievement disparities	Too tangential to be fully plausible	Insertion of psychological-based interventions in underperforming schools	Students and their families are the cause of their on failure
Parental Factors	Mountains of research do indicate links between parental involvement and student academic success	Significant blame, perhaps somewhat unwarranted, placed on parents	Insertion of parent partnerships programs in underperforming schools	Students and their families are the cause of their on failure

C.   New and emerging scholarly directions for addressing the educational achievement of African-American male students

According to Perry, Stelle, and Hilliard (2003), the literature about African-American male student achievement and its relationship to the academic achievement disparities is vast – as is the literature about directions for addressing the educational achievement of African-American males in 9-12 settings. The avenues, Perry et al.

(2003) and other scholars, show, generally fall under five umbrellas: (1) generic school-based education reforms (Barth, Haycock, Jackson, Mora, Ruiz, Robinson, and Wilkins, 1999; Carter, 2000; Cawelti, 2000; Delpit, 1996; Feldman, Tung, and Ouimette, 2003; Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Howard, 2001; Hurley, Boykin, Allen, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Lipman, 1995; Mathis, 2005; Watkins, 2002; Wilson-Jones and Caston, 2004), (2) school-based responses to the historical and systematic effects of racism (Cooper and Jordan, 2005; Noguera, 2001; Ogbu, 1998), (3) improved self-esteem and self-image among students (Cohen et al, 2006; Davis, 2005; Davis, 2009; McBride 2005), (4) strengthened school leadership positions (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Carter, 2000; Heck, Larsen, and Marcoulides, 1990; Legler, 2004; McGee, 2004), and (5) strengthened teacherships (Kober, 2001; Laitsch, 2003; Rothman, 2002; Symonds, 2004; Toldson, 2008). The literature relative to high-achieving African-American students, therefore, points out that such students are exposed to the following benefits.

With respect to generic school-based education reforms, employing culturally responsive instruction and school practices, adding instructional time, and engaging cooperative learning techniques are among the most popular.

According to White (2009), because African-American students comprise 17 percent of the nation's public school enrollment and African-American teachers represent some six percent of the U.S. teaching force, it is very unlikely that many African-American students will come into contact with many African-American teachers who share an understanding of their cultural norms and values. As a result, White continues, the potential for cultural incongruence and cultural mismatch is high. Howard (2001) shows three major culturally responsive instruction modules used that prove effective in

educating "other people's children" – particularly, the African-American male: holistic, culturally inclusive, and skill-building-centric. In general, his study concludes that given the polarizing ethnic/racial demographics between students and teachers, White teachers should embrace these three teaching characteristics and, in general, offer culturally responsive instruction. This, he argues, will absolutely make a mark in closing the academic achievement disparities. Howard's thesis is well-supported in the literature; a number of scholars argue that offering culturally responsive instruction is a plausible means of closing the academic achievement disparities (Delpit, 1996; Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Lipman, 1995).

When schools, particularly low-performing schools where African-American males comprise a bulk of the student population, offering additional instructional time researchers find improves student achievement (Carter, 2000; Mathis, 2005). A report, for example, on high-performing, high-poverty schools indicates that these schools consistently find ways to provide additional instructional time for their students – or time on task – especially in reading and mathematics (Barth, Haycock, Jackson, Mora, Ruiz, Robinson, and Wilkins, 1999; Carter, 2000; Cawelti, 2000; Feldman, Tung, & Ouimette, 2003). Given these findings, many scholars now argue that the lengthening of the school day is a valid and effective in-school means of closing academic achievement disparities.

And finally, with respect to in-school possibilities, Hurley, Boykin & Allen (2005) show that African-American culture is angled towards "a communal orientation…marked by the priority of social bonds, awareness of connectedness among people, and a sense of mutual responsibility." Further, because many of these characteristics are germane to cooperative learning, many researchers argue that

cooperative learning has a place in improving the academic achievement of African-American males and in closing the academic achievement disparities. Watkins (2002), for example, investigated the learning styles of young African-American children and determined that the said population tends to gravitate towards a group-learning environment because they are more likely to ask peers than teachers for academic assistance and such a disposition is in line with the communal nature of their culture-inspired home responsibilities. Similarly, cooperative learning among African-American male students is the focus of a Wilson-Jones & Caston (2004) study. The goal of the study was to investigate how cooperative learning promotes the academic achievement of African-American males in grades three through six in a rural Mississippi school. The results of the study indicate that schools might experience dramatic improvement of academic achievement, behavior and attendance, self-confidence, and school satisfaction as a result of the engagement of cooperative learning strategies.

Cooper and Jordan (2005) locate African-American male student achievement within the context of the historical and systematic effects of racism; they show, further, how institutionalized racism plays a large role in growing and sustaining academic achievement disparities. For example, the researchers show that the historical and systematic effects of racism are directly linked to the rampant unemployment, poverty, and inadequate access to health care rates of African-American males and that the African-American male's situation within these social ills automatically disenfranchises him within the context of both school and society. Perhaps Ogbu (1998) best contextualizes these historical inequities; he suggests that the treatment of minorities in

wider society is apparently reflected in their treatment re: education in various school spaces.

In agreement, Noguera (2001) argues that African-American males are marginalized and victimized by schooling experiences within capitalist educational structures and that their marginalization and victimization manifest themselves in the behavior and underachievement patterns of this population.

Cooper and Jordan (2003) and Noguera (2001), in turn, argue that in engaging and addressing the aforementioned social and historical context of school experiences for African-American males, teachers must: (1) play a vital role in motivating this cohort of students and emphasize the importance of schooling, (2) impart on these students that expectations for their achievement are high and that failure is not an option, and (3) provide skills to help African-American males become independent, critical thinkers. A plethora of scholars argue Cooper and Jordan and Noguera's point as a means of addressing the academic achievement disparities between African-American males and their White peers.

Davis (2005), on a different note, argues that homophobia and misogyny have a place in the conversation about the achievement of African-American males. Homophobia and misogyny, Davis asserts, often go unchallenged within the context of schooling. He argues that African-American male students often disengage from school-related activities, including high performance, because they have to contend with the possibility of being labeled "feminine," which threatens their sense of black masculinity. Davis comments:

> Understanding the role of peers, in addition to teacher and families, the social construction of masculinity for Black boys in early education would constitute a

> major research effort in addressing issues of disengagement and achievement. Studying Black boys' constructions of masculinity and framing how they link these constructions to achievement motivation and performance will be extremely important in unpacking the achievement gap problem. (p. 143)

Davis furthers, bravado and hypermasculinity are learned traits for African-American males that cause these students to resist or reject academic success. He counters, therefore, that problematizing and rejecting these framings of gender performance are critical in closing the academic achievement disparities. Many scholars, including leading performance studies Dwight McBride (2005), agree with Davis in that this is critical in closing the academic achievement disparities.

The literature about ways to close the academic achievement disparities between African-Americans and their Asian and White counterparts includes a study by Cohen et al (2006). Cohen et al. show how affirmations can be used to address the stereotype threat concept and conversely improve the self-esteem and self-image of African-American boys and, consequently, close the achievement gulf. The study involves seventh grade students being placed in experimental and control groups, which include the same number of African-American and White students in both groups. Students in the experimental group are asked to choose one value that is important to them and write a paragraph detailing why they cherish this value. The control group, conversely, focuses on values held by others. None of the students are aware that the assignment involves issues related to race and stereotype, but view the assignment as a normal classroom activity. This self-affirmation exercise, Cohen et al. contends, allows students to reaffirm their belief and their own personal identity and because the exercise does not focus on testing and the stress connected with negative stereotype threat, African-American students in the experimental group improve dramatically over the course of the year with

respect to academic achievement. Such self-affirmation exercises, of course, are provided to the experimental group students throughout the course of the school year.

Cohen et al. indicate that as a result of this psychological intervention, African-American students in the experimental group have higher cumulative grades compared to those in the control group. This study is significant in that is representative of a large body of literature that points to the potential benefits of psychological interventions in closing academic achievement disparities. Psychological interventions (i.e., improving self-esteem and dealing with stereotype threat with respect to African-American males), Cohen et al. argue, have bearing on the knowledge acquisition and academic performance of this population.

The Heritage Foundation also has a voice in the conversation about African-American male achievement. While many of the intents and purposes of the Foundation are problematic, it did examine 21 high-poverty, high-performing schools and smartly found that one of the primary traits shared by the schools is that they were all lead by strong principals who, according to Carter (2000) and Bryk and Schneider (2002), hold their students and teachers to the highest of standards.

Leadership theory – the idea that school leadership is the most important factor in improving student achievement – has also emerged as a plausible way of increasing academic achievement and closing achievement disparities (Legler, 2004; McGee, 2004). Heck, Larsen, and Marcoulides (1990), for example, tested a theoretical causal model concerning how elementary and secondary school principals can influence school student achievement through the frequency of implementation of certain leadership behaviors. And, per their study, after controlling from contextual variables, found that three

important variables related to administrative leadership great affect student achievement (i.e., school governance, instructional organization, and school climate). Many school districts are now engaging this body of literature and hire school leaders from graduate programs that emphasize the capacities-building of to-be school leaders.

And finally, teachers and what they do in the classroom space, is well-regarded in the literature as a critical orientation in closing academic achievement disparities. Because many African-American males are taught by the least experienced and least qualified teachers, efforts are needed to place the most qualified personnel in these schools. Toldson (2008), a leading scholar in education policy aimed at closing the achievement disparities, calls for school districts to adopt formal policy that places the most qualified teachers in the schools with the most need. He also argues that this policy should also outline the support structures that will be in place to support these teachers. Toldson's wants are well-documented in the literature on using the classroom space and teachers occupation of that space as a means of closing the achievement disparities (Kober, 2001; Laitsch, 2003; Rothman, 2002; & Symonds, 2004).

The flagbearers of each of these orientations clearly hope that their particular orientation is engaged with respect to educational policy aimed at closing the academic achievement disparities between African-American males and their counterparts.

D. **Resiliency and African-American academic achievement: Varying definitions**

While considerable research exists with respect to a purported academic achievement gap and its implied sense of hopelessness with respect to the academic engagement and achievement of African-American males (Christie, 2002; Irvine, 1990; United States Department of Education, 2002; United States Department of Education,

2003; United States Department of Education, 2004; United States Department of Education, 2005; United States Department of Education, 2006; United States Department of Education, 2007; United States Department of Education, 2008; United States Department of Education, 2009; Viadero, 2000), little research engages the other side of the coin – the resiliency and at-large experiences of high-achieving African-American males from disadvantaged backgrounds (Salley, 2005).

But since the 1980s, according to Lee (2009), many scholars have focused their studies on the strengths of at-risk youths – particularly with respect to African-American male academic achievement – in lieu of their deficiencies (McMillian and Reed, 1994; Patterson, 2001; Walsh, 1998).

Lee (2009) also comments on a couple of underlying points with respect to the study of resiliency and African-American academic achievement: (1) an important rationale for studying resiliency rests on the fundamental assumption that understanding how individuals overcome adversities and obstacles can reveal adaptation processes that can be utilized to inform intervention programs and school reform efforts for other at-risk students; and (2) the focusing on resiliency allows for the study of positive achievement outcomes and narratives – in lieu of deficit-modeled, pathological-crusted research (Benard, 1991; Rutter, 1979; Werner and Smith, 1989). Most succinctly, resiliency theory – its study and applications – can help the education community better understand why some at-risk students perform better than others and it also – inherently – steers the metanarrative about African-American academic achievement in a more hopeful, positive direction.

Despite such focus on resiliency with respect to African-American males and their achievement, there still is no simple definition of the concept (Bellin and Kovacs, 2006).

Resiliency is defined differently in the literature on the topic. Per Grotberg (2003), resiliency is the human capacity to deal with, overcome, learn from, and be transformed by the adversity – school-based or otherwise – that one encounters. Patterson, Collins, and Abbott (2004) define the concept as the usage of energy productively to achieve school goals in the face of adverse conditions. Novick (1998) finds that self-efficacy and self-esteem are key elements that contribute to resiliency and, therefore, notes that resilient students view challenges and problems as obstacles to be overcome; Novick's definition seems to hinge on an amalgamation of self-efficacy characteristics. Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994) define resiliency as a heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities and obstacles brought on by early conditions, experiences, and traits. Lugg and Boyd (1993) define the concept as an ability of students to recognize factors that place them in jeopardy and an ability to adapt to and overcome these factors. Dass-Brailsford (2005) argues that the concept is derived primarily from humanistic psychology theory and is defined as the ability to maintain competence – school-based or otherwise – despite stressful life circumstances. And finally, probably because the concept is drawn from the psychology field, the most complete definition seems to come from this field. Lindsey and Nebbitt (2010) assert:

> …resiliency entails maintaining functional competence in the face of risk.
> Resiliency is broadly defined as the ability to achieve positive adaptations in the
> context of significant threats to development. Resiliency can be further
> characterized by the interaction of biological, psychological, and environmental

processes. Resilient African-American youth from highly stressed environments exhibit the following protective characteristics: (1) diverse, flexible social skills; (2) positive peer and adult interactions; (3) high cognitive skills; and (4) resourcefulness in new situations. Individual resiliency, however, in the African-American community should be viewed in the context of values that characterize the adaptive responses to the historical and social experiences of African-Americans in the U.S. Included among these values is the importance of: (1) religion and the church and (2) flexible roles and the extended family (p. 99).

While scholars do not necessarily agree on a common understanding of the concept, there is some unity with respect to common components of the concept (Lee, 2009); most agree that (1) resiliency emerges from the interaction between risks and protective factors (Kitano and Lewis, 2005; Patterson, 2001; Rutter, 2000) and (2) resiliency is a contextual phenomenon that is developed through complex interactions among individual characteristics, family characteristics and processes, and environmental and social conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kirby and Frasier, 1997).

E.   Resiliency and African-American male academic achievement: How does it look?

According to Lee (2009), while resiliency has been the focus of many studies in the context of drug addiction, mental illness, and poor parenting, few studies have focused on academic resiliency – particularly what academic resiliency looks like with respect to African-American male students and what nurtures it (Finn and Rock, 1997; Martin, 2002).

With respect to the appearance of academic resiliency, Martin and Marsh (2006) conducted a study on resiliency that involved over 400 high school students in grades 11 and 12 in two different high schools and sought to test the validity of a new resiliency instrument and to investigate the relationship between resiliency and behavioral outcomes

in schools. The study reveals that five factors and personal characteristics strongly relate to academic resiliency: (1) control, (2) low-anxiety, (3) planning, (4) persistence, and (5) self-efficacy. The study also shows that academic resiliency greatly influences three educational outcomes, which are: (1) enjoyment of schools, (2) high self-esteem, and (3) participation in school endeavors.

Gordon (1995) also studied the appearance of resiliency with respect to African-American students. Her study of 128 urban students examines the role of motivation and self-concept in aiding resilient African-American high school sophomores in obtaining academic competence. In the study, high school sophomores from an impoverished, disadvantaged background with a 2.75 grade point average or higher on a 4.0 scale were considered academically resilient. As to determine resiliency status, socioeconomic status – per Gordon – was determined by the Hollingshead Two Factor Index and stress by a self-report measure. Motivation and self-concept were measured by the High School Assessment of Academic Self-Concept and the Assessment of Personal Agency Beliefs. Findings from the study suggest that resilient African-American high school students differ from non-resilient peers mainly in the cognitive domain. The former students have more cognitive ability, cognitive environmental support, cognitive control, and cognitive importance; they also place more emphasis on extracurricular activities and material, external gains.

Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996), however, finds that African-American male students with a high degree of intrinsic motivation perform better in school than peers who are motivated by external factors (e.g., parents and their rewards) and, therefore, argues that academically resilient students tend to be self-motivated. Similarly,

Robinson-Heath (2001) also finds that academically resilient, self-motivated students perform better in school because they have higher expectations of academic success than students who are prompted by external rewards.

Floyd (1996) also studied the phenomenon of resiliency, which she defines as the manifestation of competence despite the presence of stressful life events and circumstances. She studied 20 academically successful African-American twelfth-grade students from impoverished backgrounds, ten male and ten females. Interviews were conducted with these at-risk students as to identify life factors shared among the studied group. The results show that these academically resilient students: (1) have a supportive, nurturing family and home environment, (2) interact with committed, concerned teachers and adults inside and outside the school place, and (3) maintain two key personality traits – perseverance and optimism.

F. **Resiliency and African-American male academic achievement: What nurtures it?**

With respect to what nurtures academic resiliency, Reis, Colbert, and Hebert (2005) conducted a study to investigate what factors high-achieving students attributed to their resiliency and what factors the student-participants think may contribute to the inability of underachieving students to display resiliency. The qualitative case study is comprised of 35 high school freshmen and sophomores; the subjects were interviewed and observed and data were collected on the participants over a three-year period. By the study's conclusion, 17 of the academically successful students had become underachievers, while 18 of the participants had maintained solid academic performance. The researchers show that protective dynamics (i.e., appreciation for cultural diversity,

determination to succeed, independence, inner-will, and sensitivity) are present in each of the 18 high-achieving students. Participation in extracurricular activities and special program, enrollment in challenging, rigorous courses, and strong support systems at home are also shared by the successful students.

Also, the high-achieving group of students has a clear, positive outlook for the future and state that their high school experiences – both good and bad – helped prepare them for the future. The researchers note, contrarily, that the underachievers experience several, negative factors. The underachievers state that school is boring and that their classes do not match their learning styles. Most poignantly, the underachievers have negative interactions with teachers and generally have peer-friends who do not seem to care about school; they also lack parental support and monitoring at home, have a lot of unassigned time, and have negative interactions with family members (i.e., inconsistent role models, sibling rivalries, and inappropriate parental expectations). This study underscores that peers, parents and other family members, and teachers have significant bearing on the building of resiliency among African-American students and that the quality is not independently an intrinsic one.

Hawkins and Braddock (1992) investigated the relationship between athletic participation and academic resiliency in African-American students. The researchers used data collected in a longitudinal study by the United States Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which surveyed some 25,000 students in 1988 on a wide range of topics. Lee (2009) cites that the study's results show significant evidence that interscholastic sports have a positive influence on academic resiliency. Specifically, the results show that interscholastic sports influence

athletes with respect to their interest in school, behavior in school, enrollment in a college preparatory track, and in their post-high school plans. This study underscores the ability of athletics and other extracurricular activities in nurturing resiliency in students.

McMillian and Reed (1994) argue that resiliency is self-nurtured; they conclude that resilient at-risk students have a set of personal beliefs, characteristics, and dispositions that promote their academic success regardless of their background or current circumstances. Young (2009), referencing McMillian and Reed, argue that such students have a locus of control and healthy internal attributes and take personal responsibility for their successes and failures and show a strong sense of self-efficacy; they feel that they are successful because they have chosen to be successful and have put forth the required efforts (Bandura, 1995). They credit and value themselves. These beliefs, characteristics, and dispositions, according to McMillian and Reed, seem to grow from within.

High expectations (Maton, Hraboski, and Greif, 1998; Young, Martin, and Ting, 2001), positive self esteem (Novick, 1998), and feelings of belongingness (Benard, 1993) are also documented in the literature as protective factors in building resiliency in children.

So, while the scholarly definition of resiliency – particularly with respect to the academic achievement of African Americans – is diverse, scholars generally agree on some key components of the concept. Similarly, both the appearance of resiliency with respect to African-American achievement and that which inspires it are also in contested.

G.   Major, positive in-school influences on the academic achievement of African-American male students

In school constituencies and factors – particularly climate in school, extracurricular activities in school, and peer relationships – greatly and positively impact the academic achievement of African-American males; this point is a consistent theme in the literature (Alder et al, 1992; Anderson, 1982; Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2009; Conchas, 2006; Davis, Jenkins, and Hunt, 2002; Fejgin, 1994; Graham et al, 1998; Halpern, 1992; Hanson and Kraus, 1998; Harper, 2005; Haynes, Emmons, and Ben-Avie, 1997; Hebert, 1998; Huang and Change 2004; Jordan ,1999; Kunjufu ,1993; Ford, 1993; Paredes, 1991; Plucker, 1998; Truesdale, 2007; Walker, 2006; Young, 2009).

In a seminal essay, Loukas and Murphy (2007) argues that it is difficult to provide a concise and commonly-accepted definition of school climate; she notes, however, that most researchers agree that it is a multidimensional construct that includes academic, physical, and social dimensions. The academic dimensions, she notes, includes understanding and analysis of the school's monitoring of student progress and reports of such progress to stakeholders, teacher expectations with respect to student achievement, and quality of instruction. The physical dimensions, she continues, includes and understanding and analysis of the school's appearance – aesthetically -, the availability of school resources, the order and organization of classrooms in the school, the school's size (i.e., ratio of students to teachers), and the overall safety and comfort of the school. And finally, the social dimension primarily speaks to – per Loukas and Murphy (2007) – the quality of interpersonal relationships between and among staff, students, and teachers. The dimension, additionally, includes understanding and analysis around degree of competition and social comparison between students, degree to which staff, students, and

teachers contribute to decision-making at the school, and equitable and fair treatment of students by teachers and staff,

The Center for Social and Emotional Education (2009) also concedes that there is no common definition of school climate among scholars; but, it argues that a review of the research – practitioner and scholarly writings – suggest that there are several dimensions that color and shape experiences in schools: (1) environmental, (2) structural, (3) safety, (4) teaching and learning, (5) relationships, (6) sense of school community, (7) morale, (8) peer norms, (9) school-home-community partnerships, and (10) learning community.

The literature shows each of these factors and the at-large environment of the school (i.e., school climate) have major bearing on the academic achievement of African-American males. Young (2009), for example, asserts that school climate – created by administrators, teachers, and staff – impacts how African-American males students manifest their potential to achieve or flounder. Plucker (1998) similarly notes that achievement is related to school climate – arguing that schooling that promotes academic achievement motivates students to do their best in school. Ford (1993) maintains that when students' perceptions of the school climate are high, achievement results are generally high – particularly with respect to African-American males. Kunjufu (1993) also shows a positive relationship between school climate and academic achievement; he notes that a school's character greatly influences whether the students will interact with the learning environment and thereby be motivated to achieve.

Paredes (1991) conducted one of the more complete studies on this topic; he examined the relationship between school climate factors and student achievement in the

Austin Independent School District. Per Paredes, factor and regression analyses were used to analyze data from a survey of professionals in the district and the findings suggest that differences in students' average achievement gains are related to their schools' learning and working conditions and that conditions related to student learning strongly impact achievement than did treatment of teachers as professionals or school discipline and management protocols. The study also finds that the best predictor of student achievement is the percentage of school faculty willing to express displeasure with school climate.

On another large scale, Anderson (1982) reviewed 40 major studies between 1964 and 1980 on the relationship between school climate and academic achievement and found that over half of these studies found a casual relationship; he maintains that students' achievement is associated with high teacher commitment or engagement, positive peer norms, and emphasis on group or team cooperation, high level of expectations held by administrators and teachers, consistency with respect to reward and punishments, consensus over curriculum and discipline, and clearly defined goals and at-large objectives.

Both large studies – Paredes (1991) and Anderson (1982), respectively – underscore this apparent link between school climate and the academic achievement of African-American males.

Participation in extracurricular activities also has positive bearing on the achievement of this group of students. Longitudinal studies on school athletics suggest that such participation raises students' grades and test scores (Fejgin, 1994; Hanson and Kraus, 1998). Hebert (1998) also notes that participation in extracurricular activities –

including athletics – reinforces a positive sense of self through building a sense of accomplishment with respect to African-American males; this positive self-image, Hebert contends, generally precedes strong academic performance. Harper (2005) discusses that when thinking about their high school experiences, academically successful African-American male college students generally report on the positive benefits associated with membership in high school athletic teams and student clubs and organizations. And Halpern (1992) indicates that such involvement in after-school activities and programs offer young men the structure that might be missing in their lives which – generally – translates into improved academic achievement.

Jordan (1999) used a nationally representative sample to examine: (1) the effects of sports participation on various school engagement and student-evaluative variables, (2) the potential differential effects of sports participation for African-American students, and (3) the degree to which sports participation impacts African-American students' academic achievement. Ultimately, Jordan find that sports participation does improve the school engagement and academic self-confidence of all student athletes and a positive intervening relationship exists between sports participation and academic achievement for African-American students.

While the research with respect to positive correlation with respect to student involvement in extracurricular activities is strong for African-American males students, the link is also apparent for all high school-aged students – domestically and internationally. Huang and Change (2004) sought to explore the relationship between different forms of involvement and student achievement and the optimal amounts and combinations of different forms of extracurricular involvement for students' cognitive

and affective growth. Involvement in academic work and involvement and student activities were used to explore the two questions; the participants were 627 students in Taiwan. Results suggest a positive, linear relationship between academic and co cocurricular involvement and maximization of cognitive and affective growth is contingent upon maximum student involvement in both academic and curricular activities.

High-achieving African-American males must navigate a minefield of the school environment to negotiate their academic progress and ensure their physical safety; to do well in school is well-noted as to put oneself at-risk for derogatory name-calling (e.g., faggot, geek, White boy) (Adler et al, 1992; Young, 2009). So, peer relationships – positive ones – also have positive bearings on the academic achievement of African-American male students, particularly given the noted link in schools between high-achieving African-American males and a socially-constructed link between said students and femininity. Graham et al (1998) argue that the late elementary and middle school years are the times when the values of adolescents' peer groups begin to supersede that of their parents, family, and other influential adults and, consequently, peer groups have major bearings on the achievement of students. Walker (2006) suggests that peer groups may not support high academic achievement of African-American males, so those of the mass who are academically successful are likely engrossed in healthy relationships with equally successful peers. Anecdotally, Davis, Jenkins, and Hunt (2002) tell of their experiences as young African-American men living in Newark, New Jersey – one of the most dangerous cities in the United States – and supporting each other en route to

becoming doctor practitioners. Conchas (2006) also show that peer culture and peer groups inspire and encourage the academic achievement of African-American males.

On an in-depth level, Truesdale (2007) examined factors influencing the achievement motivation among nine, seventh-grade African-American male students in the Southeast region of the United States; specifically, the study focused on how peer influence, perceptions of educational experiences, feeling of alienation, cultural context of learning, and elements of African-American masculinity influenced achievement motivation among this population of students. Per Turesdale (2007), the relationships between these factors were also explored. These questions were engaged via case study methodology – specifically interviews with students, interviews with parents, focus group interviews, and observations in school as communities – and the study resulted an interesting, generalizable result: family structure and peer relationships have significant bearing on the motivation and subsequent achievement of African-American male students.

Agreeing with Truesdale (2007), Conchas (2006) supports the point that peer culture and peer groups inspire and encourage hard work and high academic achievement with respect to African-American males. In his qualitative study of African-American students who attended three public high schools in California, Conchas found that these students expressed very positive attitudes about school not only "for themselves, but for all people of color" (p. 49). He also found that the students found school to be an important piece of upward mobility in the United States and, consequently, felt compelled to encourage other African-American males to take school seriously.

An oppositional culture with respect African-American males negotiation of academic success and masculinity and blackness is well-documented, so too is the notion of peer culture and peer groups serving as a buffer to this phenomenon. Climate in school and extracurricular activities are also cited as having bearing on the achievement of this group of students.

H.   Major, positive out-of-school influences on the academic achievement of African-American male students

Out-of school-constituencies – particularly community and family, and church groups – greatly impact the academic achievement of African-American male students; this point is a consistent theme in the literature (Conchas, 2006; Davis, 2005; Davis, 2009; Delpit, 1995; Feemster, 2009; Fordham, 1996; Halle, Kurtz-Costes, and Mahoney, 1997; Herndon and Moore, 2002; Hill, Castellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates, and Pettit 2004; Irvine, 1990; Jeynes, 1999; Kunjufu, 1988; Kuvlesky, 1978; Peoples, 2003; Sanders, 1998; Spencer at al, 2003; Walker, 2006; Young, 2009).

With respect to community and family constituencies, Young (2009) reports that African-American children – especially males – who come from communities and families who verbalize high academic expectations and reinforce these expectations with corresponding behaviors perform better in school than their less-guided peers; Young's study hones in on academically high-achieving, economically challenged African-American young men who attend an Ivy League university. Fordham (1996) similarly argues that a stable community and family environment greatly improves the possibility of academic success for African-American males. And Spencer et al. (2003) also speak to the importance of community and family with respect to the academic achievement of

African-American male students, "…resources such as caring parents and involvement in extracurricular activities help to facilitate positive [academic] outcomes" (p. 610). Conchas (2006) states in his study on high-achieving African-American males that this population of students generally speak to 3 factors as influential with respect to their outstanding achievement: (1) the importance of community and family, (2) the significance of adult role models, and (3) the role of the school context; nearly all such students view their parents and other adults in the family and at-large community as the most significant sources of their school achievement. And Walker (2006) shows that poor, high-achieving African-American male students generally want to emulate people in their lives – people in their family and community lives – who they view as smart, strong, and supportive.

Halle, Kurtz-Costes, and Mahoney (1997) carried out one of the more complete studies on this topic. They examined the achievement-related beliefs and behaviors of parents of poor African-American youth, and the relationships among parental factors and children's academic self-concept and subsequent achievement. Forty-one children and their primary guardians were interviewed. Parents reported on their academic related beliefs and behaviors, while children completed measures of academic self-concept and 2 standardized achievement exams. The results indicate positive, significant relationships between parental beliefs and behaviors measures within both reading and math subject areas; parental beliefs are, particularly, strongly lined with child outcomes than are parents' achievement-oriented behaviors. The study underscores the apparent link between community and family and the academic achievement of African-American male students.

Hill, Castellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates, and Pettit (2004) also carried out a fairly complete study on this topic; a longitudinal model of parental academic involvement, student behavioral problems, student academic achievement, and student aspirations was examined for 463 adolescents, following from 7th grade through eleventh grade. The researchers indicate that there were variations across parental education levels and ethnicity and found the following through the study: (1) among the higher parental education groups, parental academic involvement is related to fewer behavioral problems, which are related to achievement results and aspirations, (2) for the lower parental education groups, parental academic involvement is related to aspirations, but not to behavior or achievement, and (3) most applicably, parental academic involvement is positively related to achievement for African-Americans, but not for Whites.

The literature also shows that the church constituency greatly influences the achievement of African-American male students (Conchas, 2006; Herndon and Moore, 2002). Herndon and Moore (2002) assert that most high-achieving African-American students centralize religion in their lives; such students – the scholars argue – are more likely to attend religious services, pray, and seek spiritual support than their less-achieving peers. Peoples (2003) argues that because the African-American church instills the value of education and promotes educational achievement and attainment with respect to parishioners, high-achieving students – particularly males – are absolutely influenced by the church. Jeynes (1999) similarly contends that very religious, church-going African-American students outperform less religious students academically; he explains that the discrepancy is likely the result of the church instilling a strong work ethic in its members. Kuvlesky (1978) argues that some African-American students adopt church –

generally Christian – teachings as a larger framework that guides their behavior in school and – consequently – outperform less religious peers. And Davis (2009) examined the effects external constituencies – including church – have on the academic engagement and achievement of 827 African-American students and argues that church involvement has a positive and significant influence on student conduct and performance in school.

Feemster (2009) carried out one of the more complete studies on the influence of church on the academic achievement of African-American males. Her study looked at whether the relationship between African-American male adolescent students and an African-American pastor made a difference in the former's academic achievement. The research was conducted using archival student data from several different schools in Nevada. The study, Feemster asserts, was designed to answer several research questions: (1) What is the academic achievement level of African-American male students who attend church on a regular basis? (2) What is the academic achievement level of African-American male students who do not attend church on a regular basis? (3) Is there a significant difference in the academic achievement level of students who attend church on a regular basis and those who do not attend church on a regular basis? (4) What are some student characteristics of African-American male students who attend church on a regular basis? The non-experimental, quantitative study generated several interesting findings. Firstly, African-American males who attend church on a regular basis have higher grade point averages, take more college entrance exams, and take and pass more state-mandated high school proficiency exams than their African-American male counterparts who do not attend church on a regular basis. And secondly, African-American male students are disproportionately represented in special education programs

and more involved with the juvenile justice system especially when they do not attend church on a consistent basis and have a relationship with an African-American pastor.

Drawing on Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence, Sanders (1998) explores the effects of church, family, and teacher support on the school-related attitudes, behaviors, and academic achievement of African-Americans from urban communities. 826 students in an urban school district completed a questionnaire measuring: (1) student perceptions of teacher support, (2) student perceptions of parental support, (3) church involvement, (4) school behavior, (5) academic self-concept, (6) achievement ideology, and (7) academic achievement, and interviews were conducted on a portion of the total subject pool as to enhance analyses of the quantitative data. The researcher comments that results of the study suggest that students' perceptions of parental and teacher academic support, and church involvement indirectly influence achievement through their positive influence on more or more of the attitudinal and behavioral variables measured; students' academic self-concept, school behavior, and ultimately achievement results, therefore, are all influenced by family, school, and – most significantly – by church.

So out-of-school constituencies – namely community and family, and church groups – have major bearing on the academic achievement of African-American male students.

III. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

A.   Introduction

Improving the academic achievement of African-American students – particularly

males – on gate-keeping academic indices continues to be a significant quagmire for

education professionals. Doing so, however, is critical in ensuring the positive life

outcomes of this population.

On a macro-level, therefore, this project was fashioned to contribute to scholarly

conversations about improving academic achievements with respect to African-American

males – as to improve the life outcomes of this population.

On a micro-level, further, the purpose of this project and the at-large questions

engaged in this project are: (1) how do formal school experiences support the academic

successes of a group of four high-achieving African-American males enrolled in an inner-

city, low-performing, public high school, (2) how do church, community, family, and

other non-school constituencies support the academic successes of these students, and (3)

what factors influence students' resiliency. And again, the findings of these research

questions and at-large study could possibly contribute to conversations about improving

the academic achievements of similar African-American males and – in doing so – help

narrow achievement disparities and life outcome disparities with respect to this

population and their better positioned Asian-American and White peers.

These research questions cover a broad range of areas, factors, issues, and

experiences that have influence, frame, and shape these academically high-achieving

African-American young males' conception of self with respect to overcoming barriers to

achieve academic excellence. Through the use of qualitative methods – a mix between

action research ethnography and case study – rich, textured responses to these questions emerged.

B.   **Role of researcher**

While I – the researcher – have seen and continue to see realized narratives with respect to African-American male underachievement, I have also seen and continue to see high-achieving African-American males display remarkable resiliency and overcome tremendous odds en route to academic success; these noticings happened and happen through my professional positions as teacher, school administrator, and instructional coach, respectively. I am also closely intertwined in the narratives of the young men of this study insofar as I, too, have displayed remarkable resiliency and overcame tremendous odds en route to high levels of academic success; I grew up in poverty in South Central Los Angeles amid the gang wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Such personal connections to the lives and narratives of these young men certainly both helped and hindered the completion of this study; while they enabled me to facilitate deep and genuine conversations and exchanges with the student-participants and observations of the student-participants; which, in turn, helped me produce more authentic data sets and ultimately a solid study, they also brought to bear biases with respect to understanding the students' lives and narratives in relation to the research questions. Mitigating the latter required that I, minimally, (1) use a highly-structured, research-driven protocol for the formal – and even and informal – observations; (2) use a highly-structured, research-driven protocol for the formal – and even informal – interviews, and refrain from asking leading questions during both sets of interviews; (3)

use a highly-structured, research-driven coding protocol with respect to document analyses.

C.   Conceptual and methodological framings of methods

This project situates youth as critical social agents. Such an intentional situation is both a conceptual and methodological assignment.

With respect to conceptual framing, if youth are situated as problems to be solved, then the role of the researcher is to outline pathologies, test corrective interventions, and ultimately generate potential solutions to the pathologies. Conversely, if youth are situated as critical social agents, then the role of the researcher is to use the former's critical insight in exploring and understanding complex social phenomena (Jenkins, 2009).

Such is the conceptual framing of this project: the utilization of youth in exploring a complex social phenomenon (i.e., academic achievement disparities). And methodologically, youth and their perspectives sit at the core of this research project.

D.   Methodological stance

Scholars in the field of interpretive research argue that the goal of this type of research is not to generalize about specific groups in a positivistic sense; rather, the goal is to (1) interpret how the studied actors of a social setting construct and make meaning of their world (Glesne, 1999; Schultz, 2005) and (2) to provide thick descriptions and in-depth explorations of a central social phenomenon (Merriam, 1998).

This project is my attempt to understand and speak to: (1) how formal school experiences support the academic successes of a group of four high-achieving African-American males enrolled in an inner-city, low-performing, public high school, (2) how

church, community, family, and other non-school constituencies support the academic successes of these students, and (3) what factors influence these students' resiliency.

My main goal, most broadly, was to understand how these African-American boys construct and make meaning of the world in relation to their outstanding academic achievements and accomplishments. My goal was to engage the stated goals of interpretive research – to interpret how the studied actors (i.e., student-participants) of a social setting (i.e., a high school) make meeting of their world (i.e., high academic achievements) and generate thick descriptions of such sense-making contextualized in a central social phenomenon (i.e., looming cross ethnic/racial academic achievement disparities). So, qualitative research methods – specifically interpretive ones – were appropriate for this study's construction.

Moreover, in utilizing the stated interpretative, qualitative research design, I drew upon a couple of traditions: feminist and youth participatory action research (YPAR).

Feminists generally reject the notion that any research can be value neutral – thus renouncing research methods that engage detached objectivity and distance between the researcher and researched (McInnes, 1994; Roman, 1992; Wolf, 1996). Feminists also speak to the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research, arguing that generating trustworthiness between researcher and studied-participants is important in presenting the latter's' authentic views and generating authentic data sets. So, the tradition and its proponents argue that researchers should try to build power-balanced, reciprocal relationships with the researched and build trustworthiness, forefront their commitments and subjectivities, and make the research process more interactive, iterative, and reflective – again, thus eliciting more authentic data sets.

In her study about caregivers of persons with advanced AIDS, for example, Matocha (1992) describes her relationship as a researcher as that of a helper, relative, and therapist. Such a relationship, she argues, allowed her to garner more authentic data, as the patients (i.e., the researched) were more willing to engage in the research. Such a power-balanced, reciprocal relationship also proved to be of tangible benefit to the studied population; Matocha maintains that the studied patients needed her counsel as much as they needed medicinal drugs.

Making use of the feminist tradition, I entered into power-balanced, reciprocal relationships with the studied students as to both garner authentic data and to offer tangible benefits to the studied. While interviewing the studied, for example, my role sometimes shifted from researcher to life coach – whereas I talked about the importance of pursing and attaining a higher education. My role, similarly, sometimes shifted from that of researcher to student-advocate during observations in the school at-large, whereas I sometimes notified school authorities of apparent issues with students and sought out help on the latter's behalf. My role, also, oft-times shifted from that of researcher to coach, whereas I sometimes played basketball with the studied students during our interview sessions and inserted some basketball teachings.

My roles shifted based upon the shifting needs of the studied students. I did not shy away from such shifting roles; rather, as the feminist tradition encourages, I entered into power-neutral relationships with the studied as to both garner more honest data and offer benefits to the studied.

This study is also informed by the youth participatory action research tradition. YPAR and its advocates argue that the tradition provides youth with opportunities to

study social problems affecting their lives and then take action to rectify these problems (Cammarota and Fine, 2008). Social problems affecting youth, YPAR proponents further argue, can not be adequately explored – and no less solved – minus the engagement of youth. And such youth engagement, furthermore, not only yields better understanding of the social phenomenon under exploration, but also offers tangible benefits to the engaged youth.

With respect to the engagement of the YPAR framework, for example, disproportionate minority contact (DMC) represents a nation-wide public health disparity; ethnic/racial minority youth comprise 34 percent of the juvenile population, but 62 percent of the nation's detained youth (Hsia, Bridges, and McHale, 2004); in seeking to better understand this phenomenon (i.e., causes for the phenomenon), Frabutt, Wilson, Kendrick, Arbuckle, Cabaniss (2005) engaged the YPAR tradition in a qualitative research project. Through a series of hands-on student activities and projects – which sits at the core of YPAR – Graves et al find that most ethnic/racial minority youth who have entered the juvenile justice system have few meaningful relationships with positive adult role models and tend to distrust many authority figures, including parents, caregivers, teachers and school leaders, law enforcement officers, and court officials. Additionally, this population also views schools, neighborhoods, and even their homes as hostile environments; within these spaces, furthermore, the studied youth contend with substantial personal challenges often created, exacerbated, and/or ignored by the adults in their lives. Simply put, the study finds that such youth have few advocates for their needs and are generally ignored at home, in their schools, and in the community and, therefore, become "menaces to society."

Equally important as the study's findings is the researchers' assertion that the findings – and even the proposed solutions – could not have been generated without the engagement of youth through a YPAR framework and the central hands-on student activities and projects. Furthermore, as Berg, Coman, and Schensul (2009) assert, the YPAR engaged project proved to be of tangible benefit to the students, insofar as it increased their positive attitude towards education, developed their critical social analytic skills, instilled self efficacy and a sense of hope and empowerment to act, and reduced and/or delayed engagement in further risky behaviors.

Making use of the YPAR tradition, this project engages youth and their voices. But, not only do the research questions require the engagement of youth and, thusly, the YPAR tradition, but the project was also of similar tangible rewards as the Frabutt et al study. Also, since the completion of hands-on student activities and projects is central to the YPAR tradition, student-participants in this project also completed reflective, memoir-type pieces of writing throughout the duration of the study. YPAR, therefore, does have a place in this dissertation project

Ultimately, as Cammarota and Fine (2008) assert, YPAR- centered projects teach young people: (1) that conditions of injustice are produced, not natural, (2) that such conditions are designed to privilege some and oppress others, and (3) that such conditions are ultimately challengeable, thus rendering them changeable. This project, broadly, sought to accomplish just this – incorporating youth in giving understanding to the cross ethnic/racial socio-politically incited discrepancies in achievement and in generating potential solutions.

Both traditions – feminist and youth participatory action research – informed the multi-method construction of this project: a cross between action research ethnography and case study.

Ethnography, one of the more commonly applied methods of qualitative research, is ambiguously defined in methodological literature. It is, however, well defined by noted educational ethnographer – Harry Wolcott. Wolcott – in Jaeger (1997) – points out several important facets with respect to defining ethnography: (1) the research method essentially calls for a "picture of the 'way of life' of some identifiable group of people" (in Jaeger, 1997, p. 329), (2) the role of the ethnographer is successful creation "in attributing aspects of culture to the group under study" (p. 239), and (3) the ethnographer's successful creation in attributing aspects of the culture to the group under study is achieved by the ethnographer learning about, recording, and ultimately portraying the culture of that group.

Utilizing Wolcott's definition of ethnography, Poole and Morrison (2004) extend by identifying five common characteristics of ethnography, which include: (1) a focus on a discrete location, event, or setting, (2) a concern with the full range of social behavior within the location, event, or setting, (3) the use of a range of different research methods which may combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, but where the emphasis is upon understanding social behavior from inside the discrete location, event, or setting, (4) an emphasis on data and analysis which moves from detailed description to the identification of concepts and theories which are grounded in the data collected within the location, event ,or setting, and (5) an emphasis on rigorous or thorough research,

where the complexities of the discrete event, location, or setting are of greater importance than overarching trends or generalizations.

Poole and Morrison (2004) also argue that while Wolcott's definition of ethnography is well-received in methods in education literature as well as the aforementioned characteristics, neither signal what is constituted as ethnography. There still remains a range of latitude with respect to defining this research method; they argue, therefore, that the education research community is better served by a laying out of what ethnography is expected to achieve as opposed to a rigid definition of the method.

Ethnography should purposefully achieve the following, according to Poole and Morrison (2004): (1) the collection of detailed data, which would facilitate careful analysis and understanding of a particular culture, (2) a comprehensive and contextualized description of the social action within the location, event, or setting, (3) the portrayal of an insider's perspective, in which the meaning of the social action for the actors themselves is paramount and takes precedence over, but does not ignore, that of the researcher, (4) the construction of an account of the discrete location, event, or setting which is grounded in the collected data and which incorporates a conceptual framework that facilitates understanding of social action at both an empirical and theoretical level.

While this projects aims to address Wolcott's and Poole and Morrison's stated goals of ethnography, it also draws in the feminist and youth participatory action research traditions – insofar as the power-balanced relationship between the researcher and researched is forefronted and the project deliberately engages youth in exploring, understanding, and helping solve a critical social phenomenon (i.e., cross ethnic/racial academic achievement disparities). Thus, this project is not just ethnographic in nature,

but of the action research ethnography paradigm – which seemingly draws upon the feminist and YPAR traditions.

Action research ethnography is an informed reflective process where research is planned in, engaged in, reflected upon, and modified in an iterative manner. Research using the action research ethnography approach seeks to accomplish all of the stated goals of ethnography, but also emphasizes the personal relationship between the researcher and researched and engages youth in exploring, understanding, and helping solve an issue affecting youth. Additional hallmarks of action research ethnography also include: (1) the researcher's striving to research *with* youth rather than on youth and (2) the researcher's readiness to help – in whatever capacities – the researched youths and their contexts when needed help is apparent and possible.

Case study is the second research method engaged in this project.

According to Yin (1984), case study research is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, notably when the boundaries of the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident and when multiple sources and types of evidence enter into the equation; it allows for the exploration of some contextual conditions. Similarly, Rhee (2004) suggests that case study research is a method of inquiry that brings understanding to a complex issue or object and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known about the issue or object via previous research; the inquiry form emphasizes detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships. And Mitchell (1983) – echoing Yin and Rhee – defines case study as a "detailed examination of an event (or series of related events) which the analyst believes exhibits (or exhibit) the operation of some

identified theoretical principles" (p. 192). Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster (2000)

simply define case study as a research type that relays deep information about a case or

cases.

Some scholars – including leading case study theorists (e.g., Soecker, 1991; Yin,

1994) – argue that the approach is not a method, but simply a strategy (Rhee, 2004).

Stake – in Rhee (2004) – similarly argues that a case study is not a methodological

decision, but a decision as to what is to be studied. Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster

(2000) argue that the case study approach simply implies the collection of unstructured

data and qualitative analysis, and is not – itself – a methodological approach.

There also some disagreement among scholars with respect to what is deemed a

case. Ragin – per Rhee (2004) – explains that in conventional variable-oriented

comparative work, investigators begin by defining the problem in such a way that allows

for the examination of many cases; data relative to specific variables are collected and the

focus of the research process is on explaining relations among these variables. In case-

oriented work, however, individual cases are the focus of the research, as opposed to the

variables. Stake – per Rhee (2004) – simply defines a case as a bounded system that has

working parts.

While there is disagreement among scholars with respect to case study's utility as

a method or a mere inquiry-based approach and what actually counts as a case, there is

some agreement with respect to the benefits of the application of the method. Some case

study researchers explain that a case study can employ the best of both quantitative and

qualitative methods and can, therefore, be a mix-method approach that satisfies

proponents of both sides of the research spectrum (Rhee, 2004; Stake, 2000; Stoecker,

1991; Yin, 1994). Yin (1994) also explains that the method is a comprehensive research strategy that deals with situations "in which there will be more variables of interest than data points," "relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to be converged in a triangulating fashion," and that "benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis" (p. 13). Stoecker (1991) explains that the method allows researchers to explore different outcomes of general processes suggested by theories depending on different contexts.

Stake – per Rhee (2004) – distinguishes between the three types of case studies. (1) An intrinsic case study, he argues, is carried out when one wants to understand a particular case. Contrastingly, an (2) instrumental case study is carried out when one has a research question and wants to engage the question by studying a particular case. A (3) collective case study refers to an extension of the instrumental case study design, but with several cases. Yin (1994) also suggests three different types of case studies: (1) exploratory, (2) descriptive, and (3) explanatory. He explains that if the research is mainly centered around "what" questions, it probably calls for the exploratory type. A descriptive case study focuses on covering and relaying background information and accurate, precise description of the case in question; and, an explanatory case study deals with "how" or "why" questions.

According to Rhee (2004), there are several strengths of the case study method with respect to qualitative research. First, in-depth research of specific instances in case studies can actually show causal processes in context, which then allows researchers to see which theoretical conjectures provide the best explanations (Gomm et al, 2000); the method also has the ability to allow researchers to "explain idiosyncrasies, which make

up the "unexplained variance." (p. 94). Second, a case study is an intensive piece of research in which interpretations are given "based on observable concrete interconnections between actual properties and people within an actual concrete setting" (Stoecker, 1991, p. 95); Stoecker further comments, "a case study is the best way by which we can refine general theory and apply effective interventions in complex situations" (p. 109). Rhee (2004) maintains that this all means that case studies provide researchers with the ability to explore different outcomes of general processes suggested by theories depending on the different contexts, which satisfies those concerned with the application of theory to practice. Thirdly, Walton (1992) explains that cases are situated within theories and are embodiments of casual processes operative on a small-scale level. Walton also explains that case studies are used "to demonstrate a causal argument about how general social forces take shape and produce specific settings" (p. 122). So, understanding a specific case by applying the available knowledge is an important and possible task through case study for social scientists, which, in turn, has utility with respect to producing the best theory. Case study research, therefore, is strong with respect to its utility to generate and inform theory. Fourthly, by focusing on a single entity, case study enable researchers to uncover interaction of significant factors that are characteristic of the entity (Merriam, 1998; Young, 2009); the method also allows for a focus on the holistic descriptions and explanations of events insofar as it highlights the details from the viewpoints of participants by using multiple sources of data (Gall, Gall, and Borg, 2005; Young, 2009) – all of which is unique to case study, Young (2009) asserts.

Rhee (2004) also speaks to major criticisms of the case study method. First and

most notable, the approach is frequently criticized for lacking grounds for generalizations (i.e., external validity) (Stake, 2000; Yin, 1994). Stake (2000) argues that with case studies researchers make "naturalistic generalizations," which are quite different – perhaps less reliable – than generalizations based on statistical analysis, as the former develop by a superficial noticing of patterns of happenings. Yin also speaks to this point and argues that case studies are only "generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes" (p. 10); he also argues that the point of the method must be to expand to theory and not statistical generalization. Donmoyer (2000) also cautions against the appropriateness of case study with respect to generating generalizations. Secondly, internal validity – the inherent difficulty of finding patterns between cases – is also a stated criticism of this approach. And finally, construct validity – the problems associated with defining a "direct set of operational measures" (p. 35) is a stated problem with respect to this model (Yin, 2003).

Many scholars argue that despite the model's limitations, it does have utility with respect to theory building and is, therefore, an effective social science method.

Most succinctly, ethnographers attempt to capture a picture of a social phenomenon, while case studiers attempt to offer an in-depth understanding and analysis of an individual case of a social phenomenon. This dissertation project is an attempt at both; the social phenomenon at-large is academic success *against all odds*, while the individual cases are that of the student-participants.

E.   **Selection of the research site and the researched**

In engaging the aforementioned research questions, I – the researcher – selected a school research site that resembles a typical poor-performing inner-city school – as

defined by my research state's supreme court with respect to the most underperforming districts and schools. Per the court's criteria, the school – and encompassing district –: (1) must be among those with the lowest socio-economic status, (2) demonstrate evidence of substantive failure of thorough and efficient education – including failure to achieve what the state's department of education considers passing levels of performance on the high school proficiency examination or the comparable state test, (3) must have a large percentage of disadvantaged students who need "an education beyond the norm" (i.e., special education placement), and (4) the existence of an "excessive tax [for] municipal services" in the locality where the district is located.

Ultimately, access to the school district and school-site was granted through the school district's external research review process.

In engaging the research questions, particularly why these exceptional students are performing exceptionally, I selected four students who met the following criteria and passed its encompassing random screening assessment: (1) from a low-income background as defined by the state, (2) from a single-parent household, (3) of junior-standing with a minimum 3.5 cumulative weighted grade point average, and (4) exceed state standards on each section of the state's sophomore-level standardized assessment. The criteria and number of student participants were influenced by similar studies and through conversations with peer-colleagues. Additionally, this study – in part –, is an attempt to understand how and why the student-participants are succeeding on biased academic indices; this required using these very indices – however biased – to select students for participation in this study. Thusly, this project does not put forth that exceptionalism is the sole determinant for the engagement of student voice. Rather, the

aforementioned exceptional students were chosen to better understand why such exceptionalism even exists.

F.   **Methods and procedures with respect to ethnographic elements and case study elements**

To collect the qualitative data to compose the ethnographic and case study pieces of the study I used three research techniques over an eight-month span: (1) formal and informal observations of the studied students within the school context and sometimes home context, (2) formal and informal interviews with the studied students and some influential adults in their lives (e.g., guardians, parents, teachers, et al), and (3) document analyses.

The formal and informal observations occurred throughout the entire duration of the project. I visited the research site three to four times a week – for three to four hours each day –, alternating the days of attendance to better understand the ebb and flow of the four youths and their experiences. I observed the selected youths – formally and informally – in all school contexts and situations (i.e., in the cafeteria, classrooms spaces, the library, sporting spaces, etc.). The focus of the observations hinged on the research questions in mind during observations; I took field notes on the observations using a highly structured protocol. One column of the field notes protocol required notes about that which was seen, heard, and experienced in relation to the research questions. A second column had my reflection field notes – reactions, questions, and my sense-making about what I saw, heard, and experienced in relation to the research question. If something inhibited my ability to take notes on site, I took the notes and drew reactions as soon as possible. And finally, after each day of collecting observational data, I wrote

small narrative analyses of the data reflected in the field notes and securely stored the field notes and analyses until time for final data analyses.

With respect to the formal and informal interviews, I drew upon Billson's protocol (2006), and asked the selected students questions about family and background information, home and travel, peer group information, school, work and future aspirations, self-concept, and race. I began conducting the individual interviews with the student participants after being at the school for approximately three months.

I also interviewed adults in the school – particularly teachers after three months – who had a direct or even ancillary impact on the selected students, in hopes of understanding how these adults positively impacted these students. The adults interviewed for this study were chosen via names that emerged through formal and informal conversations with the students, and even formal and informal observations of the students. If a student mentioned a particular teacher as being instrumental with respect to their academic successes, I interviewed that teacher. Or, if I observed constant interaction between one of the student-participants and a particular teacher, I also interview that teacher.

I personally transcribed the formal interviews, thus developing an intimacy with the data. And, I immediately recorded comments and thoughts about the informal interviews subsequent to their occurrences. After the transcription of each formal interview and/or write-up of each informal interview, the data were securely stored until time for final analyses.

And finally, document analyses (e.g., student and parent handbooks, course listings, extracurricular notes, etc.) enabled me to understand and speak to the school

structures and systems that are positively affecting the said students and their achievement. Student work and teachers' comments on and about student work were also analyzed. Documents chosen for analyses were generated through emersions from the formal and informal observations and formal and informal interviews.

Ultimately, the observational and documentary data were coded for recurring themes and patters and then used to answer the stated research questions – employing Lofland and Lofland's (1995) technique for data coding, which is known for being best-suited for such types of data.

Lofland and Lofland define coding as using labels to classify and assign meaning to pieces of information, rendering the researcher able to make sense of qualitative data. It also enables the researcher to organize large amounts of text and to discover patterns that would be difficult to detect by reading alone. Codes, most succinctly, answer the questions, "What do I see going on here?" or "How do I categorize the information?"

The Lofland and Lofland approach calls for a two-step process with respect to coding. Step one entails generating numerous codes as the researcher reads through the data, identifying the data that are related without worrying about the variety of categories. Because codes are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the researcher does not worry about assigning a piece of data to several codes. And finally, step two – subsequent to initial coding – calls for reviewing the initial codes and eliminating less useful ones. Also, combining many large categories into large ones and/or subdividing categories that have been assigned a large number of pieces of data are facets of this stage. At this focused coding stage, additionally, the researcher should see repeating ideas and can begin organizing codes into larger themes that connect different codes.

The Lofland and Lofland technique to data coding allowed me to analyze the collected data in answering each of the three research questions.

Interviews were recorded – with the consent of the engage parties –, dated, transcribed, coded, and analyzed according to the three-stage process proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and used by Young (2009).

The first stage of Strauss and Corbin's method consists of open coding, whereas all transcribed interviews are read and analyzed line-by-line to generate some initial categories. Open coding – according to Young (2009) – is achieved by looking closely at the names and categories that arise out of the data and then breaking down all aspects of the data so that a comparison can be made with respect to similarities and differences. The second stage of coding involves identifying consistent themes and relationships from all of the data sources. After the general categories are determined, each source is again reviewed as to locate additional evidence in the data. Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe this process as axial coding, as it involves analysis to be focused individually around the axis of each category; the data are basically deconstructed and then reconstructed in a way that puts them back together in new ways after connections between categories are found. The final component of this process involves comparing the emerged themes across all sources of data and – thus – creating broader and more consistent themes.

Using this method, interview transcripts were read, studied, and dissected for information that offers understanding as to how the young men in the study navigated through harsh realities, displayed resiliency, and ultimately achieved academically.

G. **Specific data collection with respect to interviews**

Following Young's model (2009), as the initial activity of the individual interviews with student-participants I introduced the purpose of the study to the participants and stressed the important contributions they will be making in supporting this research project.

Initially, I asked open-ended questions as to allow student-participants to dictate the natural flow of the conversation (Seidman, 1998). "Why is it important to do well in school," was one such question.

Individual formal interviews with each of the four participants were the primary sources of data. Based on the concerns, issues, and topics discussed during informal interviews, I encouraged participants to revisit these points of discussion and talk more in-depth during this part of the study. Each interview was audio recorded and lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Per Young's advice (2009), semi-structured, open-ended questions formed the basis of the protocol. The audiotapes were transcribed by the researcher and from these transcripts; themes emerged with respect to issues important to these young men and their lives. The information gathered through the individual interviews was vital with respect to understanding the students' feelings and opinions.

Per Young's advice (2009), in-depth explorations through the interviews provided insight into the lived experiences of these high-achieving African-American males. Participants' identity construction and performance, interaction with family members and other constituencies, significance of school, and the importance of extra-curricular activities with respect to shaping their achievements were also explored. Also, the individual interviews allowed the participants an opportunity to elaborate on issues and topics of particular importance to them.

The individual interviews were conducted in various classrooms at the school research site.

H.   Limitations and Delimitations

A couple of limitations are glaringly obvious as relevant to this study.

First, the major limitation of this study is the number of student-participants participating in this study (i.e., four). However, the goal of this study is not to produce generalizations about academically successful African-American male high school students enrolled in inner-city, low-performing schools. The data gathered from these student-participants cannot (and should not) represent the responses of all academically successful African-American male high school students enrolled in inner-city, low-performing schools. Rather, I attempted to capture a rich picture of that which inspires these select students to be successful despite their contexts – contexts that suggest they should be academically unsuccessful. Based on the captured narratives, I believe sound hypotheses about the project's research questions were generated. Finally, data collected from these students can add to the knowledge base gained from similar studies conducted by other researchers.

Similarly, another limitation of this study is the inhabitation of a single school site as research site. However, the selected school site (i.e., research site) was deliberately chosen as to be representative of the typical inner-city, low-performing public high school. And again, a goal of this project is not to draw generalizations about successful students enrolled in such schools, but to capture a rich picture of such students enrolled in one school.

The small number of student-participants and sole research site allows for richer, more detailed pictures.

I.   __Implications__

The literature on closing the academic achievement gap – as typically defined – between African-American males and their white counterparts in K-12 settings is vast. The majority of the literature hinges on in-school possibilities (e.g., appointing highly effective teachers and employing culturally responsive instruction and school practices). Some pieces of the literature, furthermore, are anomalous in that they call for dramatic, foundational, systematic undoing of economic and political conditions that created and grow the gap (e.g., Ladson-Billings' call for addressing the education debt in closing the achievement gap).

With respect to the former possibilities – in-school means of closing the achievement disparities – a growing body of literature concerns the engagement of student voice in the decision-making processes of schools and in change efforts of schools, particularly with regard to closing the disparities. Thiessen and Cook-Sather (2007), for example, show that when students are actively involved in their own learning and in the improvement of what happens in their classroom and school, the gaps in achievement between minority students and their peers dwindle. Similarly, Mitra (2009) shows that the engagement of students in the decision-making and change efforts of schools is an effective strategy for improving the success of schools, particularly with respect to closing the achievement open. And, Raymond (2001) argues that while few studies have directly explored the role of student involvement in school improvement, the literature from related fields (e.g., organizational change, motivation, and learning)

affirms its conceptual validity and suggests the potential effectiveness of student voice as an agent for school improvement.

This study builds upon the literature on the utility of the engagement of student voices in education reform aimed at bettering the academic engagement and achievement of African-American males.

While study after study point to the potential effectiveness of employing student voices in the improvement of underperforming, African-American schools and as a means of closing the achievement disparities, few – if any – actually use the strategy in making a case for an informed type of education reform aimed at closing the achievement disparities and improving the educational outcomes of African-American males.

This study, therefore, contributes to the literature in that it actually utilizes a method that is purported to be valid and effective. Also, as many scholars comment, many educators and education researchers still use the deficit paradigm to understand and interact with African-American males. This study, like that of Perry, Stelle, & Hilliard (2003), offers is a reversal of that paradigm and – therefore – builds upon the scant body of literature that engages African-American males from a positive standpoint.

The implications are spelled out at length in chapter five.

## J.	Presentation of findings

Improving the academic achievement of African-American students – particularly males – on gate-keeping traditional academic indices is definitely a significant problem for education professionals. But again, doing so is critical to ensuring the positive life outcomes of this population. On a macro-level, therefore, this project is fashioned to contribute to scholarly conversations about improving achievement among African-

American males – as to improve the life outcomes of this population. So, this work and its finding are important and can and should have a place in the conversation about improving the achievement results of African-American males.

As such, I anticipate presenting the findings from this study to a number of stakeholders: (1) the students and families, and schools who gave so generously of their time as to participate in this study; (2) the education community through write-ups proposed for publication in scholarly journals and through academic conference presentations; and (3) school districts through proposed presentations to education leaders.

TABLE VII
METHODS FRAME

Feminist tradition   YPAR

Ethnography   Case Study
* * *   * * *
(Action-research ethnography)   (Instrumental-type a la Stake and
                                                      Explanatory-type a la Yin)

This methods frame shows several things: (1) the feminist and youth participatory action research traditions this research project, (2) the methods used in this project are ethnography – specifically action-research ethnography – and case study – specifically instrumental case study (Stake) and explanatory case study (Yin) – and both methods inform each other.

IV. DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

A.   Introduction

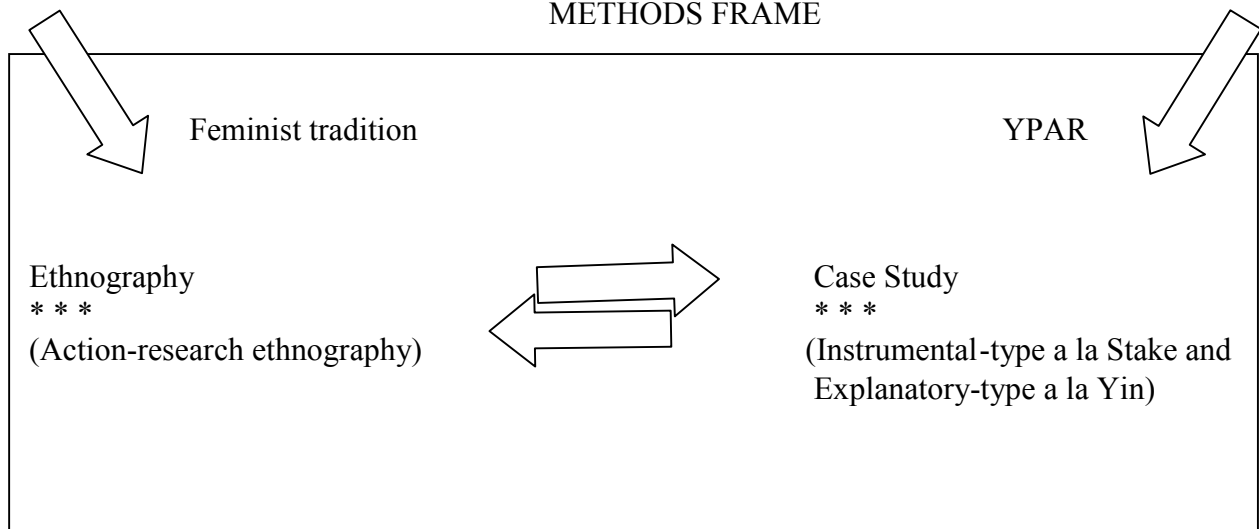As previously mentioned, improving the academic achievements of African-American students – particularly males – on traditional academic indices continues to be a significant quagmire for education professionals. Doing so, however, is critical in ensuring the positive life outcomes of this population.

On a macro-level, therefore, this project is fashioned to contribute to scholarly conversations about improving academic achievements with respect to African-American males – as to improve the life outcomes of this population.

On a micro-level, further, the purpose of this project and the at-large questions engaged in this project are: (1) how do formal school experiences support the academic successes of a group of four high-achieving African-American males enrolled in an inner-city, low-performing, public high school, (2) how do church, community, family, and other non-school constituencies support the academic successes of these students, and (3) what factors influence these students' resiliency. And again, the findings of these research questions and at-large study could possibly contribute to conversations about improving the academic achievements of similar African-American males and, in doing so, help narrow achievement disparities and life outcome disparities with respect to this population and their better positioned Asian-American and White peers.

High schoolers Davon, Lawrence, Terrence, and Victor participated in this study and their co-operation and participation – in addition to the peripheral co-operation and participation of their families, teachers, and other engaged parties – allowed me to engage these research questions, generate findings, and speak to the educational implications of the at-large study.

But again, Davon, Lawrence, Terrence, and Victor are the central persons in this ethno-case study.

B.   **Basic demographic profiles of student-participants**

Davon – Davon meets each criterion required for participation in this study; he is (1) from a low-income background as defined by his state of residence, (2) from a single-parent household – he lives with his mother, (3) of junior standing with at least a 3.5 cumulative weighted grade point average – he carries a 3.6 grade point average, and (4) is above average (i.e., exceeds state standards) with respect to his performance on each section of his state of residence's sophomore-level standardized assessment. With respect to home life – again, Davon is from a single-parent, mother-headed household; he also has two resident younger sisters – one of whom is a toddler and the other is seven. Davon's mother did not complete high school and currently works as a customer service representative at a local electronic goods store. Davon's father is not and has never been a part of his life. With respect to his school life, Davon is a model example of a well-involved, popular student; he is involved in several student activities and organizations – most notable among them is membership on the school's basketball and football teams, and vice-presidency on the school's student council. He is well-liked by his peers and teachers alike; he is regarded as one of the more popular students at the school.

Lawrence – Lawrence meets each criterion required for participation in this study; he is (1) from a low-income background as defined by his state of residence, (2) from a single-parent household – he lives with his mother, (3) of junior standing with at least a 3.5 cumulative weighted grade point average – he carries a 3.5 grade point average, and (4) is above average (i.e., exceeds state standards) with respect to his performance on

each section of his state of residence's sophomore-level standardized assessment. With

respect to home life – again, Lawrence is from a single-parent, mother-headed household;

he also has four resident siblings – three older sisters and a younger brother. Lawrence's

mother completed high school, completed some office management courses at the local

community college, and currently works as a secretary in a neighboring school; she also

has a part-time job as a caretaker at a nearby nursing home. Lawrence's father is not and

has never been a part of his life. With respect to his school life, Lawrence is generally an

uninvolved student; he does not participate in any student activities and organizations.

But, Lawrence did play football for a few weeks, but then quit. Lawrence is well-liked

by his peers and teachers alike. He is regarded as the class clown – frequently

interrupting instruction with joking antics; yet, he discreetly produces solid work.

Terrence – Terrence meets each criterion required for participation in this study;

he is (1) from a low-income background as defined by his state of residence, (2) from a

single-parent household – he lives with his mother, (3) of junior standing with at least a

3.5 cumulative weighted grade point average – he carries a 3.9 grade point average, and

(4) is above average (i.e., exceeds state standards) with respect to his performance on

each section of his state of residence's sophomore-level standardized assessment. With

respect to home life – again, Terrence is from a single-parent, mother-headed household;

he is his mother's only child. Terrence's mother completed high school, is currently

enrolled in a bachelor's program, and currently works as a medical assistant at a local

clinic. Terrence's father is not and has never been a part of his life. With respect to his

school life, Terrence is the quintessential well-involved student; he is involved in several

student activities and organizations – most notable among them is membership on the

school's baseball and track and field teams, and presidency on the school's student council. He is well-liked by his peers and teachers alike, but is definitely not one of the most popular students at the school.

Victor – Victor meets each criterion required for participation in this study; he is (1) from a low-income background as defined by his state of residence, (2) from a single-parent household – he lives with his mother, (3) of junior standing with at least a 3.5 cumulative weighted grade point average – he carries a 3.5 grade point average, and (4) is above average (i.e., exceeds state standards) with respect to his performance on each section of his state of residence's sophomore-level standardized assessment. With respect to home life – again, Victor is from a single-parent, mother-headed household; he has an older resident sister, who is a senior at the school. Victor's mother completed high school, earned a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education, and currently works as a second grade teacher. Victor's father is not and has never been a part of his life; his father was shot and killed when Victor was only two years old. With respect to his school life, Victor is heavily involved in student athletics; he is a member of the school's basketball, football, and track and field teams; he is not involved in other student activities and organizations. He is well-liked by his peers and teachers alike – considered one of the more popular students at the school.

TABLE VIII

BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS IN CHART FORM

Student-participants	Household type and head of household's basic demographics	Household's income classification	Other Household members	Cohort	Grade point average and exam results	Extracurricular involvements	Popularity status
Davon	Single-parent, mother-headed household. Mother did not complete high school; she works in cust. service at electronic goods store	Low-income background	Two younger sisters (i.e., a toddler and seven year old)	Junior	3.6 and exceeds state standards	Well-involved (i.e., basketball, football, vice-president of student council)	Popular
Lawrence	Single-parent, mother-headed household. Mother completed high school and some community college coursework; she works as a school secretary	Low-income background	Three older sisters and a younger brother	Junior	3.5 and exceeds state standards	Involved (i.e., football)	Popular
Terrence	Single-parent, mother-headed household. Mother completed high school and is enrolled in a bachelor's program; she works as a medical assistant	Low-income background	No one	Junior	3.9 and exceeds state standards	Well-involved (i.e., baseball, track and field, president of student council)	Not popular
Victor	Single-parent, mother-headed household. Mother completed high school and an undergraduate program; she works as a second grade teacher	Low-income background	One older sister	Junior	3.5 and exceeds state standards	Well-involved (i.e., basketball, football, and track and field)	Popular

C.   How do formal school experiences support the academic successes of the student-participants?

As previously mentioned, in-school constituencies and factors – particularly climate in school – namely mentor-mentee relationships – , extracurricular activities in school, and peer relationships – greatly impact the academic achievement of African-

American males; this point is a consistent theme in the literature (Alder et al, 1992; Anderson, 1982; Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2009; Conchas, 2006; Davis, Jenkins, and Hunt, 2002; Fejgin, 1994; Graham et al, 1998; Halpern, 1992; Hanson and Kraus, 2003; Harper, 2005; Haynes, Emmons, and Ben-Avie, 1997; Hebert, 1998; Huang and Change 2004; Jordan ,1999; Kunjufu ,1993; Ford, 1993; Paredes, 1991; Plucker, 1998; Truesdale, 2007; Walker, 2006; Young, 2009). Each of the said factors – and others – and resultant experiences are contributors to the overall academic successes of the student-participants.

With respect to climate in school – mentor-mentee relationships –, each of the student-participants maintains meaningful relationships with teachers – particularly a particular mentor – and such a dynamic undoubtedly positively impacts their outstanding academic achievement. Davon commented:

> I think my teachers motivate me to do well. My teachers – all of them – push me so I can achieve my goals, which are to pass all of my tests and to turn in good work, and one day go to college and then have a successful career. Mr. McKenzie is my World History teacher and is the main one who makes sure that I do well and who inspires me to do well; he knows my grades even before I know them and always asks me why I didn't do as good as I could've done on a certain test or in a certain class. Mr. Smith always spots me about once a month and checks up on my grades, too. They all inspire me to do my best and to strive for the best.

Similarly, Lawrence commented:

> My teachers are the people who I credit as motivating me to do so well in school. I credit my teachers because they are always telling me to do better. They are always telling me if I don't do well in high school I won't do well in life. They encourage me to do better because if I don't I won't be able to get in a good college or a college period, and I definitely want to go to college.

And Terrence, perhaps, best captured the point of the three with respect to the impact of a mentor on their outstanding academic achievement:

It's like this, everyday I don't feel like doing my best in school, even though I know I can get good grades easy. My teachers – especially Mr. McKenzie and Mr. Smith – push me to work hard even when I don't feel like [it]. If it weren't for them I think I would probably have a "C" average; I would do just enough to get by. But they make me work hard and threaten to call my mom and [sic] if I don't. So yeah, I kinda have to work hard because of them. But I'm also motivated by myself, too. I want to be sports agents so I have to work hard in school.

Victor offered a slightly different perspective with respect to the impact of an in-school mentor – a piece of school climate – on his outstanding academic achievement. He argued:

My coaches stay on top of me and they make sure I turn in my best work and get good grades. But, I think I would do good work and get good grades even without their help. But, because I'm on the basketball team, they make me do progress reports every two weeks and they check in on my classes with my teachers and sometimes even call my mom, so I guess it doesn't hurt.

In speaking to the extent to which in-school mentor-mentee relationships impact the academic achievement of the latter, some adult mentors in the school commented:

I think it's absolutely critical; I know firsthand the importance of being a mentor and how it can impact the grades and total well-being of students. I have taken students under the wings and have seen their grades dramatically improve in a short time span. Most importantly, I have seen lives transformed because of a mentorship-type thing. And I don't mean to sound arrogant as if I am changing lives, I mean that it really is a school-wide effort. We are all involved in the raising of our youths and we all spend time mentoring, teaching, coaching, and learning.

It's one of the most important parts of being a teacher, in fact it is the reason why I went into teaching. I had the same mentor throughout high school and maintained him throughout college and he [the mentor] was absolutely critical to my successes as a student and as a professional.

It's more important than people realize, in fact I'm pushing our administration to restructure our homeroom and advisory system to allow for more time for a formalized mentoring approach.

Being a teacher is being a mentor; we don't just teach academic subjects we teach life skills and some of these life skills lessons can be taught in the classroom, but have to be taught on the court, in the field as a mentor or a coach of some sort.

Important is an understatement. I might even argue that it is as important as the academic subjects we focus on. If not for some type of relationship with an adult in the school, sometimes the academic subjects cannot be transmitted and absorbed.

So, adults in the school echoed the comments of their student mentees with respect to the enormous impact of a teacher and/or a mentor on student achievement.

The average grade point average of the student-participants is 3.625 on a 4.0 scale. Unexpectedly, the number of meaningful contacts between a mentor and the student-participants over a sample of five academic months is seemingly uncorrelated to individual grade point averages. Meaningful contacts are defined as conversations between mentor and mentee – initiated by either party – around an important issued, as determined by at least one of the two parties.

TABLE IX
NUMBER OF CONTACTS WITH A MENTOR OVER A SAMPLE SPAN OF FIVE ACADEMIC MONTHS

Student-participants and grade point averages	Number of meaningful contacts (student-initiated)	Number of meaningful contacts (mentor-initiated)	Total number of meaningful contacts
Davon (3.6)	3	10	13
Lawrence (3.5)	4	14	18
Terrence (3.9)	3	12	15
Victor (3.5)	5	13	18

According to a member of the school's administration, the number of contacts between the student-participants and a mentor in the building is definitely higher than that of their peers who did not participate in this study. The discrepancy underscores the impact of an in-school mentor on the academic achievement of African-American youth – a point made by both the student-participants and adult mentors in the building..

When questioned about such deeply sustained involvement in their mentees' academic and personal lives – with respect to the student-participants – Mr. McKenzie – a frequently named teacher by both parties – showed me a ragged piece of browning paper with a quote on it; it was crookedly pinned to the bulletin board above his desk. The quote read:

> The tragic plight of African-American males in regard to low academic performance, high school graduation, and college enrollment together with the increased numbers of juvenile detainees, prison incarceration, and gang involvement requires a strategic response. African-American males mentoring other African-American males is one of the critical strategies that are required. In fact, it may be the most important strategy in ensuring the successful development and maturation of young African-American males into a generation of men who will be loving fathers to their children, faithful husbands to their wives, and leaders for their community.

Ironically, Mr. Smith – another teacher-mentor frequently cited by the student-participants – also maintains a pseudo-mantra with respect to the importance of mentorship of African-American male youths:

> This [mentorship of African-American males] is important work; it's the most influential thing we can do to impact the lives of the young men of color who sit in our classes. Yes, culturally responsive curriculum is important, and so too are leadership personnel and quality of instruction and all of that other education jargon. But as an educator of nearly 20 years, I know the most important thing we can do for these kids – these kids before us – is mentor them and ride them until they start doing the right thing. Now everyone doesn't agree with me, but I think it's true and I can only speak for me.

Most of the research does side with Mr. McKenzie – through his quote – and Mr. Smith. Beier, Rosenfeld, Spitalny, Zansky, and Bontempo (2000), for example, argue that a lot of mentorship programs – both formal and informal and rightfully – that connect adolescents with adults to whom they can turn to for advice and helps are proliferating and that the bottom-line goal of such programs is to prevent high-risk behaviors in teenagers and – inversely – to promote good decision-making capacities.

They also argue, however, that there are few data to show that mentorship actually makes a difference and – therefore – sought to determine if there is an association between having an adult mentor and high-risk behaviors in adolescents.

The cross-sectional study utilized a self-administered, anonymous questionnaire that was developed to assess demographics, involvement in risky behaviors, and the prevalence of a mentor in the life of a youth. Per the researchers, a convenience sample of 294 adolescents participated in the study. With adolescent smoking, alcohol and drug use, sexual practices, and weapon carrying as main outcome measures, the study shows that adolescents with mentors are significantly less likely to participate in four of the five measured risk behaviors (i.e., ever carrying a weapon (odds ratio, 0.41; $P \leq .01$), illicit drug use in the past 30 days (odds ratio, $0.44; P \leq .01$), smoking more than five cigarettes per day (odds ratio, 0.54; $P \leq .05$), and sex with more than one partner in the past six months (odds ratio, $0.56; P \leq .05$)). No significant difference was found with alcohol use ($\geq$ 3 drinks in the past 30 days). Most broadly, a strong casual link is implied between adolescents having an adult mentor and decreased participation in four of the five risk behaviors – which, no doubt – positively impact the academic achievement outcomes of said youths.

Thompson and Kelly-Vance (2001) also argue that planned mentoring programs have flourished as one possible solution to the problems affecting American youth. Much like Beier, Rosenfeld, Spitalny, Zansky, and Bontempo (2000), they also argue that little research has been conducted evaluating mentoring programs in spite of the accepted belief that only positive effects result from their implementation. The former's study examines the impact of mentoring on the academic achievement of at-risk youth involved

in Big Brothers Big Sisters of America – a non-profit organization whose mission is to help children reach their potential through one-to-one relationships with mentors.

Academic achievement tests – pre and post tests – were individually administered to 12 boys in the treatment group (i.e., had a mentor) and 13 boys in a control group (i.e., were waiting to receive a mentor) over a nine-month period. Results from the study indicate that boys in the treatment group made significantly higher academic gains than the control group, even after controlling for ability. Apparently, mentoring matters and matters at lot – as the student-participants in this study suggest.

Davon's mother – Juliet – also offers some credence with respect to the positive influence of an adult mentor in the life of an African-American youth. During dinner with her in her tiny, cluttered apartment – one evening – she recounted a story about finding several marijuana joints in Davon's sock drawer when he was a freshman in high school and vividly relayed her shock at the finding:

> I was mad as hell. I done everything I knew how to do to keep my son on the right path, so when I found those joints in his drawer I was mad and really didn't know what to do. I asked him about it and he lied to me, which made me madder so I beat him until he told me the truth. The next day I called the school and made an appointment to speak to one his teachers – the one he always talking about – and I went up there and told him [said teacher] everything that had happened and asked him about some stuff I can get my son involved in afterschool, so he ain't out here running the streets when I'm at work. The teacher told me to leave it up to him and that he [said teacher] was at school afterschool everyday anyway doing teacher stuff and that he would basically watch Davon and keep him busy everyday until about four [pm]. I ain't found no more joints since then and don't think I will.

When pressed about the impact of said teacher on safeguarding her son from high-risk behavior and simultaneously supporting the child's high academic achievement – the thesis of the Beier, Rosenfeld, Spitalny, Zansky, and Bontempo (2000), and Thompson and Kelly-Vance (2001), respectively –, she commented:

Well again, I got three kids and I'm by myself and I work, too. So, I gotta rely on the school to help me out. I know Mr. Smith is helping my son with homework and making sure he gets all his work done and gets good grades – just like I try to do. I also know that Mr. Smith and the other teacher is [sic] helping my son learn how to be a man, though, and that means leaving drugs and all that alone.

Her tiny, one-bedroom apartment is riddled with stuff – particularly with Davon's earned academic certificates, plaques, and trophies. Silver-framed certificates border the living room ceiling. Pointing them, she uttered:

My boy earned these up here. All of them. But I know that a lot of his teachers and me had a lot to do with him earning all these rewards. And any kid can do this good. We just gotta raise our kids.

Davon's mother uttered such comments while chastising him for claiming to not have any homework. Davon said, "I told you I don't have any homework tonight," which prompted her immediate response "Your teachers told me you have homework every night of the week. So tomorrow I'll call the school to find out if it's true or not." And she will – as both Mr. McKenzie and Mr. Smith suggested – absolutely contact the school to ensure that he did not – in fact – have homework.

Lawrence's mother – Desiree – made very similar remarks with respect to the impact of a mentor on the academic achievement and at-large safekeeping of her son:

Lawrence's daddy lives somewhere near Atlanta and really ain't never been a part of his life and every boy needs a daddy; and I keep telling my sister that, too. I can't teach this boy to be a man; I do the best that I can, but I can't teach him to be a man. So I make sure my brother comes around a lot to be that man in my son's life and I know he has a good relationship with Mr. McKenzie I think, and so I know Mr. McKenzie helps him get good grades and stay out of trouble, too. It's a whole team of us.

Lawrence's mother – a mother of five – also has a full-time job as a secretary and was – therefore – frequently tough to contact. She attended one of Lawrence's football games and uttered the prior-mentioned comments in that space. The stadium – as I recall

it – was nearly empty.   But the band was blaring – however poorly – the same tune over

and over again: the rock band Queen's classic "We Will Rock You." The unusually

warm autumn day inspired perspiration to develop about her forehead and around her

eyes, which made it difficult to decipher perspiration from tears. But, tears – no doubt –

definitely formed and fell from her eyes when she commented:

> I just do what I can. But I know what I can do ain't enough. It just ain't enough.
> And I know it ain't enough everyday. It's only me and I got five kids; it's only
> me. So, I gotta make these kids stay busy because I know what I can do ain't
> enough. So I put 'em in sports and my girls in cheerleading and dancing because
> I know what I can do just ain't enough and the coaches and teachers help.

Desiree grew increasingly emotional when speaking about the influence of

mentors in the lives of her children.

Perhaps irresponsibly, I alluded to this emotional conversation with Desiree

during a conversation with Mr. McKenzie some weeks after the football games. In

reference to the conversation, he commented:

> Man, she's always crying. Whenever I or Coach Powell take Lawrence home
> after practice or a game or something she comes outside and thanks us and starts
> crying and what not. She broke down crying at the open house on report card
> pickup day last year. But, I know she really does appreciate the fact that we look
> after her son like he's ours. I just think she's overwhelmed. She has like six kids,
> though [She actually has five kids].

Although far less candid and open than Desiree – even after six or so weeks of

building a relationship with her and her family – Candice – Terrence's mother – also

relayed the importance of a mentor in her son's life. Apparently too busy – or perhaps

just unwilling to sit for an interview – she submitted some written comments to me one

several occasions. One of the comments:

> Terrence's father has an addiction problem and he's been struggling with this
> addiction problem for a long time. I don't think he will ever get over his
> addiction and I've tried to help him. So I purposefully kept him out of Terrence's

life. I don't think you can be a father or a good father if you are stuck on drugs. So yes, I do make sure that Terrence has positive male role models in his life to somewhat take on the duties of his absent father. Some of these people are his teacher and some men in my church, too. But Terrence actually established a relationship with the male teachers in his school even without me doing anything. He just did it and I think it helps him keep his grades up and keeps him out of trouble.

Committed to helping me – an African-American man of whom she claims pride – complete this research project, Candice also wrote, "Two of my closest friends has a lot to say about this topic and wrote something down for you, too." One of Candice's friends wrote:

> As a single woman trying my hardest to raise a man who had issues with school and discipline I felt lost. But after my son the youth pastor in the church he has taken on a new attitude toward his studies [sic]. Education has now become a priority in his life as appose [sic] to a punishment. His eyes have now been opened to a new world and I owe it to the pastor and some of this teachers to [sic]. His English teacher after he became one of Jason's mentor he gave him the confidence that led him to do good in all of his courses. He has gone from a low "C" student to a all As and Bs. My son has also become a pleasure to have at home. He also has started to do things around the house without a fight. It seems that mentor's encouragement has not only led to my son's academic good grades, but it has made the relationship we have betters, too.

And the second friend wrote:

> There are some things I just can't teach a boy about being a man. I'm a parent. I can talk about right and wrong and I can discipline. I can set curfews and ground rules and make sure that they're seen as signs of love, not just arbitrary restrictions. But it's different when it's coming from a man. How would you feel if a doctor was teaching you how to be a chef? The doctor can only tell you what they think a chef is or should be. But a chef makes a much better teacher of chefs because it's what they are and that experience has value. That's why my son's teacher is so important. And why not only do I not take it for granted, I want to take advantage of it. Men are automatically more authoritative when dealing with men; younger men in particular. Having a male mentor gives my son a living example of what he should be working towards. If his mentor has been in trouble, he can tell him what it's like – the affects [sic], ramifications, and possible consequences. If he hasn't, even his stern adult male presence can be intimidating enough to discourage a misstep. He can put pressure on him, encourage him to make good grades. Those are the precursors of future success. And he can teach

him that it's okay to make good grades, even though his friends might think that's "whack" or "nerdy" or whatever words kids are using right now. There just aren't a ton of successful male figures out there. And none of them is in our house. My son's teachers are living, breathing blueprints. No matter what values I instill, amount of love I express, or boundaries I set, I can't be that. His father isn't in the picture and I think I'm doing a good job by myself. But if his teacher and mentor teaches [sic] him nothing else, I hope he can teach him what it takes to be [a man].

While the comments issued by Candice's friends seem a bit exaggerated, both comments – and that of each mother of the student-participants – are also corroborated by Victor's mother – Laverne. During one of our several early morning conversations – I spoke with Laverne at around 7am on at least four occasions via phone – she succinctly commented:

> Victor's dad was killed when he was one or two years old, so he's never had a father in his life. But I make sure that he has men in his life who can serve as father-like figures and some of these men are his teachers at school, especially Mr. McKenzie.

Juliet, Desiree, Candice, and Laverne – the mothers of the student-participants – and Candice's two friends all seem to be party to a sorority; each is singularly committed to the whole-person development of her son and recognizes the need for a man's rearing in this process. Each woman – additionally – intentionally and deliberately relies upon the influence of an adult mentor in the school as to maintain her son's outstanding academic performance and as to keep him removed from high-risk behaviors. The relationship between the student-participants and teacher-mentor – undoubtedly – has a positive impact and supports the outstanding academic achievement of said students.

At the onset of the interview-focused and observation pieces of this study – sometime in early September – I vividly recall seeing Lamont – one of the school's security guards – stop student after student in the school hallways and inquire of each

student's grades and overall well-being. Alternately bellowing "Put that cell phone away

before I make it disappear" and "Hurry up and get to class before the bell rings," Lamont

stopped Victor in the hallway and inquired about his grades and the football season. The

hallway was crowded – definitely an overcrowded school – and loud, yet Lamont was

seemingly blind to these distractions and held conversations with individual students

despite the distractions, including conversations with Victor. I faintly recall Victor

commenting, "I just gotta finish my project in English and do good on that and I should

still have a really good grade in the class."

I watched the school hallway interactions between Lamont and the students for

the entire four-minute passing period and then stopped Lamont and asked for his

comments about the importance of the relationship between an adult mentor and at-risk

African-American youth. He commented:

> I don't know if I want to call it a mentor-type thing. I don't think it's that formal
> and stuff. I just know that kids – especially black kids here – need to know that
> people care and want to know about how they are doing in school and in life, so I
> just try to be one of those people. I think they know I care and that they can come
> to me whenever they have an issue and they do. Just trying to do a part in
> keeping these kids on the right track and get good grades, that's just what it's
> about.

While "just a security guard," which I heard hurled at Lamont a few times by

some recalcitrant youth, Lamont seemingly best captures the essence of mentorship –

formal and informal – at this individual school and its effect on students. Summarily, this

mentorship piece – a clear centerpiece of this school's climate – clearly matters and has a

supportive impact on the achievements of African-American youths, including the

student-participants.

Extracurricular activities in school also support the academic achievement of the student-participants, although its impact on achievement seems weaker than that of mentorship. Each student-participant is involved in extracurricular activities and spoke in the affirtimative with respect its effect on their outstanding academic achievements.

Davon – a one of the most involved students at the school and of the student-participant bunch with respect to extracurricular involvement – is a member of the school's basketball and football teams; Davon is also vice-president of the student council and a peripheral member of the newspaper and yearbook committees. Commenting on how such participation in extracurricular activities influences his outstanding academic achievement, he commented:

> I think it just keeps me out of trouble; it keeps me off the streets and stuff. So I'm usually at school late doing for basketball or something and it's hard when I get home because I still have homework to do, but I'm not outside getting into trouble. A lot of times, though, my coaches help me with my homework and help me keep my grades up.

Ironically, the teacher-moderator of the newspaper and yearbook committees – on which Davon is a member – echoed Davon's point about the value of such student extracurriculars; Mrs. White commented:

> There are absolutely academic benefits to being a member of student clubs and organizations and other student efforts, but I think the biggest benefit is that these things allow students to nurture their interests and talents and it also keeps them off of dangerous streets. We know where our kids are when they are in the school building, the gym, the field, we know.

A student of individual school history and trajectory, I could not help but notice that yearbooks dating back to the 1940s – some four or five copies per edition – are stuffed in black metal bookcases throughout the small classroom and office. I perused the yearbooks – noticing that the school was comprised of mostly White students as late

as the 1960s – and simultaneously noticed Mrs. White's aggressive disposition, all the

while half-heartedly listening to Mrs. White comment on the importance of

extracurriculars with respect to student achievement. Mrs. White – a woman of some 60

years of age – sat in a wheelchair – likely because of her weight – and barked out orders

to students while alternatively issuing comments to me on said topic. "Sit down and get

to work!" "Raheem, you are about three seconds from being assigned three extra

articles." "Chante, don't come to me complaining wonder why you are failing; you have

to work to do!" Such were among the many, many barks hurled by Mrs. White during

our 30-minute conversation. Making me quite uncomfortable with her condescending

rhetoric, she also uttered:

> These kids just don't get it; they want everything done for them and that's
> because their parents don't raise them. Anyway, yes, I think these activities are
> important because sometimes we know best for these kids in the school than the
> people in their homes.

> Coach Powell – the coach of the basketball teams – agrees with Mrs. White and

spoke on the topic, however less condescendingly:

> Sports and involvement in co-curricular are also about teaching kids
> accountability, responsibility, hard work, and maturity. We [the extracurricular
> moderators and coaches] are also another layer of adults who care about   these
> kids and make sure they stay on the right track [maintain solid academic
> performance and distant from involvement in high-risk behaviors].

> While Lawrence – apparently the resident babysitter of his younger brother and

several cousins – is not involved in any extracurricular activities – he quit football, he

wants to be: He commented:

> I just don't have the time. I got stuff to do at home. I gotta watch my lil' brother
> when he gets out of school and my lil' cousins, too. I like track and probably
> would be on the team, but I can't.

He also commented:

But I don't think I would do any better or worser [sic] in school – my grades or homework or any of that stuff by being on track or other clubs and stuff, I just think it would be fun and it would just be fun.

Terrence and Victor err on the side of Lawrence with respect to the extent to which involvement in extracurriculars support their outstanding academic achievement.

Terrence commented:

I don't think it has anything to do with it. I just like baseball and track and I want to be in politics when I get older so I like student council, too. But I don't think any of this helps me get good grades or anything like that, though.

Victor echoed Terrence:

I don't think it matters, either. I would have good grades I know and stuff even if I wasn't playing basketball and football. I just like it, too; it has nothing to do with grades and stuff for me.

A member of the school's administration estimates that the student-participants' average grade point average is a half point higher than that of their demographically-similar peers who did not participate in this study; he also estimates that latter group is probably involved in one or two extracurricular activities per year. Chart 10 highlights this discrepancy.

TABLE X
EXTRACURRICULAR INVOLVEMENTS OF PARTICIPATING STUDENTS

Student-participants	Number of athletic teams on which student is a member	Number of student activities and organization on which student is a member	Total number of extracurricular involvements
Davon (3.6)	2	3	5
Lawrence (3.5)	.50 (Played for .50 of season)	0	.50
Terrence (3.9)	2	3	5
Victor (3.5)	3	0	3
Demographically-similar peers (~3.1)	N/A	N/A	~1 or 2

As previously cited, participation in extracurricular activities is known to have positive bearing on the achievement of African-American youths – although the student-participants disagree. Longitudinal studies on school athletics, for example, suggest that such participation raises students' grades and test scores (Fejgin, 1994; Hanson and Kraus, 2003). Hebert (1998) also notes that participation in extracurricular activities – including athletics – reinforces a positive sense of self through building a sense of accomplishment with respect to African-American males; this positive self-image, Hebert contends, generally precedes strong academic performance. Harper (2005) discusses that when thinking about their high school experiences, academically successful African-American male college students generally report on the positive benefits associated with membership in high school athletic teams and student clubs and organizations. And Halpern (1992) indicates that such involvement in after-school activities and programs offer young men the structure that might be missing in their lives which – generally – translates into improved academic achievement.

Casey – referenced student in a similar study (Davis, 2009) who is demographically comparable to the studied students – also commented on the extent to which extracurricular impact his outstanding achievement:

> Art and music [extracurricular activities and programs]! That really helps me to be a successful student … I play that saxophone and it's really complicated when you first do it but once you get used to it, it's not so hard and I'm pretty good at it …In order to play the saxophone you have to focus, practice and memorize all the songs. If you don't memorize the music, you will get kicked out and that will be it. Art teaches you to concentrate and to work carefully and not to mess up. It teaches you to work slowly. There's no need to rush. You can just do it slow as you want…I try to remember to do those things when I do math. You know to think really hard before I come up with an answer and to take it easy and slow down [be]cause there's nothing to be nervous about. You just have to focus and then you can come up with the right answer.

Casey's response is representative of some literature that speaks to the positive impacts extracurricular activities and programs can have on student achievement.

Comments by the parents of the student-participants also indicate that the former persons tend to err on the side of the literature – and Davon. Desiree – Lawrence's mother – for example, commented:

> I just do what I can. But I know what I can do ain't enough. It just ain't enough… His grades also got better when he started playing sports and doing stuff after school. I know you have to keep your grades up to stay in clubs and on the team. I'm glad they do that. Plus it just gives him something to do instead of being somewhere making trouble or running with the wrong people. I can't be there 24/7, and I think with coaches and sponsors, I don't have to be.

Laverne – Victor's mother – commented:

> I put Victor in sports early on because I know the difference involvement in sports and activities can make; I wanted my son to have that experience and the kind of maturity that happens from being involved [in extracurricular activities].

Davon acknowledges the positive impact of involvement in extracurricular activities has on his outstanding academic achievement. Lawrence, Terrence, and Victor issued comments suggesting that they do not see the see value such has on their achievement. Victor, however, also issued starkly contrasting comments when he spoke about the impact his coaches have on his achievement. He commented about the great extent to which his coaches stay on top of him with respect to his grades and at-large academic achievements, including making him submit bi-monthly progress reports and checking in with his teachers regarding his grades on a regular basis; he also commented on his coaches frequently calling his mother regarding his academic achievements, much to his apparent chargrin.

Desiree – Lawrence's mother – and Laverne – Victor's mother – also see the value of such extracurricular involvement. Apparently, extracurricular involvement does support the student-participants outstanding academic achievement, just less directly – per the student-participants' perspectives – than school climate, namely the mentorship piece.

Juliet – Davon's mother – and Candice – Terrence's mother – skirted around the question time and time again, perhaps indicating their belief that extracurriculars do not support their children's outstanding achievement.

However, I do recall Juliet – Davon's mother – using his involvement in extracurricular as leverage:

> He know [sic] that if I don't see good grades and I don't mean just decent grades, I want good grades, he know [sic] that I'll pull him off those teams so quickly it ain't even funny and I've done it before and will do it again if I have to.

Humorously, I recorded hearing one of Davon's teachers – his art teacher – also make use of this leverage. The teacher – much to my surprise – shouted out in class, "Davon, I'm about three seconds from calling your mother and basketball – as you know it – will be no more. Capish?" The art teacher's chastisement apparently worked; Davon immediately ceased his sidebar conversations with two young ladies and immediately got back to work – pencil sketching a Converse shoe.

And finally, positive peer relationships – unexpectedly for me – also greatly support the academic achievement of African-American males – including the four student-participants.

Davon commented:

My friends a lot of my friends play a big role in my grades and success because we all help and encourage one another. We also have fun while we help each other to be successful in school and all.

When probed as to if he has friends who impede his academic success – perhaps ridiculing him for working hard and being successful – he said, "No, I'm not ever accused of any smart jokes. I wouldn't care about such comments, either. There is nothing wrong with being smart."

Lawrence similarly commented:

Most of my friends graduated; I have a lot of older friends. The friends I have who are still in [high] school are doing good in school and are going to go to college, too, we support each other. I think we push each other to do good.

He elaborated:

The friends I do have here play and [sic] important role. Together we make learning completely different and easier to do. We each help motivate each other to do well in school.

I frequently observed Lawrence's stated interactions about the extent to which he and his peers support one another's outstanding academic achievements. Lawrence and peers do, in fact, often study together and craft papers together. In fact, he and his friends generally spend weekday lunch periods working on such endeavors – studying and writing papers. One particular incident is especially memorable, I recall Lawrence helping a student study for a vocabulary quiz and offer a student spot-on way of remembering the definition of the word "facetious." Lawrence told his peer, "Remember the word 'see' whenever you think of the word 'facetious,' and then remember that what you 'see' isn't always what you get. So, the word means what you see isn't what you get, it means not literal."

On the other side, when probed about the extent to which he has friends who impede his academic success – perhaps bullying him for working hard and being successful – Lawrence uttered "Sometimes I'm accused of being a geek, but I personally don't care."

Echoing the comments of Davon and Lawrence, Terrence said:

> My friends play some part in my success because I choose to hang with a positive crowd. I believe if I was to choose a negative crowd, I would still have success because I don't let anything influence me. I'm my own person. But I think friends I picked to be my friends do help me do well.

Though Terrence is well-liked his peers and teachers alike, he is definitely not considered a member of the "cool" crowd. He is short in stature – about 5'7 – skinny, keeps his hair cornrowed, and wears glasses. As I suspected, he is – in fact – sometimes ridiculed for his smarts. He said:

> Sometimes I get called a nerd or acting White or a geek, but it's just in a joking way and I do care about it, but I just don't respond. But sometimes it's hurt my feelings and made me mad, too, but it doesn't happen as much as it used to.

At the onset of this research project – during the proposal phase, I decided to engage the feminist tradition in the study's design; the tradition requires that I enter into power-balanced, reciprocal relationships with the studied as to both garner authentic data and to offer tangible benefits to the studied. Given this information – and the recent cases of school-situated bullying that ended tragically – I felt compelled to act on Terrence's notification of being bulled and notified his guidance counselor – Mrs. Southwell – of his predicament and suggested that she keep an eye on the matter. She responded:

He really only surrounds himself with kids like him, so I didn't even know he was possibly being bullied. But I guess he's short and looks somewhat geekish and all, so I guess it's not that big of a surprise.

I probed Mrs. Southwell about the importance of peer relationships with respect to solid achievement, she commented:

I think it's very important and that's why I'm so against tracking. When you place motivated, high-achieving kids around less-achieving, less-motivated kids, the higher ones tend to influence the lower ones more than the other way around.

Dr. Tate – the school's psychologist – walked into Mrs. Southwell's office during my conversation with the latter and chimed in:

Friends and peer groups have more influence than any adult in the school building and the sooner we realize this, the better. We need to begin to somehow use this to our advantage – using student leaders as part of the education process. Kids get teased and picked on in part because student leaders don't stand up.

Victor – one of the more popular kids in the school – has experiences that are vastly different than that of Terrence; he is never bullied or teased. He eagerly shouted out:

I guess they [my friends] play a role in my good grades; they encourage me to do well and study. No one ever accused me of being a geek for being smart. If they do, I don't really care anyway because I don't entertain stupidity

During my time in the field, I also frequently saw the student-participants actualizing their cited comments with respect to the extent to which they support each other's education. Time and time again, for example, I witnessed students copying another student, a peer's assignment.

One particular cafeteria incident is most vivid. Lawrence asked Terrence if he completed his double-entry journal for homework for English class. Terrence replied in the affirmative and Lawrence asked to copy the assignment. Terrence – well knowing that copying another student's reaction to a literary piece would not go unnoticed –

rejected Lawrence's request. Lawrence literally begged and pleaded until Terrence finally gave way and allowed his work to be copied. Sadly, I do no think the teacher even noticed; assessing students' work was not one of her strengths.

Similarly, I also frequently noticed the student-participants – seeking clarification – asking each other about assigned homework and due dates. I recall playing basketball with about six or seven young men – including Davon and Victor – and Victor asked Davon about an upcoming due date for a Spanish project. Davon replied, "Nigga it's due tomorrow." Victor shot back, "You lying!" Davon commented, "Nope. Swear to God; it's due tomorrow." Victor – showing utter disgust – replied "Fuck" and ran to the bleachers, picked up his bookbag, and apparently went home to work on the assigned project.

As previously cited, the literature shows such positive peer relationships have bearings on the academic achievement of African-American male students, particularly given the noted link in schools between high-achieving African-American males and a socially-constructed link between said students and femininity. Graham et al (1998) argue that the late elementary and middle school years are the times when the values of adolescents' peer groups begin to supersede that of their parents, family, and other influential adults and – consequently – peer groups have major bearings on the achievement of students. Walker (2006) suggests that peer groups may not support high academic achievement of African-American males, so those of the mass who are academically successful are likely engrossed in healthy relationships with equally successful peers. Anecdotally, Davis, Jenkins, and Hunt (2002) tell of their experiences as young African-American men living in Newark, New Jersey – one of the most

dangerous cities in the United States – and supporting each other en route to becoming doctor practitioners. Conchas (2006) and Haynes, et al (1997) also show that peer culture and peer groups inspire and encourage the academic achievement of African-American males.

Pajares and Urdan (2002) also argues that research examining students' achievement goals has often excluded social constructs, so he studied the relations among 260 preteen and early teen students' achievement goals and the orientation of students' friends with respect to academic effort and achievement. Per Pajares and Urdan, regression analysis of the data reveals that associating with positively oriented friends is the strongest predictor of task goals, while associated with negatively oriented friends is strongly related to the pursuit of extrinsic and effort avoidance goals. Pajares Urdan also argues that relative ability goals are related to the positive orientations of friends at scale for boys, but not girls; and, significant interactions between positive friend orientation and achievement levels on relative ability goals are also apparent. Most succinctly, the study shows that the goal orientations of students – particularly boys – are in part contingent upon association with negatively and positively oriented friends.

Each mother of the four participating students corroborates these findings in the literature. Juliet – Davon's mother – commented:

> It seems like he hangs around the right people, some good kids. Being friends with other kids who do good in school, I think, makes it okay for him to do good, too. I know a lot of kids think good grades make you a nerd or they give good kids a hard time for making good grades and that's the worst part. But those aren't the kids he's been around, so I don't know if they talk about it or do it on purpose, but I think they're all helping each other out. Just being friends is making them do better.

Desiree – Lawrence's mother – commented:

Sometimes my son's friends at school care more about how he doing than I do because they are on him about not waiting till the last minute to do some of his work done.   A part of why he get good grades because his friends stay on him. It's not that I don't care, it's because I don't understand his work.

Candice – Terrence's mother – commented:

Him and his friends like to compete with each other and they tease each other about who is the smartest. Even though they are teasing they are serious and want to out do each other with grades and school.

Laverne – Victor's mother – commented:

There only a few black guys in the honors program and they really stick together because some of the teachers don't like them. My son think its because how they look. They think the boys are thugs and they treat them different. That makes them work even harder to prove to them.

Each of the student-participants thinks that positive peer relationship have a lot to do with their academic success; such relationships – they argue – greatly support their outstanding academic accomplishments and the data support this point.

Summarily, the data for question one is represented below in chart form. The data with respect to each of the three in-school factors that potentially support the academic achievements of the student-participants are categorized as most significant, significant, insignificant, and no substantial data. Note: the asterisk denotes student-participant, each mother follows her son's name.

TABLE XI
DATA SUMMARY OF QUESTION 1 IN CHART FORM

Persons	Climate in school	Extracurriculars	Peer relationships
*Davon	Most significant	Most significant	Most significant
Juliet	Most significant	No substantial data	Most significant
*Lawrence	Most significant	No substantial data, but leans towards insignificant	Most significant
Desiree	Most significant	Most significant	Most significant
*Terrence	Most significant	Insignificant	Significant
Candice	Most significant	No substantial data	Most significant
*Victor	Significant	Insignificant, but pieces of data lean toward significant	Most significant
Laverne	Most significant	Most significant	Most significant

D.   How do church, community, family, and other non-school constituencies support the academic successes of the student-participants?

As previously cited, out-of school-constituencies – particularly community and family, and church groups – greatly impact the academic achievement of African-American male students; this point is a consistent theme in the literature (Conchas, 2006; Davis, 2005; Davis, 2009; Delpit, 1996; Feemster, 2009; Fordham, 1996; Halle, Kurtz-Costes, and Mahoney, 1997; Herndon and Moore, 2002; Hill, Castellino, Lansford,

Nowlin, Dodge, Bates, and Pettit 2004; Irvine, 1990; Jeynes, 1999; Kunjufu, 1988;

Kuvlesky, 1978; Peoples, 2003; Sanders, 1998; Spencer at al, 2003; Walker, 2006;

Young, 2009).

Each student spoke eloquently and emotionally about the extent to which out-of-

school constituencies – namely community and family – support their outstanding

academic achievement. Davon, for example, commented:

> My moms motivate me and pushes me to do better whenever she felt like the
> need to. She knew how to discipline me, but also show me the love I needed to
> do well in school and to do well in life. She did it by herself, too.

When probed as to if other people in life – "family, community, or whatever" – have

bearing on his outstanding achievement, he replied:

> Nope. It's about me and my mom and my lil' sisters. And I'm the one who
> encourages them or who tries to encourage them, so no[one else influences my
> achievement]. It's like a little domino effect; my mom tries to influence me
> and I try to influence my sisters.

I recall having dinner at with Davon and his mother – Juliet. And again, speaking

on the extent to which a mentor supports her son's outstanding academic achievement

Juliet commented:

> Well again, I got three kids and I'm by myself and I work, too. So, I gotta rely on
> the school to help me out. I know Mr. Smith is helping my son with homework
> and making sure he gets all his work done and gets good grades – just like I try to
> do. I also know that Mr. Smith is helping my son learn how to be a man, though,
> and that means leaving drugs and all that alone.

But, Juliet – apparently – has also done a lot of legwork! Such is apparent through her

comments:

> The job don't pay that much, so I gotta work 12 and 13 hour days sometimes to
> make enough to take care of my family and I do. I do anything for my kids and if
> I gotta get another job, I'd do that, too. I just want my kids to do better than I did
> and not have kids at a young age and gotta work for minimal wage and work half

of your life away just to support and feed and clothe and just to provide for your family. I just want them to do better than I done done.

Over the course of dinner in her tiny, one-bedroom apartment on an autumn evening, Juliet demanded that I tour the apartment with her. She showed me the mouse traps that were conspicuously present throughout the resident – a couple near the refrigerator, a couple near the greasy, stained stove, and some scattered about the stained, browning carpet in the living room. She – a bit reminiscent of Lawrence's mother – held back tears and struggled to say:

> I don't want my kids to live like this and I don't want to live like this, so I do the best I can to make sure they do better in life than I done done. I just want the best, the very best for my kids and their kids.

Wondering if she was already a grandparent, I probed about the "and their kids reference." She shouted, "I bet not have any." I laughed and she continued engaging in the conversation.

Echoing Davon's sentiments, Lawrence relayed:

> I credit my mom for motivating me because without her being strict and a good mother then I wouldn't have been where I am today. She is strict about me and wants me to succeed and make something of my life. I am smart and I have gotten trophies, always, and people look up to me and I have to thank my mother for making it possible and staying on top of me so I can reach my goal. She motivates me all the time and tells me I can do better and I know I can. She really is the only one in my family and makes me do good in school and good in life.

Just like Davon, when probed as to if other people in life – "family, community, or whatever" – have bearing on his outstanding achievement, Lawrence replied:

> Well, we don't really go to church, so no. And other people, I guess I have uncles and Aunt Mae around me who always talking about staying in school and going to school, but I really don't pay them no mind. So I just think my mom is the main one.

Knowing – specifically – that Lawrence has older sisters, I probed again – actually several times on several occasions – about the extent to which his older sisters may have some bearing on his high achievement. Each time he basically shot back:

> I don't think they are as smart as I am, so my mom doesn't really put the pressure on them as she does on me. Like I think my mom expects a lot out of me, more than them. So I don't really think they have a lot of influence on me.

Curiously, out of the many hours I spent with Lawrence and his mother, they really did not seem terribly interested in the lives of his older sisters. Perhaps there is some validity to Lawrence's assertation that his mom expects much more out of him compared to his sisters and – therefore – treats him much differently.

True to her reputation, Lawrence's mom – Desiree – also teared up during our conversation about the impact of family on her son's achievement:

> There are six of us in that house and I do my damnest to make sure that all fix of us – each one of us – is doing the right thing and doing positive stuff. Each and every one of us and I'll see to it.

Desiree's friend – apparently known as Ms. Joanne – chimed in:

> …she doing what she supposed to be doing and that's taking care of her family and because of her, Lawrence is a good kid and he gone be a good kid and go to college, get an education, and make something of hiself [sic].

Similar to the comments of his peers, Terrence uttered:

My mom is the person who I think helps me do well in school, too. She is always encouraging me to do good in school and constantly tells me that if I don't I won't be or do anything in life. Everytime I tell her how much I hate school and complain she tells me to "deal with it" and tells me it will get me somewhere one day. She really is the only one does that to me.

Apparently finding the question to be a ridiculous one, Candice – Terrence's mother – simply wrote: "Of course I think I have a lot to do with my son's success. I'm his mother and that's what I'm supposed to do." Candice – perhaps – found the question

so absurd that she did not pose the question to her friends who previously submitted comments.

But during a prior conversation, Candice was more elaborate. As previously cited, she once comment on Terrence's father drug addiction and resultant decision to keep a wedge between Terrence and his father and, in turn, the decision to surround Terrence with positive male role models from church and school – as "replace" his absent father.

And Victor – piggybacking off the comments of his peers during an interview – shouted out:

> My mom is the one that motivates me and tells me that I need to get an education; she wants me – and I want – to go to college and get a good job one days and provide for my family one day.

When probed as to if there is another person outside of school who pushes him to do well, he curtly replied "Nope. My mom." Victor's mom – Laverne – corroborated this point in many of our early morning conversations. One on-depth conversation is particularly memorable.

Laverne recounted how she grows frustrated because she is the only one trying to motivate her son to excel. She expressed feeling like there are "so many negative influencers" that she worries that her lone voice, if it is truly lone, is not enough to sustain his academic achievement and commitment to excellence in the classroom. Her genuine concern and mounting fear was present in every word she chose. "He only has one year to go, really," she said, "but you never know what could happen." She thinks there is still a chance he could meet the wrong people or get discouraged about college. It all comes out in a monologue of hope, fear, and frustration. She is careful not to blame

any one "influencer," but verbally thumbs through them with undeniable disdain. The musicians he likes "talk about everything their under-educated money can buy." "Many of his teachers – not all of them – many do not have the time to put into his education because they're too busy keeping order and just getting students to the next phase."

His friends, she continued, are a collection of equally susceptible youths who, even when smart, are still naïve and ignorant to the ways of the world. Each day and every situation presents the potential to change her son's direction for the worse. "There's a lot of room between the classroom and our front door. I can't fill it all, and there are all kinds of people who can," she pointed out. Laverne feels like she's engaged with a constant battle with the world, and Victor's future is at stake. She is hopeful that someone else is on her side, but it is clear she feels they are outnumbered.

This conversation with Laverne – truly – gave new life to a neophyte scholar weary with dissertation research and writing: me. The conversation reminded me about why such work is so important; it can inform policy that helps the likes of Laverne and her vulnerable son.

Cited in Young (2009), many scholars supply reports of how caring parents and concerned family and community members – particularly the mother – provide a framework and structure that helps facilitate high academic achievement. Young also cites that a relatively recent study finds that nearly 70 percent of African-American children in the United States are being raised in female-headed households. Most of these mothers – undoubtedly – want the very best for their sons and do everything possible to support their sons' academic achievement – such was also reflected in the lives of the young men of this ethno-case study. But, unique to this study is the fact that

the young men are generally impacted and supported by their mothers and not church and greater community constituencies.

Sanders (1998) also explored the effects of teacher, family, and church support on the school-related attitudes, behaviors, and academic achievements of African-American urban adolescents. In doing so, Sanders surveyed 827 students in an urban school district in the Southeastern United States; he also conducted interviews with a subset of the research population as to enhance and aid in the analysis of the questionnaire data. The analyzed data indicate that students' perceptions of teacher and parental academic support and their church involvement indirectly influence achievement through their positive and quite significant influences on students' academic self-concepts and school behaviors. But again, the cases of these young men deviated from this finding – as their support seemly singular focused on their mothers with respect to church, community, and family constituencies.

Each of the students spoke eloquently about the positive extent to which family – namely their mother – supports their high academic achievement. In an individual case (i.e., Lawrence), siblings are modestly supportive and influential. Community dynamics apparently have no impact, and church is also equally insignificant– with the exception of Terrence; the other three student-participants and their families are not church-goers.

Summarily, the data for question two is represented below in chart form. The data with respect to each of the three out-of-school factors that potentially support the academic achievements of the student-participants are categorized as most significant, significant, insignificant, and no substantial data.

TABLE XII
DATA SUMMARY OF QUESTION 2 IN CHART FORM

Persons	Church	Community	Family
*Davon	Insignificant	Insignificant	Most significant
Juliet	Insignificant	Insignificant	Most significant
*Lawrence	Insignificant	Insignificant	Most significant
Desiree	Insignificant	Insignificant	Most significant
*Terrence	Significant	Insignificant	Most significant
Candice	Significant	Insignificant	Most significant
Victor	Insignificant	Insignificant, but pieces of data lean toward significant	Most significant
Laverne	Insignificant	Insignificant	Most significant

E.   **What factors shape the resiliency of the student-participants?**

According to Lee (2009), while resiliency has been the focus of many studies in

the context of drug addiction, mental illness, and poor parenting, few studies have

focused on academic resiliency – particularly what academic resiliency looks like with

respect to African-American male students and what nurtures it (Finn and Rock, 1997;

Martin, 2002). A growing body of literature – however – shows that the engagement of

resiliency is paramount to closing cross-cultural academic achievement disparities.

By virtue of surviving and succeeding in blight-stricken neighborhoods and failing schools, it is fair to assume that these young men possess resiliency; but what inspired such resiliency? As to gain insight with respect to the studied students' resiliency and the influences that shape it, the studied students completed a self-reflective piece of writing that about their resiliency.

Davon commented:

> I think students who are from a similar background than me don't do as well as me in school because they can't say "no." When I say they can't say no I mean they follow the crowd. They do what the crowd does and they try so hard to be like the crowd; they just take their mind off school. What made me so resilient is that I learned from my mother and I learned from my mistakes. Last year I didn't do as much of my work and my grades somewhat dropped, now I feel like no matter how big the challenge is I still need to complete it in order to succeed.

When asked to orally elaborate on the prior mentioned written statement, Davon said:

> I think because of the surroundings they be around. Like if someone see another person doing something nine times out of then that person would start to do it, too, cause the other person might think that it makes you cool that monkey see monkey do. What makes me resilient is that I don't follow others. I stay to myself when it comes to a lot of stuff and try to overcome obstacles.

Ironically, I have a pretty vivid recollection of Davon actualizing such sentiments. While observing his Spanish class, Mrs. Cordero struggled mightily to quiet the class as to begin the day's lesson. Davon – intervening on her behalf – "Can ya'll be quiet. This is why ya'll keep failing the quizzes! Damn." As one of more popular students in school, Davon's "authority" seemed to impress upon students much more than that of Mrs. Cordero; students were immediately quiet and subsequently attentive after Davon's outburst. If

Davon also exhibited similar leadership during a scrimmage basketball game. While my impression of a scrimmage game was one of randomness and unstructured

play, Davon frequently called his teammates together – in huddle – and drew up plays

and strategies.

I asked Mrs. Southwell – who openly and perhaps inappropriately acknowledges

Davon as one of her favorite students – about Davon's leadership and sense of resiliency.

She commented:

> I think he's just a very determined young man and I don't know where that comes from. He is just determined to do well and will make sure that he does well in all that he does. And he's a leader.

> Davon's mother also spoke about this inner self-efficacy that Davon's seems to possess:

> He just always been that way and I think he always will be that way. The sports and stuff and teachers help, but he is also just a very determined person. That's just who he is and who he always was. I don't know.

> In this writing piece, Lawrence wrote:

> I think I'm so resilient because that's just my personality. I love a challenge because I know at the end of the day I will conquer whatever. But I don't think the background of where people come for [sic] has any effect in school. Students will learn and do as they choose to do and I choose to do well so do well.

During an interview Lawrence's elaborated on his written comment:

> What I meant by that is, there is a lot I could be doing that no one would ever know about. Like I could be cutting school and missing classes or smoking or any of that. And my mom doesn't babysit me 24-7 and I don't do those things because I don't want to; I'd rather focus on trying to be a good student because I have big plans for my future and I know what I need to do to get there. That just my personality, to work hard because I want to.

True to Lawrence's comment, I saw him exercise a sense of self-efficacy both with

respect to school life and homelife. While generally known as the class clown, Lawrence

is definitely one of the brightest members of his class. Time and time again I witnessed

him taking the initiative to go beyond that which was required by the teacher with respect

to assigned work and with respect to helping others complete assignments. One particularly incident is particularly memorable.

While studying "Of Mice and Men" in Mr. Smith's American Literature class, Mr. Smith accurately pointed out that Robert Burns' poem "To a Mouse" inspired John Steinbeck to write the classic American novella. Much to my chagrin, Mr. Smith did not fully comment on how and why the poem inspired Steinbeck to write the novella; he did not expose students to the poem. The very next day – an unusually warm autumn day – Mr. Smith asked students "What inspired Steinbeck to write this famous novel?" Students hurriedly sifted through their notebooks to find the answer, but Lawrence shouted out "Robert Burns' poem, which I tried to read and didn't understand. It wasn't even written in English." Lawrence corrected relayed that the Scottish poem is difficult to understand, as it is written in a blend of Scottish and English dialect. Lawrence even passed on the printed copy of the poem during class – which – Mr. Smith finally reviewed with the entire class – seemingly through Lawrence's initiative. Bandura (1995) argues that people with high self-efficacy: (1) view challenging problems as tasks to be mastered, (2) develop deep interest in the activities in which they participate, (3) form a stronger sense of commitments to their interest and activities, and (4) recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments. In this scenario, Lawrence perfectly realizes this definition of self-efficacy: he viewed a difficult task as an opportunity – he admitted to reading the poem over and over again in hopes of understanding it; he demonstrated sincere interest in the novel "Of Mice and Men" by reading its inspirational poem – without provocation –; he clearly demonstrated a strong commitment to this literary

analysis interest, and – perhaps most importantly – he recovered from the setback (i.e., his inability to read and understand the poem) by asking for assistance.

While generally a class clown, I also often observed Lawrence in the school's cafeteria, library, and in various classroom spaces helping students complete assignments – though much of his help might be considered cheating.

I recounted the Steinbeck story with Lawrence's mother – several weeks after it occurred. She aptly responded:

That's just always been him. Always. Sometimes I come home from work and I see him in the living room helping his little brother with his homework. He doesn't wait for me to ask him, he just do it. Sometimes he cooks for his little brother without me even asking him, he just do it. That's just been his personality for a long time, as long as I can remember.

Mr. Smith also commented:
I think that's just his personality, too. When the kid is focused, he is focused. Every now and again I have to make him focus, but when he is on it, he's on it. He comes to class a lot having gone above and beyond what I asked the class to do. It's not really unusual.

When probed for another example of the student's self-efficacy, Mr. Smith recounted:

I remember he did the summer reading assignment even before summer started. Right before the end of the school year last year, I assigned all my incoming students a summer reading and writing assignment and Lawrence actually did it even before the school year ended. He said he was bored because teachers had really stopped teaching and he wanted to do something so he did it. I guess that's just his personality.

Interestingly, both Davon and Lawrence spoke about their self-efficacy – not in said terms – and about being the primary contributor to their self-efficacy; neither spoke about the school's advisory curriculum. Advisory is a 30-minute class at the school held on Tuesdays. Lessons and activities focused on (1) understanding the relevance of education to achieving life goals, (2) academic confidence, (3) connectedness to educators, (4) stress management skills, (5) balanced sense of well being, and (6) intrinsic

motivation; the curriculum was developed by a couple of non-profit organization focused on building students resiliency and preparing them for higher education and the workplace.

I specifically asked the student-participants about the extent to which the class inspires their resiliency; Davon and Lawrence replied in the negative. Observations of both students in the class wholly corroborate this point; they were completely disconnected from the lessons and activities and were usually working on assignments for another class during the advisory sessions.

As to gain insight with respect to the studied students' resiliency and the influences that shape it, the studied students engaged in a resiliency-building advisory curriculum that I helped facilitated several times and observed several times, too.

Terrence and Victor responded to these advisory sessions a bit more favorably. During a session on goal setting (i.e., generating career and life goals and plotting steps to get there) both students were completely involved in the activity and subsequent discussion. I learned that Terrence wants to study entertainment law and become a sports agent and Victor wants to run a company – of any genre. I also took note of the extent to which the advisory program at the school has an impact on Terrence and Victor's resiliency. Terrence responded:

> It's one of my favorite parts of coming to school because I feel like we do and talk about things that have a lot to do with what we as kids go through now and what we will face in the future, so I think they are helpful and have a lot to do with my personality and not giving up attitude.

In agreement, Victor commented:

> Oh, I think it helps a lot. It's a time when we can ask and talk about things that are important to us as like a school community and it actually does help me with the discussions and problems I face, too.

Neither student could concretely point to an example as to how the advisory program has informed a past decision, obstacle, or anything of the nature – a question that was posed time and time again. I also failed to even notice the students engaging pieces of learnings from the curriculum in their home or school lives.

Terrence and Victor also completed the self-reflective piece of writing about their resiliency. Terrence commented:

> I think the people who come of my similar background don't do well in school because they don't have motivation or any good and positive motivation. My life has been hard but my struggle for success has made me resilient because I'm too confident that I'm going to do something positive with my life. That's just a part of my personality that I think has always been there.

He elaborated:

> I know a lot of people who are from my neighborhood and come from a similar background as me and they are not doing as good as me and I think it's just because they don't care or don't have that thing within them that makes them want to care and work hard.

As previously cited, commenting on his inner self-efficacy and how it is received by others, Terrence once commented on being called a "nerd" or "acting White or [like] a geek" but followed by saying [his peers do it] "in a joking way." Speaking to his self-efficacy, Terrence also commented about not caring about such "jokes" and letting them impact his academic achievements.

Ironically, during my many weeks in the field I never saw Terrence bullied or mistreated because of his academic performance or "geeky" look – as reference by his guidance counselor. In fact, I frequently saw quite the opposite. I saw a Terrence proud of his smarts and academic accomplishments and I saw his peers celebrate his smarts and academic accomplishments. "Terrence, can you help me with the assignment" and

"Terrence, you're so lucky you get this so quickly" – or some variations of the statements – were common refrains in the field.

I recall – for example – a student struggling in Spanish class and just not understanding conditional verb conjugations and commented, "Damn I wish I got this as quick as Terrence did." At the teacher's behest, Terrence immediately got up and helped the student with the conjugations.

As cited, Mrs. Southwell underscores Terrence's celebration of his intelligence and his peers' celebration of his intelligence, too:

> He really only surrounds himself with kids like him, so I didn't even know he was possibly being bullied. But I guess he's short and looks somewhat geekish and all so I guess it's not that big of a surprise. But it somewhat is a surprise because the kids always ask for his help and seem to like him too.

Terrence's mother is also surprised at the prospect of her son being bullied:

> He's usually a pretty straightforward kid who doesn't care what others think about him and is determined to succeed regardless of what others may think. So even if he is being bullied, I really doubt he cares much.

Quite similar to his three studied peers comments about self-efficacy, Victor commented:

> I want to and do well in school because I just want to become something in life. I do not want just a job, I want a "career." I would rather become a doctor as opposed to flipping burgers for the rest of my life, which I don't see anything wrong with that, but I just picture my life so much more than just that. I want to run my own business one day and I realize that I can't reach that goal if I don't stay focused now. What I do now impacts what I will do tomorrow and I realize that. So I think I am resilient because I know what I want and what I want to be when I get older.

Building upon these comments, Victor elaborated some weeks later:

> I always picture what I want my life to look life when I'm an adult and so I know the steps I need to take to get there. So school for me is about getting me to where I want to be and I don't want to be working in a fast food place when I get

older. I think that's why I work so hard, I just know what I want and I know getting there is going to take hard work and my personality makes me work hard.

Victor – I learned through him during a one-on-one interview – apparently keeps an in-progress business plan in his primary school binder; he envisions a company that allows people to purchase an airline ticket through a third-party travel angry – his company – and pay for the purchase in installments. His business plan – apparently – was not a class assignment, rather just something he did – and maintains – through his own initiative and self-efficacy.

Responding to the plan, his mother – using similar language as the other studied boys with respect to self-efficacy – commented:

> That's just his personality and I think I have a lot to do with that part of his personality and the other factors I mentioned already – but I think at the core that is just his personality; that's just him, it is.

Interestingly, each of the four boys spoke about a sense of self-efficacy – not in said terms – as being that which inspires and supports their resiliency; they also spoke about the in-school factors – chiefly climate in school, extracurricular activities, and peer relationships – and out-of-school factors – mainly mother's influence – as having influence on their resiliency, too. But this sense of self-efficacy – this main point – holds a prominent place in the literature on African-American achievement and is reflected in this study, too.

Representatively, Witherspoon, Speight, and Thomas (1997) examined the extent to which racial identify, self-esteem, and academic self-concept are related to academic achievement for 86 African-American students. The results indicate that the majority of said student indicated support from both peer and parents for their academic work – which my study also finds. But, per the researchers, multiple regression analysis

indicated that grade point average is *best* predicted by immersion racial identity attitudes and academic self-concept and a solid sense of self-efficacy.

The results of my study corroborated that of the Witherspoon, Speight, and Thomas (1997) study.

Point of importance: while participation in this study was contingent upon the students' living in poverty and residing in a single-parent household, no pathology is argued; the study only attempts to speak back to that which is assumed about African-American males enrolled in inner-city, low-performing public high schools.

V. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

A.   Review of the purpose of the project, research questions, and nature of the problem and significance of the project

As discussed, the very discourse of the academic achievement gap – as generally employed in academic circles and public spheres alike – puts forth deceptive, forged narratives about cross-ethnic/racial disparities in academic achievement, whereas the onus is on the "underachieving" pool – generally African-Americans at-large and African-American males, especially – to catch-up to their more privileged peers, all without consideration to that which favors the privileged group.

Noted education scholar Ladson-Billings spoke to this point several years ago:

Last year [2006], in my American Educational Research Association (AERA) presidential address in San Francisco, I challenged my colleagues in education research to reconceptualize this notion of the [academic] achievement gap and to begin to think about the incredible debt that we as a nation have accumulated. So rather than focusing on telling people to catch up, we have to think about how we, all of us, will begin to pay down this mountain of debt that we have amassed at the expense of entire groups of people and their subsequent generations.

Da Silva, Huguley, Kakli, and Rao – editors of The opportunity gap: Achievement and inequality in education (2007) – echo Ladson-Billings and speak to this point of reconceptualizing the academic achievement gap:

[We] shift attention from the current overwhelming emphasis on schools in discussions of the [academic] achievement gap to more fundamental questions about social and educational opportunity. Together [our edited volume] reintroduces the overlooked central issue in educational inequity: the lack of opportunity that many social groups face in our common quest for educational attainment.

Perhaps Evans (2005) – clinical and organizational psychologist – best captures this point about the need for a reconceptualization of the academic achievement gap, given its forged underpinnings:

> The conventional wisdom has it that the achievement gap is a school problem. This belief is invitingly simple, allowing a narrow focus on schools that suits the current passion for accountability through testing. But it is fatally shortsighted. It misunderstands and mistreats schools and, more important, black and Hispanic students.

He continues:

> When we set the [academic] achievement gap and schooling itself in the broader context of how children grow up, it becomes clear that the issue far transcends the classroom. Its roots lie well beyond the reach of schools, and so the underlying dilemma will require much, much more than school-based strategies and programs. Educators must do all they can to pursue promising approaches for reducing the gap. But holding them, almost alone, accountable for closing it is a doomed strategy that can only disserve our most vulnerable children.

Such calls for reconceptualization of the academic achievement gap (i.e., Ladson-Billings, Da Silva, Huguley, Kakli, and Rao, and Evans) are inspired by the reality that many achievement-linked socio-economic privileges are not afforded to most students of color, including access to preparation for important, gatekeeping standardized tests – ones that also fail to predict students' authentic academic abilities and incorporate culturally-biased questions –, enrollment in poorly funded schools where students of color are routinely counseled out and ones where the student body is subjected to low-teacher expectations and other student morale effacing dynamics.

So again, the *framing* and *popular naming* of cross ethnic/racial academic achievement disparities are problematic because they fail to engage and speak to the socio-economic inequities and inequalities that gave and give life to the supposed achievement gap. But, the actual academic achievement disparities are – indeed – real and significant; the construct of the achievement gap is a false binary, but the underpinning disparities of the gap are real and significant as society treats them as real and significant.

At the time of the conceptualization of this dissertation project (2009), for example, data distilled from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams in math and reading indicate that only 12 percent of African-American eight-grade boys are proficient in reading, compared to 38 percent of White boys. And only 12 percent of African-American eight-grade boys are proficient in math, compared to some 44 percent of White boys. Localized and non-gendered data with respect to the exam are similarly troubling. Table 13, borrowed from Gotham Schools (2009) – an independent news source for New York City public schools – indicates that only 19 percent of African-American eight-grade students demonstrated proficiency in math in 2007, compared to 55 percent of White students; the table also indicates little progress with respect to closing this "achievement gap" over nearly a two-decade timeframe. Table 14, also borrowed from Gotham School (2009), indicates that only 19 percent of African-American eight-grade test-takers demonstrated proficient in reading, compared to 57 percent of White students; the table also indicates a decade-long steady "achievement gap."

TABLE XIII
2007 NAEP MATH SCORES FOR NEW YORK

	1990	1992	1996	2000	2003	2005	2007
White	273	280	283	284	293	290	290
Gap	39	46	40	33	37	32	32
African-American	234	233	243	251	255	259	258

African-American: 19 %; White: 55%

TABLE XIV
2007 NAEP READING SCORES FOR NEW YORK

	1998	2002	2003	2005	2007
White	275	274	277	276	274
Gap	28	28	32	34	29
African-American	246	246	246	242	246

African-American: 19 %; White: 57%

These NAEP data indicate that persistent, pervasive, and problematic disparities exist with respect to the performances of African-American students compared to White students – which, again, captures the popular framing of the achievement gap. These NAEP data are also representative of multiple achievement gaps with respect to the performances of African-American students compared to White students – gaps that are evident in nearly every measure of academic achievement (e.g., standardized test scores, high school completion rates, grade point averages, and college entrance and completion rates) and throughout the American educational pipeline.

These gaps, furthermore, have major bearing on the life outcomes of representative persons, particularly with respect to employability, probability of attaining low wage-paying employment, diminished earning potential, and even high-risk behaviors and subsequent health outcomes. Olneck (2005) captures this point:

> Continuing racial disparities in academic achievement engender persistent disparities in educational attainment. While 18% of twenty-six- to twenty-nine-year-old African Americans in 2001 had completed a four-year postsecondary degree or better, 33% of European Americans had done so. Because both academic achievement and educational attainment directly affect adult occupational status and earnings, and do so increasingly, and because economic well-being is essential to broader well-being in a society in which already weak welfare-state provisions are being eroded at an accelerated pace, we are impelled to ask about the economic costs of the achievement gap for African Americans.

Thusly, achievement disparities are not simply disparities in achievement, but disparities in access to positive life outcomes across multiple dimensions, namely economic and health spheres. Narrowing achievement gaps, therefore, is also tantamount in narrowing cross-ethnic/racial economic and health gaps. So, while the framing and popular naming of the achievement gap are problematic – as they do not speak to the socio-political factors that created and spur the gap – engaging and addressing the disparities reflected in the gap are important as they have major bearings on life outcomes. Simply put, educational efforts are needed to address cross-ethnic/racial disparities as (1) they have major bearing on the life outcomes of students and (2) society treats them as real as they are products of fixtures of American education (e.g., standardized tests).

B.   The project

Given the life outcome disparities propelled by achievement disparities, this project takes aim at engaging – narrowing – achievement disparities with respect to African-American males by engaging a group of four high-achieving African-American males enrolled in an inner-city, low-performing, public high school and capturing – via ethno-case study (i.e., a blend of ethnography and case study methods) – (1) how did formal schooling experiences support their academic successes, (2) how did church, community, family, and other non-school constituencies support their academic successes, and (3) what influences shaped their resiliency. The findings to these research questions definitely have a place in the conversation about improving the achievement outcomes of similarly situated African-American males and – in doing so – help narrow achievement disparities and life outcome disparities with respect to this population.

The point that student voice and student voice initiatives are paramount to closing academic achievement disparities – part of Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory – and the working assumption that socio-political factors greatly influence the academic engagement and achievement of African-American male high school students enrolled in low-performing, inner-city, public high school serve as the theoretical framing of this project.

The feminist tradition – through my building power-balanced, reciprocal relationships with the student-participants, building of trustworthiness, and forefronting of my commitments and subjectivities – influenced the data collection process. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) – through my participation in youth development activities with the student-participants – also influenced the data collection process.

C. **The results: How did formal schooling experiences support the academic successes of the student-participants?**

Formal schooling experiences are defined as climate in school, extracurricular activities, and peer relationships.

Climate in school – largely defined as access to and utilization of a mentor in the school – has the most bearing on the academic successes of the student-participants. The data suggest that the student-participants' mentors inspire, motivate, and push their mentees to pursue excellence with respect to academic achievement, future plans (i.e., college and career plans), and personal lives (i.e., human relationships and interactions). The data also suggest that the student-participants' mentors serve as school-situated parents after the school day concludes. This mentor-mentee relationship might be referenced as an IMP + P = OAA one, one where the former inspires, motivates, and

pushes the latter – in increasing order – and finally parents the latter after the school day concludes, all of which *contributes to* – not equals – outstanding academic achievement on the students' part.

With respect to the inspiration piece of the equation, the data suggest that the student-participants' mentors inspire the former to pursue excellence in terms of academic achievement, future plans (i.e., college and career plans), and personal lives (i.e., human relationships and interactions) – herein referenced as the three spheres of influence. Representatively, Davon's mother leveraged Mr. McKenzie's influence on her son to end Davon's usage of marijuana; she knew her son was inspired by Mr. McKenzie and would be embarrassed by having to admit to using an illegal substance to his mentor. Davon and his peer student-participants also indicated – on several occasions – being inspired by mentors in the building to pursue excellence and even suggested a desire to "be like them" [the mentors] one day. Several pieces of data – including anecdotal, ethnographic data – distilled from the student-participants and ancillary research participants (i.e., parents, school support staff, and teachers) suggest that this inspiration piece of the equation is paramount in nurturing the outstanding academic achievement of the student-participants at this particular school.

Mentors of the student-participants also motivate the student-participants to pursue excellence in the three spheres of influence. Representatively, Lawrence often commented on the great extent to which his mentor draws the relationship between school success and career and at-large life success for him. Terrence commented – in great detail – as to how his mentor motivates and encourages him to work hard and pursue excellence in the three spheres of influences – even "when I don't feel like

[pursuing excellence with respect to academic achievement]." Victor also commented – many times – that his mentor check-in with him about the spheres of influences at various times and in various spaces throughout the school week. Several pieces of data – including anecdotal, ethnographic data – distilled from the student-participants and ancillary research participants (i.e., parents, school support staff, and teachers) also suggest that this motivation piece of the equation is paramount in nurturing the outstanding academic achievement of the student-participants at this particular school.

In addition to inspiring and motivating the student-participants to do well at this particular school, the mentors also push students – as a last resort – to do well in school, in future planning, and human relationships. Pushing entails requiring students to complete and submit bi-monthly progress reports, threatening to kick students off of extracurricular activities should inadequacies in any of the spheres of influence become apparent, and calling the students' parents regarding apparent inadequacies. Several pieces of data – including anecdotal, ethnographic data – distilled from the student-participants and ancillary research participants (i.e., parents, school support staff, and teachers) also suggest that this push piece of the equation is paramount in nurturing the outstanding academic achievement of the student-participants at this particular school.

And finally, after the school day concludes, the student-participants are engaged in an average of 3.375 extracurricular activities. A piece of this involvement – no doubt – is about the mentor being an afterschool surrogate parent – watching and safeguarding students – as actual parents are prevented from doing so by other familial and work responsibilities. Lawrence's mother succinctly commented on the topic:

> I just do what I can. But I know what I can do ain't enough. It just ain't enough. And I know it ain't enough everyday. It's only me and I got five kids; it's only

me. So, I gotta make these kids stay busy because I know what I can do ain't
enough. So I put 'em in sports and my girls in cheerleading and dancing because
I know what I can do just ain't enough and the coaches and teachers help.

Several pieces of data – including anecdotal, ethnographic data – distilled from the

student-participants and ancillary research participants (i.e., parents, school support staff,

and teachers) also suggest that this post-school day surrogate parenting piece of the

equation – mentors' safeguarding and watching of students after the school day through

the latters' participation in extracurriculars – is paramount in nurturing the outstanding

academic achievement of the student-participants at this particular school.

Over the course of a sample span of five academic months, each student-

participant engaged in many meaningful contacts with a mentor in the school.

Meaningful contacts are defined as contacts and encompassing conversations between

mentor and mentee – initiated by either party – around an important issued, as determined

by at least one of the two parties. Chart 9 indicates that – on average – each student-

participant had a meaningful contact with a teacher-mentor 16 times – an average of once

a week over a five-month period. These meaningful contacts generally centered around

the three spheres of influence: academic achievement, future plans (i.e., college and

career plans), and personal lives (i.e., human relationships and interactions). Davon and

Victor, as representative examples, indicate the three-topic nature of their informal

mentor-mentee relationship with Mr. McKenzie. Davon commented:

> We talk about a lot of stuff, but it's usually always about how I'm doing in school
> and if I'm doing well in school, what I want to do with my future – like what
> college I want to go to and what I want to study, and sometimes we talk about
> things that I have going on at home and with my mom, sister, or whatever. When
> my mom found that joint in my drawer at home, we talked about that for a long
> time. I think he [Mr. McKenzie] thought I was using like real hardcore drugs and
> not just weed, so we talked about that for a long, long time.

And Victor commented:

> My coaches definitely look after me and so when we meet we discuss school – grades and if I'm getting at least Bs –, possibly playing basketball in college or what else I can do in college, and what I'm going to do after school [after completing college]. Sometimes we talk about sports, too. I'm a [Dallas] Cowboys fan and he hates Dallas, but it's mainly about those things [academic achievement, future plans (i.e., college and career plans), and personal lives (i.e., human relationships and interactions)].

The school's administration argues that demographically similar peers of the student-participants who did not participate in this study probably only average a handful of meaningful contacts with an adult mentor in the building and, consequently, probably have a lower grade point average. This underscores the important impact of a mentor on academic achievement.

And mentors – no doubt – collectively form a clear centerpiece of this school's climate and have the largest impact on the academic achievement of the student-participants at this particular high school. IMP + P = OAA seems a propos.

Student-participant participation in extracurricular activities also has some bearing on their outstanding academic achievement, although minimal and slight compared to the mentorship piece and peer relationships; minimal congruence with respect to the data pointing to a definitively strong connection between participation in extracurricular activities and outstanding academic achievement underscores this point.

Davon – one of the most involved students at the school and of the student-participant bunch with respect to extracurricular involvement – affirms the great extent to which such involvement supports his outstanding academic achievement and buffers him from high-risk behaviors outside the school, particularly after the school day. The at-

large ethnographic and case study data distilled from Davon and ancillary research participants (i.e., his mother, school support staff, and teachers) support Davon's point.

Lawrence's lacking involvement in extracurriculars suggests minimal and/or unfounded impact on his outstanding academic achievement; he was only involved in football for a partial season.

Terrence and Victor's narratives suggest minimal and/or unfounded impact on the extent to which extracurriculars support their outstanding academic achievement.

Peer relationships have significant impact on the outstanding academic achievement of the student-participants – equal to that of the mentorship piece. Peer relationships in the studied cases are important and supportive of excellent academic achievement in at least three ways: (1) the students encourage and help each other to excel academically, generally without ridicule for academic success, (2) the students support each other's future ambitions and plans, and (3) the students lead each other to excel by example.

The student-participants encourage and help each other to excel academically, generally without ridicule for academic success – such was actualized by the students tutoring each other, helping each other complete assignments and prepare for assessments, and sometimes holding friendly competitions with respect to academic accomplishments.

As cited, Lawrence once asked Terrence if he completed his double-entry journal for homework for English class. Terrence replied in the affirmative and Lawrence asked to copy the assignment. Terrence – well knowing that copying another student's reaction to a literary piece would not go unnoticed – rejected Lawrence's request. Lawrence

literally begged and pleaded until Terrence finally gave way and allowed his work to be copied. When I probed Terrence about his decision, he replied:

> Well, I know he has good grades and I kinda want him and all of us to keep our good grades. I was taught to help my friends and help everyone if I can and that it would ultimately come back to me in good ways in the long run. I mean, I know it's wrong, but I want to see him do well, too.

Terrence's reaction in this incident is emblematic at the great extent to which the student-participants do – indeed – encourage and help each other excel academically.

Ferguson (2001), in Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity, argues that African-American males are disproportionately getting in trouble – being suspended and even expelled – from the nation's public school systems. She argues that a large impetus to such disproportionatility is school leaders and teachers' warped view of the African-American male student; he is oft-times labeled as "unsalvageable" and "bound of jail." Such popular attributions aimed at the African-American male student runs contrary to the narratives of the student-participants in this study. Representatively, for example, while Terrence wanted to reject Victor's pleas to copy his homework assignment, he – Terrence – ultimately complied because he "want[s] to see him [Victor] do well [in school], too." Such an example of academic help and support among African-American males runs counter to the popular narratives about this population (i.e., they are "unsalvageable" and "bound for jail").

Moreover, such a support mechanism among African-American males, which were plentiful among the student-participants of this study, might be deemed an example of deviance and recalcitrance by larger society, particularly school leaders and teachers. Such a potential deeming, however, misses the target in the sense that the student-participants in this study were keenly aware of their occupation of a biased, and racist

classroom space and participation in a larger inequitable and unequal education system – discussed in chapter 1 of this document – and use such cheating support mechanisms to resist the biased-nature of their school environments. In commenting "I was taught to help my friends…," Terrence seems to acknowledge this point of resistance. Ferguson (2001) puts it best; she argues that rather than simply internalizing the labels of deviance and recalcitrance ascribed to them, African-American boys resist the labels through performing that which is expected of them and supporting each other in authentic ways (e.g., the aforementioned Terrence and Victor's narrative.

But again, Terrence did experience minimal teasing with respect to his "geeky" appearance and outstanding academic accomplishments, unlike his peer student-participants and despite his academic support of his peer student-participants.

The student-participants also support each other's future ambitions and plans – such is actualized by constant and on-going informal conversations about college and career plans, the exchange of tangible information and resources about college and career plans, and generally supporting each other to do well as to reach future ambitions and plans. Emblematically, Davon constantly visits Terrence's house during late evenings – and the homes of many other peers – as to use their internet access to research colleges and future career plans.

The student-participants also lead each other to outstanding academic success by example; they apparently are competitive and want to remain competitive with their peers – academically – and with respect to academic rewards (e.g., honor roll and standardized test scores). Such is evidenced in each student-participant's comments – and the at-large data – about his not wanting to be the least academic accomplished within peer networks.

So with respect to in-school factors, mentor-mentee relationships and peer relationships were found to have equal and significant bearing on the outstanding academic successes of the student-participants, while involvement in extracurricular activities was only positively impactful for one student – Davon –, minimal and/or unfounded for Lawrence, and unfounded for Terrence and Victor.

D.   The results: How did church, community, family, and other non-school constituencies support the academic successes of the student-participants?

With respect to church and its impact on the academic successes of the student-participants, only Terrence's narrative suggests a positive impact – the other student-participants and their families are not churchgoers which, therefore, speaks to the minimal impact of such on their academic successes.

Representatively, Terrence's mother commented:

> Terrence's father has an addiction problem and he's been struggling with this addiction problem for a long time. I don't think he will ever get over his addiction and I've tried to help him. So I purposefully kept him out of Terrence's life. I don't think you can be a father or a good father if you are stuck on drugs. So yes, I do make sure that Terrence has positive male role models in his life to somewhat take on the duties of his absent father. Some of these people are his teacher and some men in my church, too. But Terrence actually established a relationship with the male teachers in his school even without me doing anything. He just did it and I think it helps him keep his grades up and keeps him out of trouble.

With respect to community, family, and other non-school constituencies and their impact on the academic successes of the student-participants, only family has bearing. In fact, the word "family" looms too large; only each student-participant's mother has bearing on their academic successes. Community, other family members, and other non-school constituencies were readily and quickly dismissed in the data analysis process as impactful. The narrative of each student with respect to his mother's encouragement,

discipline, and structure suggests she – each mom – has major bearing on her son's academic successes.

Each student-participant's story indicates that his mother's encouragement plays a large part in his academic successes. Representatively, Davon once commented:

> My moms motivate me and pushes me to do better whenever she felt like the need to. She knew how to discipline me, but also show me the love I needed to do well in school and to do well in life. She did it by herself, too.

Each mother's discipline also has a great deal to do with her student's academic successes. Each mother is not only demanding of outstanding academic achievements, but also use tangible rewards and takeaways as consequences (e.g., threatening to remove the student-participants from a certain extracurricular activity should grades and overall achievement drop). Discipline is also manifested through each mother's requiring student-participants to adhere to a daily schedule, which sometimes includes going to school, post-school day involvement in extracurriculars, babysitting siblings and relatives, doing homework and studying, and household chores.

Summarily, each of the students spoke eloquently about the positive extent to which family – namely their mother and her encouragement, discipline, and structure – support their high academic achievement. In an individual case (i.e., Lawrence), siblings are minimally influential. Community dynamics apparently have minimal and/or unfounded impact, and church is also equally insignificant – with the exception of Terrence; the other three student-participants and their families are not churchgoers.

E. **What influences shaped the resiliency of the student-participants?**

Each of the four boys spoke about a sense of self-efficacy – not in said terms – as being that which inspires and supports their resiliency; they also spoke about the in-

school factors – chiefly climate in school, extracurricular activities, and peer relationships – and out-of-school factors – mainly mother's influence – as having influence on their resiliency, too.

But this sense of self-efficacy – this main point – holds a prominent place in the literature on African-American achievement and is reflected in this study, too.

Representatively, as previously cited, While studying "Of Mice and Men" in Mr. Smith's American Literature class, Mr. Smith accurately pointed out that Robert Burns' poem "To a Mouse" inspired John Steinbeck to write the classic American novella. Much to my chagrin, Mr. Smith did not fully comment on how and why the poem inspired Steinbeck to write the novella; he did not expose students to the poem. The very next day – an unusually warm autumn day – Mr. Smith asked students "What inspired Steinbeck to write this famous novel?" Students hurriedly sifted through their notebooks to find the answer, but Lawrence shouted out "Robert Burns' poem, which I tried to read and didn't understand. It wasn't even written in English." Lawrence correctly relayed that the Scottish poem is difficult to understand, as it is written in a blend of Scottish and English dialect. Lawrence even passed on the printed copy of the poem during class – which – Mr. Smith finally reviewed with the entire class – seemingly through Lawrence's initiative.

Such examples of self-efficacy with respect to education occurred throughout the course of this study; self-efficacy, therefore, is absolutely the prominent point with respect to that which inspires and nurtures each student' resiliency.

F.   The policy recommendations

1. According to Levine (2006):

…as many as one-quarter to one-third of American teacher education programs do an excellent job. But most of our future teachers are being prepared in the remainder of these programs, which too often have inadequate curriculums, low standards, and faculty disconnected from the schools. More than three out of five alumni say teacher education programs do not prepare graduates for classroom realities.

In his sharp and wide-reaching criticism of teacher education programs across the States, Levine speaks to a number of ways in which such schools of education must be transformed – including curricular transformation. While he does not speak at great depth about the curricular transformation piece, a piece of it has to include preparing future inner-city schools teachers to be mentors with respect to the three spheres of influence (i.e., academic achievement, future plans (i.e., college and career plans), and personal lives (i.e., human relationships and interactions). No longer can and should we – the education community – assume that by virtue of life experience teachers are automatically primed and prepared to assume such a mentor role.

The mentor piece must and should be an explicit piece of the teacher-training process and must and should be a part of the responsibilities of all high school-level classroom teachers, particularly in the States' inner-cities.

2. As previously referenced, participation in extracurricular activities is known to have positive bearing on the achievement of African-American youths – although the student-participants narratives represent scholarly disagreement. Longitudinal studies on school athletics, for example, suggest that such participation raises students' grades and test scores (Fejgin, 1994; Hanson and Kraus, 2003). Hebert (1998) also notes that participation in extracurricular activities – including athletics – reinforces a positive sense of self through building a sense of accomplishment with respect to African-American males; this positive self-image, Hebert contends, generally precedes strong academic

performance. Harper (2005) discusses that when thinking about their high school experiences, academically successful African-American male college students generally report on the positive benefits associated with membership in high school athletic teams and student clubs and organizations. And Halpern (1992) indicates that such involvement in after-school activities and programs offer young men the structure that might be missing in their lives which generally translates into improved academic achievement.

While this particular ethno-case study does not show a strong link between involvement in extracurricular activities and outstanding student academic achievement, the literature is clear on the issue – they matter and they matter a lot. Extracurricular activities, therefore, must continue to hold a place in the school day and post-school day, especially. They help provide students with a highly structured day – which might be missing the students' home lives, keep students off of sometimes dangerous streets, nurture students' interest, and provide leverage and an opportunity to connect students to school.

Schools, therefore, must take seriously the importance of extracurricular activities and grow the opportunities as abundantly as possible.

3. Scholars have been studying the effects of parent attitudes and actions on the academic successes of students for quite sometime and the results are fairly consistent: parent attitudes and actions matter, a lot! Henderson and Berla (1994) reviewed the existing body of literature on the topic and argue – quite succinctly – "When parents are involved in their children's education at home, they do better in school. And when parents

are involved in school, children go farther in school and the schools they go to are better."

This point is also apparent through this ethno-case study. Schools, therefore, must take seriously the charge about engaging parents and a piece of the conversation can and should be schools' helping parents learn how to be involved. A piece of the puzzle often omitted is the false understanding that parents always know how to be involved and this, no doubt, is a poor and faulty assumption that needs and deserves addressing.

G. **Reflections: What was personally satisfying? What was challenging? Were expectations met? At-large considerations for scholars engaging similar work**

Several personally satisfying learnings emerged after the completion of this study. First, youths and their lived experiences – particularly academically successfully African-American male youths – must be a part of the conversation about education reform with respect to closing cross ethnic/racial academic achievement disparities. These young people have and should have a lot to say about reform efforts aimed at improving their academic achievement on traditional academic indices and that of their peers; the student-participants involved in this project were incredibly open and wanting to share their lived experiences and perspectives in hopes of narrowing said cross ethnic/racial achievement disparities. Second, while the Americanized version of Afro-pessimism is alive and well in education spaces – the notion that the future of the academic achievement of African-Americans is bleak given the multitude of problems facing the community and its schools –, my hope in a better tomorrow was reaffirmed through the extraordinary narratives of the student-participants who – *against all odds* – found academic success. I learned that more hopeful narratives do exist and those narratives reaffirm the importance of my work

and similar work. Third, the student-participants, moreover, – through their achievements *against all odds* – and the ancillary research participants – also inspired me to maintain some graceful fortitude while carrying out this difficult dissertation project. And finally, I learned that research is – indeed – strengthened by the methodological engagement of the feminist tradition as its implicit power-balanced relationships and reciprocal relationships with the researched allow for a garnering of more authentic data sets and allows for an avoidance of data rape – the notion of researchers extracting and using data garnered from human subjects in a way that benefits the researchers, but offers little to nothing to the studied. I did not simply extra data from the student-participants and other participating research subject, but I also served as coach, mentor, and teacher throughout the duration of the study.

The engagement of the feminist tradition and youth participatory action research (YPAR), which call for power-balanced, reciprocal relationships between the research and researched, and the engagement of youth in data-garnering action projects, was definitely the most compelling and engaging part of completing this research project. Not only did I get to know the student-participants and other ancillary research participants (i.e., parents, school support staff, and teachers), but doing so allowed me to garner more authentic data set while simultaneously offering tangible benefits and rewards to the studied. The engagement of both traditions also allowed me to develop authentic relationships with the student-participants and their families, relationships that I know will continue will into the future.

Engrained in such a reward of engaging the two traditions – feminist and YPAR – , moreover, was being emotionally drained by such ethnographic involvement in the lives

of the student-participants; it was increasingly difficult to hold conversations with Lawrence's mother – for example – about her inability to raise her son by herself – materially and emotionally –, and to her about Terrence's father's life-long struggles with drug addiction and resultant abandonment of his family.

All in all, however, my expectations with respect to the study were met and even exceeded. These reflections can and should inform researchers interested in similar work. I would suggest that such persons also engage the two traditions and – to the best extent possible – avoid data rape and offer tangible benefits and rewards to the studied – who might desperately need them.

Appendix A: Student interview schedule

General information
1. Where do you live? How long have you lived at this address?
2. Have you ever lived away from your family? If so, when and what were the surrounding circumstances?

Present family
3. Who in your family are you most like?
4. Who in your family do you most want to be like?
5. Of all the people you know, who do you feel the closest to now? How often do you see this person? What do you do together? When do you feel most close to him or her?
6. When you were younger, who took care of you most of the time? What are some of the things he or she did for you? Was there anyone who took care of you after that; if so, when and what were the surrounding circumstances?
7. Who makes most of the decisions in your family? Does he or she talk about it with other people in the family? If yes, with whom?
8. Who do you go to when you need help with your homework?
9. Is there someone who you can talk to who really understands you?

Peer group
10. Who do you hang with?
11. Are your closest friends at this school? Describe your friends?
12. Was it easy to make friends here?
13. Who would you trust most if you were in trouble?
14. What sorts of things do you and your friends to together?
15. Are you friends as smart as you? If so, do you intentionally hang with smart people?
16. Within your circle of friends, what happens when two guys disagree or get mad at each other? Give me some examples?
17. Is there anything that your friends would like to do differently from the way you do it?

School
18. Who is the best teacher you have had this school year? Describe him or her.
19. Is there a teacher this year that you're having trouble with? Describe the difficulties.
20. Would you like any of your teachers to give you more attention or help? How so?
21. What sorts of things seem to bother teachers most at your school? Give me an example. How do they handle it? What is discipline like at your school?
22. What kinds of trouble have you had in school?
23. What have you liked most in school? Why? Were you especially good at that?
24. What is your favorite subject and why?
25. What is your favorite school-site activity?

26. What have you hated or disliked about school the most? Why? Was there anything you could do about it?
27. How are you doing in your courses this year?
28. Would you say it's easier for you to learn school subjects than others in your class, or harder for you to learn than for other kids, or just the same?
29. Is your school different in any way from other schools you know about? How?
30. Have you talked with any teacher about: what college you would like to attend; what career you want to pursue; what courses you should take?
31. How far do think most of your friends will go in school? Why?
32. Is there any one person in particular who you think has a special interest in how well you do in school? What do they say about your schoolwork?
33. If you were able to as far in school as you wanted, how far would you go and why?
34. How far do you actually think you will go in school?
35. What would have to happen for you to graduate from high school and college?
36. Do you ever think about dropping out? If so, why? If not, why not?
37. Describe your ideal teacher.
38. Describe your involvement in school clubs and sports.
39. Why do you think you do well in school? Is it because of the school, your family, something within you? Describe.
40. What does it take to be a part of these clubs and sports and why are you involved?

Work

41. What do you want to do for a living when you grow up?
42. What do you have to do to become this person? What kind of training do you need? Where would you go to school for this? What first made you think of this career?
43. Have you received any advice or counseling at school about this career choice? From whom? What did he or she say?
44. Can you think of some types of work you would not like to do? Why?

Self-Concept

45. Everyone has some things that he's especially good at and other things he's pretty bad at. What things would you say you can do pretty much better than the average boy your age?
46. If you could be different in any other ways, how would you be different? Why?
47. If you could grow up to be like any person you know, who would you pick and why? What would you have to change to become more like him or her?
48. If you had a chance to change places with any boy your age that you know – be like him and have his life – who would you switch with and why? Do you know families that you like so much sometimes that you think it would be nice to be a member of that family?
49. Who of the boys your age that you know, would you most hate to be like? Why

Neighborhood, House, and Travel

50. How would you describe your neighborhood? How does it look? What kinds of buildings are there? What kinds of people live there?
51. Where do you usually go to hang out in the neighborhood? Do you have any favorite places for hanging out? Where are they? Why do you like to hang out there?
52. Are there some places in your neighborhood that you are not allowed to go? Where and why?
53. Where do you go when you want to be alone?
54. If you won a free trip to any place in the world, where would you go? Why/? How did you know about this place? Any place else? Why?

Appendix B: Teacher and school-adult interview schedule

General information
1. What is your full name?
2. What do you teach?
3. How long have you been at this school? Where do you teach before being here?
4. Can you describe some of the advantages of teaching at this school?
5. Can you describe some of the things that you like less about teaching at this school?
6. Can you describe some of the things that have changed about this school since you've been teaching here?

Students
7. How would you characterize the students at this school?
8. Are students given a fair amount of freedom within the school?
9. Would you characterize students as proactive in their education? If so, how so? If not, why do you think this is the case?
10. Do you personally mentor a student or some students here? What does this mentorship look like?
11. With respect to mentoring students, how much of said job should a teacher take on and how much is the job of parents?
12. Why do you think some students do better in school at this school than others? Is it because of the school, your family, something within you? Describe.

School
13. Are there any teachers who are known to give students more attention than others?
14. What sorts of things seem to bother teachers the most at your school?
15. What are the greatest instructional obstacles teachers encounter here?
16. Do you think this school is drastically different than others with which you are familiar? If so, how?
17. Are teachers here actively involved in advising students regarding college, activities, programs, etc?
18. Do you think students find attending this school stressful?
19. Do you ever have students come to you to discuss personal or academic matters? Can you give me a few examples?
20. Are you involved in any clubs, committees, teams, special responsibilities?

Appendix C: Parent interview schedule

General information
1. What is your full name?
2. How long have you lived at your home location?
3. Have you ever lived away from your family? If yes, when and what were the circumstances?

Present family
4. Can you tell me something about each person who lives in your house, starting with the oldest person?
5. Who in your family is your son most like?
6. Who took care of your son most of the time when he was younger?
7. Who makes most of the decision in your family? Does he or she talk about these decisions with other people in the family?
8. Who helps your son with his homework and school matters?
9. Is church/religion an important part of your family's life? Does your son enjoy going to church?

Peer group
10. Who does your son hang around with?
11. Do you like most of his friends? Are there any you don't like? If so, why?
12. What sorts of things does your son and his friends do together?
13. Does your son talk about his friends or his activities with his friends, with you?
14. Is there anything about your son's activities with his friends that you would like to see change?

School
15. Does your son talk about school with you?
16. Is there any teacher or class this year that he particularly likes?
17. Is there any teacher or class with him/which he is having trouble?
18. Does he ever mention other adults in the school?
19. What – if any – kinds of difficulties has he had in school this year?
20. What have you liked most about his attending this school?
21. What have you liked least about his attending this school?
22. How is he doing in his course?
23. How different is this school than others with which you are familiar?
24. Is there one person in particular who you think has a special interest in how well your school does in school?
25. If he were able to go far in school as he wanted to, how far would you want your son to go?
26. What would have to happen in order for your son to graduate from high school?
27. Does your son ever talk about dropping out of high school? If so, why? If not, why do you think this is not the case?
28. Do you think it's important for your son to be involved in extracurricular activities? If so, why? If not, why not?
29. Describe your son's extracurricular activities.

30. Why do you think your son does well in school? Is it because of the school, your family, something within you? Describe.

Work
31. What do you want your son to do for a living when he grows up?
32. Have you ever offered him advice about this?
33. Can you think of some types of work you would not like your son to do?

Self-concept
34. If you could have your son be different in any other ways, how would you like him to be different?

Neighborhood, house, and travel
35. How would you describe your neighborhood? How does it look? What kinds of buildings are there? What kinds of people live there?
36. Where do you usually go to hang out in the neighborhood? Do you have any favorite places for hanging out? Where are they? Why do you like to hang out there?
37. Are there some places in your neighborhood that you are not allowed to go? Where and why?
38. Where do you go when you want to be alone?
39. If you won a free trip to any place in the world, where would you go? Why/? How did you know about this place? Any place else? Why?

Appendix D: Observation protocol

Research Question: _____

What I saw, heard, and/or experienced in relation to research question(s)	My sense-making about that which I saw, heard, and/or experienced in relation to research question(s)

Analysis of these fieldnotes:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

<u>Document analysis protocol</u>

Research Question: _____

Document: _____

What I read in a document in relation to research question(s)	My sense-making about what I read in relation to research question(s)

Analysis of these fieldnotes:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

REFERENCES

Alder, P., Kless, S., and Alder, P. (1992). Socialization to gender roles: Popularity among elementary school boys and girls. *Sociology of Education, 65*, 12-24.

Anderson, C. (1982). The search for school climate: A review of the research. *Review of Educational Research, 52*, 368-420.

Anderson, J. (1989). *The education of Blacks in the south, 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Au, K. (2006). *Multicultural issues and literacy achievement*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Bandura, A. (1995). *Self-Efficacy in Changing Societies*. Cambridge: University Press.

Barth, P., Haycock, K., Jackson, H., Mora, K., Ruiz, P., Robinson, S., and Wilkins, A. (Eds.). (1999). Dispelling the myth: High poverty schools exceeding expectations. Washington, DC: Education Trust.

Barton, P. (2004). Why does the gap persist? *Educational Leadership, 62*(3), 8-13.

Beir, S., Rosenfeld, W., Spitalny, K., Zansky, S., and Bontmpo, A. (2000). The potential role of an adult mentor in influencing high-risk behaviors in adolescents. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Medicine, 154*, 327-331.

Bellin, M. and Kovacs, P. (2006). Fostering resiliency in siblings of youths with a chronic heart condition: A review of the literature. *Health and Social Work, 31*(3), 34-54.

Berg, M., Coman, E., and Schensul, J. (2009). Youth action research for prevention: A multi-level intervention designed to increase efficacy and empowerment among urban youth. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 43*, 345-359.

Bernard, B. (1991). *Fostering resiliency in kids: Protective factors in the family, school, and community.* Portland, OR: Western Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities.

Bernard, B. (1993). Turning the corner: From risk to resiliency, a compilation of articles from "The Western Center News." Portland, OR: Western Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities.

Billson, J. (2006). *The power of focus groups: The training manual for social, policy, and market research*. Barrington, RI: Skywood Press.

Bowles, G. and Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America*. London: Routledge

and Kegan Paul.

Bryk, A. and Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). The ecology of human development: *Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cammarota, J. and Fine, M. (2008). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion*. New York, NY: Routledge Press.

Carter, S. (2000). *No excuses: Lessons from 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools*. Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation.

Case, A. and Katz, L. (1991). *The effects of family and neighborhood on disadvantaged youths*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Caspi, A., Moffitt, T., Silva, P., and Wright, B. (1998). Early failure in the labor market: Childhood and adolescent predictors of unemployment in the transition to adulthood. *American Sociological Review, 63*(3), 424-451.

Cawelti, G. (2000). Portrait of a benchmark school. *Educational Leadership, 57*(5), 42-44.

Center for Social and Emotional Education. (2009). School climate research summary. New York, NY: Center for Social and Emotional Education. Retrieved from www.nscc.csee.net/effecive/school_climate_research_summary.pdf

Christie, K. (2002, October). States address achievement gaps. *Phi Delta Kappan, 84*(2), 102-103.

Cohen, G., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., and Master, A. (2006). Reducing the racial achievement gap: A social-psychological intervention. *Science, 313*(5791), 1307-1310.

Conchas, G. (2006). *The color of success: Race and high-achieving urban youth*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Cooper, R. and Jordan, W. (2005). Cultural issues in comprehensive school reform. In Olatokunbo S. Fashola (Ed), *Educating African American males: Voices from the field* (pp. 3-25). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., and Isaacs, M. (1989). *Towards a culturally competent system of care*. Washington, DC: Georgetown United Child Development Center, CASSP Technical Assistance Center.

Dass-Brailsford, P. (2005). An exploration in resiliency: Academic achievement among disadvantaged Black youth in South Africa. *South African Journal of Psychology, 35*(3), 571-594.

Davis, A. (2009). *Helping them to achieve: African American boys perspectives on factors related to their academic achievement* (Doctoral dissertation). Hofstra University, Long Island, NY.

Davis, E. (2005). Early schooling and academic achievement of African American males. . In Olatokunbo S. Fashola (Ed), *Educating African American males: Voices from the field* (pp. 34-52). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Davis, S., Jenkins, G., and Hunt, R. (2002). The pact: Three young men make a promise and fulfill a dream. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.

Delpit, L. (1996). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (1998). *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.

Donnmoyer, R. (2000). Generalizability and the single-case study. In R. Gomm, M. Hammersley, and P. Foster (Eds.), *Case Study Method*, pp. 45-68. London, England: Sage.

Dutro, E., Kazemi, E., Balf, R., and Lin, Y. (2008). What are you and where are you from? Race, identity, and the vicissitudes of cultural relevance. *Urban Education, 43*(3), 269-300.

Economic Policy Institute. (2002). The state of working America 2002-03. Washington, DC: Bernstein, J., Boushey, H., and Mishel, L. Retrieved from http://www.epi.org/publications/entry/books_swa2002_swa2002intro/

Einhorn, E. (2008, March 31). Study shows New York City has one of the nation's sorriest graduation rates. *Daily News*, pp. A6.

Elliot, A. and Harackiewicz, J. (1996). Approach and avoidance achievement goals and intrinsic motivation: A meditational analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 76*, 628-644.

Emerick, S., Hirsch, E., and Berry, B. (2004). Does highly qualified mean high-quality? *Infobrief (39)* of Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1.

Evans, R. (2005). Reframing the achievement gap. *Phi Delta Kappan, 68*, 582-589.

Feldman, J., Tung, R., and Ouimette, M. (2003). *How are Boston pilot school students faring? Student demographics, engagement, and performance, 1997-2002.* Boston, MA: Center for Collaborative Education.

Feemester, D. (2009). *The influence of the African American pastor on the behavior of African American males adolescents that could lead to academic achievement* (Doctoral dissertation). University of LaVerne, LaVerne, CA.

Fejgin, N. (1994). Participation in high school competitive sports: A subversion of school mission or contribution to academic goals. *Sociology of Sports Journal, 11*(30), 211-230.

Ferguson, A. (2001). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of Black masculinity.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Ferguson, R. (1990). *Racial patterns in how school and teacher quality affect achievement and earnings.* Dallas, TX: Meadows Foundation.

Fielding, M. (2001). Beyond the rhetoric of student voice: New departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st century schooling? *Forum, 43*(2), 100-110.

Fielding, M. (2001). Students as radical agents of change. *Journal of Education Change, 2,* 123-141.

Finn, J. and Rock, D. (1997). Academic success among students at-risk for school failure. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 82,* 221-234.

Fleming, J. and Garcia, N. (1998). Are standardized tests fair to African Americans? Predictive validity of the SAT in Black and White institutions. *Journal of Higher Education, 69*(5), 471-495.

Fleming, J., Kellam, S., and Brown, C. (1982). Early predictors of age at first use of alcohol, marijuana and cigarettes. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence, 9,* 285-303.

Floyd, C. (1996). Achieving despite the odds: A study of resiliency among a group of African-American high school seniors. *The Journal of Negro Education, 65*(2), 181-189.

Ford, D. (1993). Support for the achievement of ideology and determinants of underachievement among gifted, above-average, and average Black students. *Gifted, 16,* 280-298.

Fordham, S. (1996). B*lacked out: Dilemmas of race, identification and success at Capitol High.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Frabutt, J., Wilson, M., Kendrick, M., Arbuckle, M., and Cabaniss, E. (2005). *Collaboration to reduce disproportionate minority contact in the juvenile justice system*. Seattle, WA: Innovation for the Future.

Fultz, M. (1995). African American teachers in the south, 1890-1940: Powerlessness and the ironies of expectations and protests. *History of Educational Quarterly, 35*(4), 401-422.

Gall, J., Gall, M., and Borg, W. (2005). *Applying educational research: A practical guide*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Gibbs, J. (1998). *Young, black, and male in America: An endangered species*. New York, NY: Auburn House.

Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Longman.

Gomm, R., Hammersley, M., and Foster, P. (2000). *Case study method texts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Gordon, K. (1995). The self-concept and motivational patterns of resilient African American high school students. *Journal of Black Psychology, 21*, 239-255.

Gotbaum, B. (2002, November 21). Pushing out at-risk students: An analysis of high school discharge figures. *Advocates for Children of New York*, pp. 1-36.

Gotham Schools. (2009). Wishful thinking. New York, NY: A. Pallas. Retrieved from http://gothamschools.org/2009/05/04/wishful-thinking/

Graham, S., Taylor, A., and Hudley, Z. (1998). Exploring achievement values among ethnic minority early adolescents. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 90*(4), 606-620.

Greene, J. (2003). *Public high school graduation and college readiness rates in the United States*. New York, NY: Center for Civic Information at the Manhattan Institute Publishing.

Greene J. and Winters, M. (2006). *Leaving boys behind: Public high school graduation rates*. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Publishing: New York, NY.

Grissmer, D., Flanagan, A., Kawata, J., and Williamson, S. (2002). Improving student achievement: What state NAEP test scores tell us. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.

Grotberg, E. (2003). *Gaining strength from adversity*. Wesport, CT: Praeger.

Gunning, T. (2006*). Closing the literacy gap*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Hale, J. (2001). *Learning while black*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.

Halle, T., Kurtz-Costes, B., and Mahoney, J. (1997). Family influences on school achievement in low-income, African-American children. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 89*(3), 527-537.

Halpern, R. (1992). The role of after-school programs in the lives of inner-city children: A study of the "urban youth network." *Child Welfare, 71*(3), 215-231.

Hanson, S. and Kraus, R. (2003). Science experiences among female athletes: Race makes a difference. *Journal of Women and Minorities in Science and Engineering, 9*, 287-323.

Harper, S. (2005). Leading the way: Inside the experiences of high-achieving African American male students. *About Campus, 10*(1), 8-15.

Hawkins, R. and Braddock, J. (1992). *Athletic investment and academic resiliency among African-American females and males in middle grades*. Cleveland, OH: Urban Child Research Center of Cleveland State University.

Haycock, K. (1998). Good teaching matters…a lot. *OAH Magazine of History, 13*(1), 61-63.

Haynes, N., Emmons, C., and Ben-Avie, M. (1997). School climate as a factor in student adjustment and achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology Consultation, 9*(3), 321-329.

Hebert, T. (1998). Gifted Black males in an urban high school: Factors that influence achievement and underachievement. *Journal of Education of the Gifted, 21*, 385-414.

Heck, R., Larsen, T., and Marcoulides, G. (1990). Instructional leadership and school achievement: Validation of a casual model. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 26*(2), 94-125.

Henderson, A. and Berla, N. (1994). *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement*. Washington, DC: National Committee for Citizens in Education, center for Law and Education.

Hepburn, L. and White, R. (1990). *School dropouts: A two-generation problem*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia.

Herndon, M. and Moore, J. (2002). African American factors for student successes: Implications for families and counselors. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families, 10*(3), 322-327.

Hill, N., Castellino, D., Lansford, J., Nowlin, P., Dodge, K., Bates, J., and Pettit, G. (2004). Parent academic involvement as related to school behavior, achievement and aspirations: Demographic variations across adolescence. *Child Development, 75*, 1491-1509.

Howard, T. (2001). Powerful pedagogy for African American students: A case of four teachers. *Urban Education, 36*(2), 179-202.

Hsia, H., Bridges, G., and McHale, R. (2004). *Disproportionate minority confinement: 2002 update.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Huang, Y. and Change, S. (2004). Academic and cocurricular involvement: Their relationship and best combinations for student growth. *Journal of College Student Development, 45*(4), 391-406.

Hurley, E., Boykin, A., and Allen, B. (2005). Communal versus individual learning of a math-estimation task: African-American children and the culture of learning contexts. *The Journal of Psychology, 139*, 513-527.

Irvine, J. (1990). *Black students and school failure*. Westport, CT: Grenwood Press.

Jaeger, R. (Ed.). (1997). *Complementary method for research in education* (2nd edition). Washingon, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Jenkins, C. (2010). *Organizing common sense: Youth reframing education reform* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Illinois at Chicago.

Jeynes, W. (1999). The effects of religious commitment on the academic achievement of Black and Hispanic children. *Urban Education, 34*(4), 458-479.

Jordan, H., Mendro, R., and Weerasinghe, D. (1997). *Teacher effects on longitudinal student achievement: A preliminary report on research on teacher effectiveness*. Indianapolis, IN: National Evaluation Institute.

Jordan, W. (1999). Black high school students' participation in school-sponsored sports activities: Effects on school engagement and achievement. *The Journal of Negro Education, 68*(1), 54-71.

Kirby, L. and Fraser, M. (1979). Risk and resiliency in childhood. In M. Fraser (Ed), *Risk and resiliency in childhood: An ecological perspective* (pp 10-33). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Kitano, M. and Lewis, R. (2005). Resiliency and coping: Implications for gifted children and youth at-risk. *Roeper Review, 27*, 2-4.

Knaus, C. (2007). Still segregated, still unequal: Analyzing the impact of No Child Left Behind on African-American students. In The National Urban League (Ed.), *The state of Black American: Portrait of the Black male* (pp. 105-121). Silver Spring, MD: Beckham Publications Group.

Kober, N. (2001). It takes more than testing: Closing the achievement gap. A report on the center on education policy. Washington, DC: Center on Educational Policy.

Krueger, R. (1993). Quality control in focus group research. In D. Morgan (Ed.), *Successful focus groups* (pp. 65-88). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Kunjufu, J. (1988). *To be smart or popular*. Chicago, IL: African American Images.

Kunjufu, J. (1993). *Hip-hop vs. MAAT: A psycho/social analysis of value*. Chicago, IL: African American Images.

Kunjufu, J. (2001). *State of emergency: We must save African American males*. Chicago, IL: African American Images.

Kuvlesky, W. (1978). *A tri-ethnic comparison of the religious involvement and orientation of Texas rural youth: A study of Black, White, and Mexican American adolescents* (Report No. 434-23). San Antonio, TX: ERIC Preproduction Services. (No. ED 151128).

Ladson-Billings, G. (1992). Liberatory consequences of literacy: A case of culturally r relevant instruction for African American students. *Journal of Negro Education, 61*(3), 378-391.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995a). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice, 31*(3), 160-166.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995b). Toward a theory of culturally-relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 31*, 465-469.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher, 35*(7), 3-12.

Laitsch, D. (2003). *What professional development structures best affect classroom instruction? Research brief.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

LeCompte, M. and Prissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research.* San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Lee, D. (2009). The impact of resiliency on the academic achievement of at-risk students in the Upward Bound program in Georgia (Doctoral dissertation). Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, Georgia.

Legler, R. (2004). *Perspectives on the gaps: Fostering the academic success of minority and low-income students.* Naperville, IL: Learning Point Associates.

Levine, A. (2006, October 31). A higher bar for future teachers. *Boston Globe*, pp. C3.

Lindsey, M. and Nebbit, V. (2010). African American youth. In C. Clauss-Ehler (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of cross-cultural psychology* (pp. 99). New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.

Lipman, P. (1995). Bringing out the best in them: The contribution of culturally relevant teachers to educational reform. *Theory into Practice, 34*(3), 202-206.

Lofland, J. and Lofland, L. (1995). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Loukas, A. and Murphy, J.L. (2007). Middle school students perceptions of school climate: Examining protective functions on subsequent adjustment problems. *Journal of School Psychology*, 45, 293-309.

Lugg, C. and Boyd, W. (1993). Leadership for collaboration: Reducing risk and fostering resiliency. *Phi Delta Kappan, 75*(3), 253-260.

McBride, D. (2005). *Why I hate Abercrombie and Fitch.* New York, NY: NYU Press.

McGee, G. (2004). Closing the achievement gap: Lessons from Illinois' golden spike high-poverty high-performing schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 9*, 97-126.

McInnes, E. (1994). *Power relations in the qualitative research process: An act of faith in Qualitative Approaches in Educational Research.* San Jose, CA: Adelaide.

McMillian, J. and Reed, D. (1994). At-risk students and resiliency: Factors contributing to academic success. *Clearing House, 67*(3), 34-43.

Martin, A. (2002). Motivation and academic resiliency: Developing a model for student enhancement. *Australian Journal of Education, 45*(1), A3.

Martin, A. and Marsh, H. (2006). Academic resiliency and its psychological and educational correlates: A construct validity approach. *Psychology in Schools, 43*(3), 34-54.

Mathis, W. (2005). Bridging the achievement gap: A bridge too far? *Phi Delta Kappan, 86*, 590-593.

Mandara, J. (2006). The impact of family functioning on African American males' academic achievement: A review and clarification of the empirical literature. *Teachers College Record, 108*(2), 206-223.

Martinez, J. (2004). *Parental involvement: Key to students' achievement*. Denver, CO: National Center for School Engagement at the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children.

Matocha, L. (1992). Case study interviews: Caring for persons with AIDS. In J. Gilgun, K. Daly, and G. Handels (Eds.), *Qualitative methods in family research* (pp. 66-84). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Maton, K., Hrabowski, F., and Grief, G. (1998). Preparing the way: A qualitative study of high-achieving African American males and the role of the family. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 26*(4), 639-669.

Mensch, B. and Kandel, D. (1988). Do job conditions influence the use of drugs? *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 29*, 169-184.

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. New York, NY: Jossey-Bass.

Missouri K-16 Task Force on Achievement Gap Elimination. (2002). Achievement gap elimination: Report on the Missouri K-16 task force. Jefferson City, MO: Missouri K-16 Task Force on Achievement Gap Elimination. Retrieved from http://dhe.missouri.gov/achievementgapreport.html

Mitchell, J. (1983). Case and situation analysis. *The Sociological Review, 31*(2), 187-211.

Mitra, D. (2009). Amplifying student voice. In M. Scherer (Ed.), *Engaging the whole child: Reflections on best practices in learning, teaching, and leadership* (pp. 23-43). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

National Black Caucus of State Legislators (2001). Closing the achievement gap: Improving educational outcomes for African American children. Washington, DC: Thomas, J. and Prentiss, C. Retrieved from: http://www.nbcsl.org/cag.pdf

Neal, L., McCray, A., Webb-Johnson, G., Bridgest, S. (2003). The effects of African American movement styles on teachers' perceptions and reactions. *Journal of Special Education, 37*, 49-57.

Noguera, P. (2001). *The Trouble with black boys: The impact of social and cultural forces on the academic achievement of African American males*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press.

Novick, R. (1998). The comfort corner. *Childhood Education, 74*(4), 3-21.

Oakes, J. and Wells, A. Detracking for high student achievement. *Educational Leadership, 1998*, 38-41.

Ogbu, J. (1998). Voluntary and involuntary minorities: A cultural-ecological theory of school performance with some implications for education. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 29*, 155-188.

Olneck, M. (2005). Economic consequences of the academic achivement gap for African Americans. *Marquette Law Review, 1*(2005). 2-90.

Pajares, F. and Urdan, T. (2002). *Academic motivation of adolescents*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

Paredes, V. (1991). *School climate and student achievement*. Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District, Texas Office of Research and Evaluation.

Patterson, J. (2001). Raising resiliency in classrooms and homes. *Childhood Education, 77*(3), 5-23.

Patterson, J., Collins, L., Abbott, G. (2004). A study of teacher resiliency in urban schools. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 31*(1), 3-11.

Peoples, G. (2003). *Does church attendance and participation influence the academic achievement of African American high school students* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

Perry, T., Steele, C., and Hillard, A. (2003). *Young, gifted, and black: Promoting high achievement among African-American students*. New York, NY: Beacon Press.

Plucker, J. (1998). The relationship between school climate conditions and student aspirations. *The Journal of Educational Research, 91*, 240-246.

Poole, C. and Morrison, M. (2004). *Ethnography for education*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Raymond, L. (2001). Student involvement in school improvement: From data source to significant voice. *Forum, 43*(2), 58-61.

Reis , S., Colbert, R., and Hebert, T. (2005). Understanding resiliency in diverse, talented students in an urban high school. *Roeper Review, 27*(2), 110-120.

Rhee, Y. (2004). *The EPO chain in relationships management: A case study of a government organization* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Maryland, College Park.

Risko, V. and Walker-Dalhouse, D. (2007). Tapping students' cultural funds of knowledge to address the achievement gap. *The Reading Teacher, 61*(1), 98-100.

Robinson-Heath, D. (2001). *Achievement motivation: A comparison of African-American achieving and underachieving students* (Doctoral dissertation). Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, Illinois.

Roman, L. (1992). *The political significance of other ways of narrating ethnography: A feminist approach*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Rothman, R. (2002). Closing the achievement gap: How schools are making it happen. *Challenge Journal, 5*(2), 1-11.

Rutter, M. (1979). Protective factors in children's responses to stress and disadvantage. In J. Bruner and A. Garten (Eds.), Primary prevention of psychopathology (pp. 49-74). Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Rutter, M. (2000). Resiliency reconsidered: Conceptual considerations, empirical findings, and policy implications. In J. Shonfoff and S. Meisels (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (pp. 651-682). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

daSilva, C., Hughley, J., Kakli, Z., and Radhika, R. (2007). *The opportunity gap: Achievement and inequality in education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group.

Salley, L. (2005). *Exploring the relationship between personal motivation, persistence, and resiliency and their effects on academic achievement among different groups of African-American males in high schools* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Maryland, College Park.

Sanders, G. (1998). The effects of school, family, and community support on the academic achievement of African American adolescents. *Urban Education, 33*(3), 385-409.

Schultz, B. (2005). *Theorizing with students: Developing an integrated, authentic curriculum in an urban classroom* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Illinois at Chicago.

Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Spencer, M., Swanson, D., Cunningham, M. (2003). Black males' structural conditions, achievement patterns, normative needs, and "opportunities." *Urban Review, 38*(5), 608-633.

Stake, R. (2000). *The art of case study research*. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stayhorn, T. (2008). Teacher expectations and urban black males' success in school: Implications for academic leaders. *Academic Leadership, 16*(2), 33-45.

Stoecker, R. (1991). Evaluating and rethinking the case study. *The Sociological Review, 39*(1), 88-121.

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Stronge, J. (2002). *Qualities of effective teachers*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Supovitz, J. and Brennan, R. (1997). Mirror, mirror on the wall, which is the fairest test of all? An examination of the equitability of portfolio assessment relative to standardized tests. *Harvard Educational Review, 67*(3), 472-507.

Symonds, K. (2004). *After the test: Closing the achievement gaps with data*. Naperville, IL: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

Thissen, D. and Cook-Sather, A. (2007). *International handbook on student experience in elementary and secondary schoo*l. New York, NY: Springer Publisher.

Thomapson, L. and Kelly-Vance, L. (2001). The impact of mentoring on the academic achievement of at-risk youth. *Children and Youth Service Review, 23*(3), 227-242.

Toldson, I., Harrison, M., Perine, R., Carreiro, P., and Caldwell, D. (2006). Assessing

the impact of family process on rural African American adolescents' competence and behavior using latent growth curve analysis. *Journal of Negro Education, 75*, 440-442.

Toldson, I. (2008). *Breaking barriers: Plotting the path to academic success for school-age African American males.* Washington, DC: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc.

Truesdale, A. (2007). *An examination of achievement motivation among middle grade African American males* (Doctoral dissertation). The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Tucker, P. and Stronge, J. (2005). *Linking teacher evaluation and student learning*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Tyack, D. (2004). Seeking common ground: Public schools in a diverse society. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

U.C.L.A., Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access. (2009). Overcrowding in California's schools: A problem that is getting worse! Los Angeles, CA: Rogers, J., Morrell, E., Blasi, G., and Terriquez, V. Retrieved from tcla.gseis.ucla.edu/equalterms/history/pdf/overcrowding_eng.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (2002). *Digest of education statistics 2001* (NCES No. 2002130). Washington, DC: Synder T. and Hoffman, C. Retrieved from: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/getpubcats.asp?sid=091#

U.S. Department of Education. (2003). *Digest of education statistics 2002* (NCES No. 2003060). Washington, DC: Synder T. and Hoffman, C. Retrieved from: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/getpubcats.asp?sid=091#

U.S. Department of Education. (2004). *Digest of education statistics 2003* (NCES No. 2005025). Washington, DC: Synder T., Tan, A., and Hoffman, C. Retrieved from: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/getpubcats.asp?sid=091#

U.S. Department of Education. (2005). *Digest of education statistics 2004* (NCES No. 2006005). Washington, DC: Synder T. and Tan, A. Retrieved from: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/getpubcats.asp?sid=091#

U.S. Department of Education. (2006). *Digest of education statistics 2005* (NCES No. 2006030). Washington, DC: Synder T., Tan, A., and Hoffman, C. Retrieved from: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/getpubcats.asp?sid=091#

U.S. Department of Education. (2007). *Digest of education statistics 2006* (NCES No. 2007017). Washington, DC: Synder T., Dillow, S., and Hoffman, C. Retrieved from: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/getpubcats.asp?sid=091#

U.S. Department of Education. (2008). *Digest of education statistics 2007* (NCES No. 2008022). Washington, DC: Synder T., Dillow, S., and Hoffman, C. Retrieved from: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/getpubcats.asp?sid=091#

U.S. Department of Education. (2009). *Digest of education statistics 2008* (NCES No. 2009020). Washington, DC: Synder T., Dillow, S., and Hoffman, C. Retrieved from: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/getpubcats.asp?sid=091#

Varlas, L. (2005). Bridging the widest gap: Raising the achievement of black boys. *Education Update, 47*(8), 1-3.

Viadero, D. (2000). Lags in minority achievement defy traditional explanations. *Education Week, 19*(28) 1, 18-22.

Viadero, D. and Johnston, R. (2000). Lifting minority achievement: Complex answers. *Education Week, 19*(30), 14-16.

Walker, E. (2006). Urban high school students' academic communities and their effects on mathematics success. *American Educational Research Journal, 43*(1), 43-73.

Walsh, F. (1998). *Strengthening family resiliency*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Walton, J. (1992). *Making the theoretical case*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge Press.

Wang, M., Haertel, G., and Walberg, H. (1994). Educational resiliency in inner cities. In M. Wang and E. Gordon (Eds.), *Educational resiliency in inner-city America: Challenges and prospects* (pp. 45-72). Mahway: NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum.

Watkins, A. (2002). Learning styles of African American children: A developmental consideration. *Journal of Black Psychology, 28*(1), 3-17.

Werner, E. and Smith, R. (2001). *Journey from childhood to the midlife: Risk, resiliency, and recovery*. New York, NY: The New Press.

White, D. (1979). Culturally biased testing and predictive invalidity: Putting them on the record. *Harvard Civil Rights – Civil Liberties Law Review, 14*(1), 89-132.

White, H. (2009). *Increasing the achievement of African American males*. Virginia Beach, VA: Department of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment of the Virginia Beach City Public Schools.

Wilson-Jones, L. and Caston, M. (2004). Cooperative learning on academic achievement in elementary African American males. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 31*(4), 280-283.

Witherspoon, K., Speight, S., and Thomas, A. (1997). Racial identity, attitudes, school achievement, and academic self-efficacy among African American high school students. *Journal of Black Psychology, 23*, 344-357.

Wlodkowski, R., and Ginsberg, M. (1995). *Diversity and motivation: Culturally responsive teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Wolf, D. *Feminist dilemmas in fieldwork*. Boulder: CO: Westview Press.

Yin, R. (1984). *Case study research: Design methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Yin, R. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Young, J. (2009). *A study of academically high achieving African American Young men* (Doctoral dissertation). Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York.

Young, M., Martin, S., and Ting, L. (2001). Internal poverty and teen pregnancy. *Adolescence, 36(*142), 34-44.

VITA

NAME: Tony Curtis Speed Jr.

EDUCATION: B.A., English Literature, Saint Peter's College, Jersey City, New Jersey, 2003

M.A., Teaching of English, Columbia University, New York, New York, 2005

Ph.D., Educational Policy Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2011

TEACHING: Chicago Public Schools, William J. Bogan Computer Technical High School, English Department, Teacher of English, January 2008 – October 2010

Jersey City Public Schools, James J. Ferris High School, English Department, Teacher of English, September 2003 – June 2006

PROFESSIONAL: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated
MEMBERSHIP