

## *African American Male Students and the Achievement Gap: Building a Successful Student/Citizen*

S. Kent Butler<sup>1</sup>

*The University of Central Florida, Orlando, USA*

M. Ann Shillingford

*The University of Kentucky, USA*

Mia Alexander-Snow

*The University of Central Florida, USA*

### **Resume**

Este artículo explora las desigualdades sistémicas encontrado en los sistemas educativos que han dificultado mucho los logros educativos de la comunidad afroamericana, especialmente opresión que siguen obstaculizando los logros alcanzados por los jóvenes varones afroamericanos. La brecha de logros a lo largo de la historia y la cultura de la opresión se examinan en relación con las ayudas sociales y los sentimientos de ser parte de un grupo, para ofrecer consejeros escolares con las intervenciones y estrategias eficaces que pueden utilizar cuando trabajan con esta población.

*Palabras claves:* Varones afroamericanos, brecha de logros, cultura

### **Brecha de logros en los estudiantes afro americanos varones: Construyendo un estudiante/ciudadano exitoso**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the systemic inequalities found within educational systems that have long hampered educational achievements within the African American community, especially oppressions that continue to hinder the accomplishments made by young African American males. The achievement gap along with the history and culture of oppression are examined in relation to social supports and feelings of belonging to provide professional school counselors with effective interventions and strategies to utilize when serving this population.

*Keywords:* African American males, achievement gap, culture

Growing up African American in the United States is an incredible experience. That is, until you step outside of the Black Community and you are faced with the myriad of institutions that represent oppression. Grant and Ladson-Billings (1997) postulated that the education system in America is built upon the philosophical principles of liberty, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity contained not only in the U.S. Constitution, but also in the Declaration of Independence. Indeed, African Americans have been guaranteed equal opportunity in America since the Civil Rights movement starting with Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954. However, in spite of these legislative guarantees, this ethnic population has fallen short as recipients of education's fair practice and has found that equality does not always guarantee fairness (Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997). Systemic inequalities, such

as those found within educational systems, have long hampered the African American population and have been found to influence educational accomplishments, predominantly achievements made by young African American males (Davis, 2003).

A review of statistical reports by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009) indicated that 8.4% of African American students had dropped out of high schools compared to 5.3% of their White classmates. Some states such as Texas, have reported dropout rates as high as 50% for African American males (McNeil, Coppola, & Radigan, 2008). In 2003, the NCES reported that 17.1% of African American students repeated a grade level while only 8.2% of White students had a grade retention; alarmingly, 22.6% of the retained African American students were males. Furthermore, data goes on to report that historically, 20% of White students received a bachelor's degree, whereas only 6% of African American students have such an attainment (NCES, 2008). In 2004 the U. S.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Educational and Human Sciences, P. O. Box 161250, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL 32816. Email: skbutler@mail.ucf.edu

Department of Education indicated that White students outperformed African American students on Math and Reading national assessments. Boruchovitch (2004) while studying underserved Brazilian children with life experiences and socioeconomic statuses similar to African American males found that effort and lack of effort were the most significant ascriptions for success and failure. Additionally, although the number of African American students registered in advanced placement courses increased between 1999 (5%) to 2005 (6%), their enrollment rates paled in comparison to the number of White students in the same courses (65%) (USDOE, 2004).

The educational letdowns of African American students are not evident just at their academic performances but are also visibly apparent within their personal/social functioning. It has been reported that the number of African American male students receiving school suspensions (24.2%) far exceeds that of their White counterparts (8.8%) (NCES, 2004); which may lead to disillusionment with the educational system and students forgoing further academic achievements. Stella, Rossi, and Govone (2008) also found that chemically dependent students who utilized drugs from an early age may present significantly higher dropout rates when compared with those who began to use drugs at a later time period. To this end, African American male students have frequently been linked to alcohol and drug usage often leading to an overrepresentation within the criminal justice system (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). In fact, Bailey and Paisley expressed that 1 out of every 4 African American juvenile is either presently incarcerated or have been through the criminal justice system.

### The Achievement Gap

Somewhere in the mist of all the deficits in African American male educational attainment came the proverbial achievement gap. In their 1994 book *The Bell Curve*, Herrnstein and Murray alluded to the controversial conclusion that Black students were intrinsically less intelligent than their White peers. More recently, Lee (2003) drew attention to a myth that has been created that highlights these students as possessors of inherent educational deficiencies. However, Lee attributed this deficit to the erroneous belief by many educators that a number of African American male students have failed school due to learning or behavioral difficulties. Likewise, African American males have also been characterized as frustrated, angry, disruptive, ignorant, disrespectful, gang-members, and drug-dealers (Davis, 2003). Despite the consequences of the academic and social challenges faced by African

American males, limited interventions and educational improvements have been initiated or supported by educational paradigms. In fact, these students often attend schools that are under-funded; burdened with limited learning tools (Education Trust, 2007), and boast an inadequate number of qualified teachers (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Unfortunately, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2001) Act which proposed that all of America's children receive free and appropriate education in order to close gaps in achievement, clearly have not diminished the problems. Though an honorable attempt, researchers suggest that many of the nation's African American students are still silently being left behind (Davis, 2003).

In retrospect, some researchers have suggested that the achievement, opportunity, and attainment gaps most likely exist due to the blame game (Cross, 2007; Stinson, 2006). For example, many school personnel hold the caregivers, particularly those of African American males, responsible for students learning deficits, academic failures, and disengagement (Rahiner, Murray, Schmid, & Malone, 2004; Thompson, 2004). Conversely, many African American students have stated that it is due to the fact that (a) their educators are not competent to meet their academic needs, (b) the core curriculum is uninteresting and does not pose a challenge, and (c) their educators and counselors do not believe or expect that they can achieve at high levels (Education Watch, 1998; Martin, Martin, Semivan Gibson, & Wilkins, 2007; Stinson, 2006; Berry, 2003).

### The Role of History and Culture in Making Systemic Change

To concentrate solely on African American male academic performance and neglect of personal and social constructs such as cultural (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005) and psychological orientations (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008), may further stagnate the closure of the achievement gap. Indeed, awareness of historical perspectives and an appreciation for cultural orientations may enable educators to look beyond the surface and examine salient issues that impede the achievement gap from decreasing (Norman, Ault, Bentz, & Meskimen, 2001).

Jordan and Cooper (2003) suggested shared cultural knowledge as a way to provide dynamic dimensions to teaching and learning; through accountability measures, educational institutions need to hold constant a teacher's academic qualifications, ability to instruct diverse populations of students, and levels of experience in working with these students. Due to dismal statistics of the achievement gap, Davis (2003) called for a solutions-oriented research agenda that addresses

the Black male achievement problem. In concert with peers, Powell (2008) recommended interventions that proactively and holistically supported African American male maturity; the proposition included six points that might elicit empowerment or enhance growth and development: (a) spirituality, (b) political awareness, (c) economic prowess, (d) cultural awareness, (e) physical wellness, and (f) mental wellness.

Other researchers have similarly attempted to determine the source of the academic deficiencies plaguing African American students. Graham and Anderson (2008) examined the relationship between African American males students' ethnic and academic identity in a predominately African American school. Through the employment of qualitative measures, the researchers found that these students highly associated ethnic heritage to academic achievement. The students indicated that who they perceived themselves to be; their 'blackness' (e.g., family, church, community), helped to define the value of academic attainment. Therefore, it appears that social supports are necessary to advance African American male students educational achievement through a combined approach integrating academics and cultural relatedness.

### **Social Support and Belonging**

Cobb (1976) defined social support as shared information that may lead an individual to feel that they (a) are cared for and loved, (b) are valued and esteemed, and (c) belong to a community or network. Social support was also suggested as a valid contributor to the development of identity which in turn supports personal and social growth (Toro-Alfonso, Diaz, Andujar-Bello, & Nieves-Rosa, 2006). Similarly, other theorists have discussed the effects of relatedness and belonging on human growth and development. For example, Maslow (1968) identified belonging as a fundamental human need in procuring relationships and behavior choices. Maslow asserted that higher order needs can only be met when the lower order needs such as a sense of belonging is accomplished. Baumeister and Leary (1995) contended that a sense of belonging is critical in securing positive connections and emotional security within varied social paradigms. In turn, these positive connections are significant because they allow students to feel respected and supported (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005).

### **African American Males and Belonging**

Uwah and McMahon (2008) explored the relationship between African American students academic self-efficacy as it related to feelings of school belonging. Although the researchers found no significant

relationship between the two variables, significance was found in students who were encouraged by others to participate in school functioning in relation to their sense of academic self-efficacy. The findings support Booker's (2007) qualitative study that found African American males were more apt to report feelings of belonging when they were directly invited and included in school functions by others within the school community. Booker's (2007) exploration of African American student's outlook towards social belongingness reported that student participation in the classroom was primarily connected to academic achievement and belonging. Booker further found that students expressed feelings of belonging when they (a) felt accepted and appreciated by others (e.g., teachers, peers) in the school, (b) were involved in school activities, and (c) recognized similarities in cultural nuances (e.g., dress) within their school community. Therefore, it might be suggested that African American student academic achievement may be significantly enhanced by positive increase in their perceptions of belonging to a school community; especially an environment where their cultural differences are accepted and appreciated.

In further explorations, Tyler and Boelter (2008) found that students' academic engagement and academic performance was significantly related to their discernment of teacher-student relationships. The researchers explained that African American students with whom teachers established strong social bonds were significantly influenced academically and showed an increase in engagement and self-esteem. Based on underlying themes of belongingness and social relatedness reported in these studies (e.g., Booker, 2007; Tyler & Boelter, 2008; Uwah & McMahon, 2008), it might also be deduced that African American students who feel a sense of connection and belongingness within the school community may be more likely to feel display higher self-esteem and yield more positive academic success.

### **Professional School Counselors as Change Agents**

Educational institutions are in a position to provide empowerment to African American students through culturally sensitive, academic and social support systems. Social support networks and empowerment initiatives are especially needed for young African American males who often find themselves at a disadvantage due to circumstances often not of their making (Davis, 2003). Due to the legislative demands on schools to close the achievement gap and the deficits equated to African American students thwarting efforts

to meet these demands, it is imperative that schools, families, and the communities collaboratively advocate for this disadvantaged student population. Professional school counselors (PSC), due to their extensive training have unique qualifications and skills necessary to meet the academic, personal/social, and career needs of students (American School Counselor Association, [ASCA], 2005). PSCs are in an ideal position to provide students with systemic support through culturally sensitive curricula and interventions (Stinson, 2006). Indeed, modeling and management of a culturally sensitive, comprehensive school counseling program may be the milestone needed in procuring supportive relationships with students. As role models for their educational environments, PSCs have the opportunity to wholeheartedly exemplify student support to other school personnel leading the charge to better academic and social support systems for African American students, particularly African American males. However, in recognition of the myriad of tasks that school counselors are bogged down with on a daily basis, systemic collaboration is imperative in support this disenfranchised population of students. Clark and Braman (2009) described inclusive collaboration whereby students academic and personal/social needs may be met by varied stakeholders without the student feeling stigmatized. Therefore, school counselors may be leaders in joining forces with other stakeholders in procuring a sense of support and belonging for African American students and other students in need.

### Implications

The following section provides implications, focused on the active role of professional school counselors (PSC) in supporting African American students through their educational journey, by exploring attitudes of self and other educators and delivering culturally-focused school counseling services.

#### Attitudes of Self and Educators

Prior to providing services to African American students, it is important for PSCs, administrators, and other educators, to explore their own attitudes about the culture. Self-exploration may well lead PSCs to better understanding the needs of their African American students (Davis, 2003) as well as enlighten themselves and their colleagues about personal biases that they may hold in relation to this student population (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Furthermore, self-examination of attitudes may lead to the discovery and confrontation of stereotypes that may have influenced interactions and general expectations that PSCs and other educators may have held towards African American students. PSCs

are in a unique position to consult with administrators, teachers, and students and challenge their stereotypes about African American students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Vaughn (2009) suggested that to support African American students academic improvements, particularly in the area of mathematics, teachers should (a) be confident that they can teach/reach these students, (b) have high student expectations, (c) stress the needs of these students, and (d) hold students accountable.

#### Culturally Focused Services

**Small Group Counseling.** For PSCs and other professionals interested in changing the trajectory for these students, the appropriate utilization of group process may afford important contributions in the promotion of academic achievement. Group counseling may be a very useful tool for the African American adolescent population as it fulfills their need for social acceptance and belonging (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007).

When PSCs establish groups with adolescent African American males who need to be challenged academically or who are struggling academically they may provide a world of good. The groups may offer a safe homogeneous environment that would allow its members to examine their issues and concerns as well as increase their sense of hope and confidence, reduce their feelings of estrangement, develop more resourceful survival proficiencies, and improve their socialization adeptness (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007). PSC group leaders must be racially and ethnically attune to the lives of their African American students and able to recognize diverse cultural idioms, both spoken and unspoken, that differs from mainstream society (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Butler, 2003a). PSCs acting as group leaders may also encourage African American males to engage in the same principles and philosophies that have helped them excel in other areas of their lives (i.e., sports, art, band, etc.) as they adapt and use these same strategies to improve their academics and social lives (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007). For example, Dawkins, Braddock, and Celaya (2008) explained the potential association between African American students' desire to achieve in sports and academics. These authors suggested an integrative model of incentive and maintenance of interests and motivation to excel in sports being intertwined with motivation to excel academically. Therefore, students are taught from an early age to view academics in the same light as they may view the importance of sports; hence, the potential for success in both areas.

**Mentoring.** As further support for African American students, PSCs program delivery may include mentoring services (Uwah & McMahan, 2008). Uwah and colleague reported that mentoring programs have



been found to foster educational aspirations, improved self-efficacy, and leadership opportunities. PSCs are in that key position to bolster the mentoring relationships between students, school staff, and even members of the community. Indeed, inclusion of these students in mentoring programs may foster a sense of connectedness to other adults and also enable students to feel a sense of belonging.

**Student Empowerment.** In further consideration of enhancing African American students' feelings of belongingness, PSCs should ensure that these students are being held accountable for their educational attainments (e.g., attendance, behaviors) in accordance with school policies (Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). Booker (2006) recommended increasing students involvement with their school community by encouraging them to participate in their own educational surroundings, including school attendance and inclusion in extracurricular activities (e.g., leadership and governance). Taliaferro and colleague (2008) also suggested that teacher expectations and support be clearly identified and communicated with African American students. However, the authors indicated that counselors and teachers should be cognizant of creating a classroom environment with diverse student representation in order to procure a sense of connection and decrease the risk of students feeling racially identified, which have been reported to lead to students dropping out of school.

**School and Home Connection.** Finally, to promote the academic and social sense of belonging of African American students, PSCs should ensure that collaboration and parent involvement is maintained. Howard and Reynolds (2008) articulated that involving African American parents in the functioning of their children's academic community may well cultivate further understanding of the issues of race in student's educational attainment. Indeed, PSCs should coordinate parent training sessions geared towards empowering parents with advocacy skills necessary for becoming pertinent decision-making partners in the academic and social development of their children (Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). Therefore, by providing parents of African American students a voice in the school community, students may begin to appreciate a triangulated sense of connection between themselves, their parents, and school community.

Further school and home connections can be promoted by school counselors and other school personnel creating participatory opportunities for parents to become involved in the students learning. For example, Cripps and Zyromski (2009) suggested school counselors create parent information nights whereby parents may be educated on how their school involvement may

positively impact their child. School counselors may also organize collaborative sessions between parents, administrators, and teachers so that all stakeholders may support students in setting future goals, balancing home and school life, identifying effective communication with adults, and learn how to handle negative life situations in a positive manner.

## Conclusion

Clearly, the PSC is in a position to promote collaboration between school, home and the community through open communication and cultural considerations. PSCs are also in an optimal position to assist their professional colleagues in restructuring their attitudes by conducting professional development workshops on cultural sensitivity. Davis (2003) suggests that by leading these professionals in discussion and encouraging them to explore the lives of the targeted population, the PSC may assist in mending the educational injustices that have limited improvements in the academic and social achievement of African American students. Another approach to shifting attitudes towards African American students would be the reflection and understanding of how the multicultural competencies relate to their jobs as educators and PSCs. A strengthening of personal convictions and the development of culturally sensitive competencies may hopefully provide socially conscious individuals with an appreciation for the strengths of students from African American and other minority cultures. Lastly, PSCs should be advocates and serve as social change agents within their school environments. Augmentation of awareness for the need for African American students to experience a sense of connection and belonging with their school community is imperative. They are in great position to address systemic barriers and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors that may hinder holistic development of African American students towards more positive educational performance; and thus, decreasing the achievement gap. Without a doubt, school counselors can make a difference in supporting these students as they navigate through our always-evolving educational systems.

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**S. Kent Butler.** The University of Central Florida,  
Orlando, USA

**M. Ann Shillingford.** The University of Kentucky,  
USA

**Mia Alexander-Snow.** The University of Central  
Florida, USA