Increasing the Achievement of African American Males

AUTHOR: Hope E. White, Ph.D., Program Evaluation Specialist
                        Department of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment

OTHER CONTACT PERSON: Jared A. Cotton, Ed.D., Assistant Superintendent
                        Department of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment

ABSTRACT
The purpose of this research brief is to offer a brief review of those factors that contribute to the academic achievement gap between African American males and their counterparts. The three overarching factors included (1) those aspects that were germane to the student--socioeconomic status, nutritional issues, and self-esteem-related concerns; (2) factors related to parental involvement; and (3) in-school dynamics such as teacher expectations/perceptions, teacher quality, lack of culturally responsive instruction, and limited school resources. Much has been written about the achievement gap between African American males and their counterparts. Yet, the literature is limited regarding strategies tailored specifically to address the achievement gap between African American males and other males. As a result, this literature review was written to gather pertinent strategies found in the research that may be valuable in increasing the academic achievement among African American males.

"Educate the black man - mentally and industrially - and there will be no doubt - of his prosperity."

Booker T. Washington

BACKGROUND

The academic achievement gap between African American students and their Caucasian counterparts continues to be one of the most important educational issues in our country. Although there have been significant gains in the educational endeavors of African American students, the 1990s saw a reduction in the progress made with a significant widening of the achievement gap between African American and

Caucasian students. For the purposes of this literature review, achievement gap(s) are defined as those disparities between African American and Caucasian students. According to the Education Trust, the black-white gaps are about 10 points wider than they were more than a decade ago (Education Trust, 2003). Additionally, research indicates that only 12 percent of African

American fourth graders reached proficient or advanced levels in reading, and 61 percent of African American students performed below the basic levels on the eighth-grade measure of mathematics attainment when compared to 21 percent of Caucasian students. By the end of high school, African American students' math and reading skills are comparable to Caucasian eighth graders (Education Trust, 2003; Hoffman & LIagas, 2003). In addition to gaps in performance on achievement tests, gaps are found in grades, course selection, advanced placement (AP) course participation and test taking, high school graduation, and dropout rates (Legler, 2004).

While there are significant gaps between African American students and their counterparts, gaps also exist between African American female and male students. Graham (1994) examined the significance of the intraracial disparities between African American females and males and discovered that at every socioeconomic level, African American females outperformed African American males. African American males are significantly more likely to attend high schools that are predominately black and have an enrollment with a large number of students on free or reduced lunch. In almost every category of academic failure, African American males are excessively overrepresented (Dallmann-Jones, 2002; Martin, Martin, Gibson, & Wilkins, 2007). They tend to be underrepresented in advanced and honors courses and more likely to be placed in special education programs and suspended or expelled from school (Garbarino, 1999; Strayhorn, 2008).

The results above beg the question--what factors contribute to the academic achievement of African American male students? Previous research (Case & Katz, 1991; Spicker, Southern, & Davis, 1987) offered evidence that a wide variety of factors impact the academic achievement of African American males and could be evaluated through three different lenses:

- Individual factors such as socioeconomic status, nutrition, and self-esteem/identity issues.
- Parental factors involving the level of parental participation in the child's education.
- School factors related to teacher expectations/perceptions, teacher quality, lack of culturally responsive instruction, and limited funding and school resources.

In order to provide strategies to address the numerous factors impacting the academic achievement of African American males, it is important to have a firm understanding of how individual, parental, and school-related factors contribute to the academic achievement gap. The next section of this report will briefly touch on each of these dynamics and their impact on African American male students.

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Socioeconomic factors such as household income, nutrition, and self-esteem are all significant elements that have an impact on the academic achievement of African American males.

Poverty

One socioeconomic factor that has been consistently associated with the achievement gap is the issue of poverty. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, African Americans have much higher poverty rates compared to other racial and ethnic groups. In 2005, 30 percent of African American children under the age of 18 were living in poverty, compared to 10 percent of Caucasian children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). By the time a student enters kindergarten and first grade, math and reading achievement gaps between poor

students and their more affluent counterparts are already present (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005). Those students in poverty were said to have weaker language skills as they enter the school system due to a lack of proper exposure to language development within the home. In many cases, students from poverty-ridden environments do not always have educational or reading material available in the home, which is also an essential factor that impacts school readiness. This achievement gap, which begins in early childhood, actually increases as students move from grade to grade (Alonzo, Tindal, & Robinson, 2008). One study that exemplifies the relationship between poverty and academic achievement was conducted by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. Their results indicated that students who reported an annual household income of less than $20,000 were twice as likely to report a "D" or less in school, as those from families making $50,000 or more per year. In addition, African American youth who acknowledged not attending school in the last year were also overrepresented among those from families making less than $20,000 per year (Toldson, 2008).

Nutrition

Nutrition is another factor that impacts achievement. In the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation study, the relationship between nutrition and achievement was assessed.   The study used a Health Behavior in School-Age Children (HBSC) dataset, where 13 foods and beverages were tested to determine their relationship with academic achievement among African American males. Results indicated that African American students with low-academic achievement were more likely to eat junk food (potato chips, cakes, hamburgers, sweets, and cola) frequently and were less likely to regularly eat healthy food (cooked vegetables, raw vegetables, fruits, and whole wheat) compared to Hispanic and Caucasian males. The study further postulated that raw vegetables rich in enzymes, minerals, and vitamins could improve brain functioning and reduce psychosomatic stressors (Toldson, 2008). As a result of the study, the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation emphasized the importance of incorporating good nutrition, "brain food" into the academic experiences of African American males.

Self-Esteem/Identity

Within the same study, the effects of students' attitudes were also considered in order to determine the relationship between academic achievement of African American males and how they viewed themselves. Study results denoted that students' attitudes can impact achievement. Fryer (2006) reported when minority students exhibited negative attitudes about school and their own lives, this tended to translate into a negative impact on achievement. African American males' attitudes are derived from various entities and can severely impact how they view the world around them. Some of the negative attitudes stemmed from the oppositional bias culture ideology. For example, minority students who were perceived as "acting white," (making good grades) were excluded from social interactions or ridiculed by their peers. Peer culture among African American youth may oppose academic achievement and instead reward nonconformity (Ferguson, 2001). For instance, African American males who were perceived as low-achievers, who did not follow the rules, or did not try hard were viewed as "cool" and were more likely to be respected by their Caucasian male peers (Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998). Another element that influenced students' attitudes about academic achievement is school safety. 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 (Barton, 2003; Poliakoff, 2006). As a result of low expectations, peer pressure, stereotypes, and safety issues, some African American males go through a process of academic disengagement, which morphs into negative attitudes regarding achievement (Ogbu, 1994).

PARENTAL FACTORS

In addition to factors related directly to the individual student, parental involvement is another factor that could impact a child's education and achievement. Toldson and his colleagues found that parent-child interactions were the most robust predictor of African American adolescent success (Toldson, Harrison, Perine, Carreiro, & Caldwell, 2006). Mandara's (2006) article indicated that when African American parents are actively involved in their sons' academic efforts by monitoring homework as well as other academic pursuits, limiting nonproductive and destructive activities (e.g., television, radio, and video games), and creating a constant and positive dialogue with the teachers and school officials, they increased the odds of their son succeeding in school (Mandara, 2006). Yet, parental involvement could be hindered by certain barriers. There could be an attitude of mistrust between parents and school staff. Parents' work schedules or lack of transportation may not facilitate involvement in school decision making or school activities. Furthermore, parents may be uncertain about their role in their children's education, or they may not know how to work with their children. These barriers to parental involvement can be overcome when parents and school staff work together (Martinez, 2004).

IN-SCHOOL FACTORS

Much evidence is found in the literature to support the concept that several in-school-related factors such as teacher expectations/perceptions, teacher quality, lack of culturally responsive instruction, and limited school resources impact the academic achievement of African American males.

Teacher Expectations and Perceptions

Teacher attitudes and expectations could also impact student achievement (Evans, 2005; Kober, 2001; Varlas, 2005). In schools that succeeded, teachers had consistently high "expectations for all students." This was strengthened by a belief that all students could and would learn (Chenoweth 2006; Moore 2005; Tucker & Stronge, 2005). The literature described a phenomenon known as the "stereotype threat," which impacts the way teachers view students and the way students view themselves. Stereotype threat influenced teachers' low-achievement expectations for poor and minority students. Teachers' lower expectations for minority students were based on their perceptions of the students' current performance rather than the students' potential to perform (Kober, 2001). Children live up or down to teachers' expectations. Teachers in urban schools say that maintaining high expectations for those students in poverty-ridden environments is critical. Feeling sorry for students because of their environment, and subsequently lowering demands, does a disservice to the students (Diffily & Perkins, 2002).

Research indicated that the burden of stereotypes plays a pivotal role in the achievement gap. Stereotype threat is stress caused by fear that a person's own behavior may confirm a negative stereotype about a specific group or race (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Ferguson, 1998). Specifically, African American males are affected by the negative stereotypes and perceptions about them found in our culture. African American male youth "are often described using disparaging terms such as dysfunctional, lazy, uneducable, or dangerous" (Strayhorn, 2008; Kunjufu, 2001; Gibbs, 1998; Mincy, 1994). Cohen et al. further postulated that ethnic minority students, on average, experience higher levels of stress in school because they are cognizant that if they happen to do poorly it would confirm the negative stereotype about the intellectual ability regarding their race. Another ramification of the stereotype threat was that some students would rather be seen as lazy because they did not thoroughly complete an

assignment as opposed to being labeled as unintelligent for having completed an assignment that was incorrect (Cohen et al., 2006).

Teacher Quality

Teacher quality is essential to raising student achievement; therefore, students need high-quality teachers (Emerick, Hirsch, & Berry, 2004; Kober, 2001). Teacher quality is an accurate indicator of a student's performance in school (Carter, 2000). Teachers "affect students, what they learn, (and) how much they learn" (Stronge, 2002, p. 1). Good teachers make lasting imprints on student achievement and those imprints (either good or bad) can last for at least three years (Stronge 2002; Tucker & Stronge, 2005; Viadero & Johnston, 2000). Teacher quality has a "huge effect on how well students fare in school" (National Black Caucus of State Legislators [NBCSL] 2001, p. 9). High-quality teachers exhibit characteristics of commitment to students and learning, knowledge about the subjects they teach and how to teach them, responsibility for student learning, systematic thought, and advocacy for students and the teaching profession (Hopkins, 2004). Yet, all students are not fortunate enough to have high-quality teachers, in fact, Haycock reviewed data that indicated students of color, regardless of their socioeconomic level, were more likely to be taught by teachers with lower test scores and less academic preparation than white students (Haycock, 1998). According to Sanders and Rivers, students who are assigned to several ineffective teachers in a row have significantly lower achievement and gains in achievement than those who are assigned to several highly effective teachers in sequence (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Teacher effects appear to be additive and cumulative. Research studies also found troubling indicators for educational equity, noting evidence of strong bias in assignment of students to teachers of different effectiveness levels (Jordan, Mendro, & Weerasinghe, 1997), including indications that African American students are nearly twice as likely to be assigned to the most ineffective teachers (Sanders & Rivers, 1996).

One study that examined the impact of teacher effectiveness on the learning of different types of students, from low to high achievers, illustrated the importance of quality teachers. The study grouped teachers into quintiles based on their effectiveness in producing student learning gains. The results indicated that the least effective teachers produced gains of about 14 percentile points during the school year, while the most effective teachers posted gains among low-achieving students that averaged 53 percentile points (Haycock, 1998). African American males are significantly more likely to attend high schools that employ a greater proportion of teachers on provisional licenses, the majority of whom teach outside of the subject in which they earned a college degree. According to the National Commission on Teaching and Americans' Future (2003), some of the most vulnerable students are often left to be taught by the least experienced individuals (Strayhorn, 2008; Case & Katz, 1991).

Lack of Culturally Responsive Instruction

In addition to teachers' perceptions, expectations, and quality, the curriculum and instruction impact achievement. What teachers teach (curriculum) and how teachers teach (instruction) represent interrelated factors that impact achievement. Educational standards that delineate what students are supposed to know shape the curriculum. The curriculum shapes classroom instruction. Instruction is assessed with tests that measure how well students learned the standards (student achievement). A litany of research has focused on the lack of culturally responsive instruction found in the classroom. Culturally responsive instruction pertains to classroom practices that draw meaningfully on the culture, languages, and experiences that students bring to the classrooms in order to increase engagement and academic achievement for students of color (Au, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995). A few of the most common tenets of a culturally responsive pedagogy included (1) acknowledging that valuable knowledge resides in

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students' home languages and cultures and that this home knowledge is not always valued in the schools; (2) pursing academic success for students of color; (3) creating valuable connections between students' home and school experiences; and (4) fostering social justice (Dutro, Kazemi, Balf, & Lin, 2008).

Scholarly work related to culturally responsive instruction also assessed the cultural mismatch between teachers and students, or the ability of teachers to misunderstand the behavior of African American students, which could severely impact the process of overidentification for special education referrals and the underachievement of students (Howard, 2001; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). This idea relates to the mismatch between school culture and home culture. For example, the home culture for many African American males consists of a firm parental-controlled environment, where as African American parents tended to be more demanding and less agreeable to their child's demands as compared to a more permissive, nonassertive, authoritative style found in many classrooms run by Caucasian female teachers, "who have been socialized to speak softly, to be nondirect, and nonassertive….thereby being perceived to lack authority by African American youth." (Baumrind, 1996; Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007, pg. 345; Mandara, 2006). In addition, the school culture tended to be centered around communicative, instructional, and curriculum-related material that may not be aligned with Afrocentric culture elements.

One study investigated how teachers' misunderstandings of students' cultural behavior impacted placement and referrals to the special education program. As Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest (2003) noted in their seminal work on cultural misunderstanding and teachers' perceptions, stylized movement is one of the dimensions of African American culture. One such stylized movement is a certain walking style called a "stroll." The stroll used by some African American males was characterized as "a deliberately swaggered or bent posture, with the head held slightly tilted to the side, one foot dragging, and an exaggerated knee bend" (Neal et al., 2003, pg. 50). Neal and his colleagues initiated a study to determine if the stroll walking style of African American males influenced teachers' perceptions of the students' academic capabilities, their propensity for aggression, and their need for special education assistance. Results indicated that teachers perceived students who walked 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). As diverse students continue to demonstrate cultural-identified behavior, teachers and administrators who are unfamiliar or inexperienced with student diversity may do more harm than good for some African American students because in some cases the teacher may overreact and apply rules and judgments inappropriately.

Learning styles of particular groups of students and the necessity of implementing a combination of alternative and mainstream methods of teaching and learning were also documented within the culturally responsive instruction literature (Dutro et al., 2008). While the literature offers numerous theories regarding why culturally responsive instruction should be implemented, there is far less scholarship about how to effectively engage students in explorations of cultural and racial differences to the extent that the process addresses the needs of students of color but also engages all students in substantive work and conversation about racial and cultural differences.

Limited Funding and School Resources

Funding can determine the per-pupil expenditures for school divisions. The per-pupil expenditures impact achievement. In fact, the differences in achievement in two states were explained by per-pupil expenditures (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000). The

state with lower per-pupil expenditures had lower achievement results, even though the states had similar characteristics. Funding regulates the resources that are available to principals, teachers, and students (Barton 2003; Barton, 2004). When funds are not available, instructional materials such as science equipment or computers can be limited (Barton, 2004). The amount of funding can also limit access to technology or the internet--resources that aid instruction and learning (Barton, 2003; Barton, 2004; Perkins-Gough, 2004). Sources showed that African American and Latino students are consistently overrepresented in school districts that lack adequate funding for education (Jewell, 2003; Harmon & Jones, 2005).

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The fact that African American males may participate in their own failure suggests that efforts to help them must take into account the likelihood that help may not be readily accepted. Changing policies, creating new programs, and opening up new opportunities may accomplish little if such efforts are not accompanied by strategies to actively engage African American males and their families in improving their fate. In education, this may require institutional changes and programmatic interventions aimed at buffering and offsetting the various risks to which African American males are particularly susceptible. To be successful, the work must also involve efforts to counter and transform cultural patterns that undermine the importance of education, a goal that can only be achieved if it is possible to provide alternative influences that offer a credible, realistic, and attractive source of hope and change (Noguera, 2003). Having a sense of those factors that contribute to the academic achievement gap provides the foundation for building and developing strategies to address those factors. The next sections consist of strategies which can be used in addressing the academic achievement gap among African American males.

ADVOCACY

With issues related to poverty, students' nutritional needs, and mental health-related concerns contributing to the achievement gap, it would behoove school districts to coordinate with social service agencies to offer some type of safety net or assistance in order to address the needs of this population. It is imperative that students have someone who can intercede on their behalf with people and agencies regarding services and assistance that they may need. One such strategy would be to offer an in-school advocate. Ideally, every student should have an advocate--a teacher, counselor, administrator, or community leader--who listens and assists students where possible. Yet, given the fact that schools may not be able to provide all students with an in-school advocate, those students who have significant academic and behavioral problems should be assigned an in-school advocate. It is also greatly important that the in-school advocate is well trained and has the time and commitment to effectively assist the student (Task Force on the Education of Maryland's African American Males, 2006; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002).

NUTRITION

As mentioned in the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation study, regularly eating healthy foods (cooked vegetables, raw vegetables, fruits, and whole wheat) as opposed to junk food impacts academic achievement. Schools should also ensure breakfast and lunch programs provide a good portion of foods rich in enzymes and vitamins. In addition, parents should be informed of the positive cognitive benefits of vegetables. An effective learning tool for students could include the use of an agricultural project, which teaches students how to grow vegetables (Toldson, 2008).

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PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Different school districts have implemented various strategies related to communicative efforts, parenting classes, covenants, and study circles to improve parental involvement, thereby improving student academic achievement.

Communication

The principal and staff members must communicate the importance of the parents' role as a partner in their children's achievement (Martinez, 2004). Staff members should make efforts to ensure parents feel welcome in the school and provide meaningful and regular communication to alleviate the feeling of mistrust often common between parents and school staff (Martinez, 2004). A premium should be placed on the good things students do, as restrictions are placed on the negative things they do. Study results supported a positive referral system in the school is effective, whereas schools forward notices to parents when their children are exemplary (Toldson, 2008). Sometimes parents need to know specific parenting skills. The principal and/or staff members can assist parents in learning the parenting skills needed to make the home a center of learning and extend school learning into the home. In addition, parents should be taught the material benefits of using positive reinforcement and affirmations (Carter, 2000; Toldson, 2008).

Covenant/Contract

In order to improve parental relations, one school district formally signed a covenant with the community. In order to heal fractured relations, the Minneapolis School Board and the local African American community signed a covenant which placed responsibility for the improvement of the students on the shoulders of parents and the school district administrators. The three-page agreement focused on shared responsibility and a deliberate focus on African American students. As part of the covenant, the school district committed to three model sites with stable teaching teams, best practices of offering a challenging curriculum, culturally responsive teaching, and effective parental participation. A task force of parents, teachers, students, school district employees, and community members monitored the districtwide implementation of the covenant. Mr. Stewart, a school board member, said the next step-- moving "from platitudes to practice"--could be a heavier lift than producing the covenant. "That's the essential work," he said. "It is the tough stuff. It scares people. But where the real work is getting everyone on the same page with what we are going to do for kids" (Gewertz, 2008, pg. 9).

Study Circles

One East Coast school district utilized a program that brought together diverse members of the school community such as parents, teachers, students, and administrators in order to address racial and ethnic barriers, which impacted student achievement and parental involvement. This program met weekly and trained facilitators were used at each of the meetings to ensure everyone had a chance to participate and that the conversation was productive. The goals for each session varied, but the aim was to have participants build relationships built on trust, learn about each other's culture, talk earnestly about racial differences, and confront racial and ethnic barriers affecting student achievement. Recently, the school district conducted a comprehensive examination of the implementation, participation, and effectiveness of the program. The evaluation indicated positive results from all program participants. One of the primary purposes of the program was to assist parents in becoming more knowledgeable about their child's school and provide them with increased resources of support; the results indicated that the program was meeting this goal. Under the Study Circles program,

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parents were more likely to know what classes their children needed to prepare for college and had more communication with teachers and other parents within the community (Wade, 2007).

HIGH STANDARDS AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR ALL STUDENTS

As mentioned before, teachers' expectations and perceptions of students impact academic achievement. Efforts related to encouraging participation in more rigorous course work as well as an acknowledgement of the need to reevaluate the special education referral system are offered as strategies.

Encourage Participation in PSAT and Advanced Placement (AP)
All students should be held to high expectations and should participate in challenging and rigorous courses. This strategy would include school districts increasing the proportion of African American males taking the PSAT in the tenth grade and providing them the academic preparation and support they need to score well. In addition, schools should provide rigorous course work through AP and honors courses. Research is clear that regardless of their skill levels at entry into high school, students' skills grow more when they are placed in more rigorous courses, even students who may start out behind the group. One strategy that has been successful in increasing the participation of African American males in AP courses is widening the criteria, which increases the access to a larger number of students. Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland applied this strategy, which resulted in a larger percentage of African American males participating in the AP program during the 2007-08 school year. The school district also implemented districtwide initiatives that included study circles that have been effective in addressing disparity among racial groups (personal communication S. Bedford, October 21, 2008; The Task Force on the Education of Maryland's African American Males, 2006; Wade, 2007).

Reevaluate Special Education Referral System
In addition, misclassification or inappropriate placement in special education is devastating for minority students, especially when the placement means removal from the regular education setting, the core curriculum, or both. Students facing such exclusionary practices almost always encounter a narrower curriculum and lower expectations compared to their peers. The Task Force on the Education of Maryland's African American Males suggested the state and school systems provide a systematic examination of everything that influences overrepresentation--prereferral interventions, family involvement, effective instruction in the regular education classroom, preservice teacher training, and professional development--so that African American male students are no longer referred disproportionately to special education (The Task Force on the Education of Maryland's African American Males, 2006).

CLASSROOM INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Instruction that was varied, interdisciplinary, and differentiated to meet students' needs or learning styles had a positive impact on student achievement (Bennett et al., 2004; Chenoweth, 2006). Certain classroom instructional strategies related to culturally responsive activities, instruction time, cooperative learning, the use of technology, and techniques such as the affirmation process and communicative learning activities have had a positive impact on the academic achievement of African American students (Howard, 2001; Anderson, 1992; Wilson-Jones & Caston, 2004; Hager, 2004; Lee, 2003).

Culturally Responsive Instruction

Given that African American students makeup 17 percent of the nation's public school enrollment, and African American teachers represent 6 percent of the U.S. teaching population, it is unlikely that African American students will come into contact with many African American teachers who may have an understanding of the cultural values and characteristics of African American students. As a result, the potential for cultural incongruence, cultural mismatch, or dissonance between African American students and teachers is amplified. In his work, (Howard, 2001) assessed three major culturally responsive strategies used by highly qualified African American teachers who taught mainly African American students. Holistic, culturally communicative, and skill-building were the three strategies discussed in his study. In essence, the report emphasized that culturally relevant teachers are personally warm toward and respectful of, as well as academically demanding of, all students.

Holistic instructional strategies teach character building, honesty, responsibility, respect, cooperation, sympathy to others, and behaving in ways that are consistent with the social norms of the classroom and society. Holistic strategies are geared toward "developing all the faculties of learners so that students are intellectually capable (able to master cognitive and academic tasks), socially adaptable (able to coexist with peers and adults in a respectable manner), and morally sound (able to adhere to teacher and societal norms)" (Howard, 2001 pg. 186-187). One example of a holistic instructional strategy included increasing students' awareness about socially and economically marginalized groups, which included frequent visits to the nursing homes to read to the elderly and trips to the soup kitchen to feed the homeless. According to the teacher, visits to the nursing homes and the homeless shelters really had an immediate impact on the students, and through discussion, students indicated they were not aware of how homeless individuals lived and that people "actually got that old." The teacher thought that it was important that the students see the homeless and the elderly so they could think about how the decisions they make today could impact their lives tomorrow (Howard, 2001).

Culturally communicative strategies focused on the role language plays in the teaching as well as the learning process. Teachers made efforts to align their lesson plans with instruction that incorporated the cultural competencies related to discourse patterns, phrases, face-to-face interaction, and vocabulary. According to teachers, it is important to use the unique verbal skills of African American students. In this study, teachers structured their instruction around ways that allowed African American students to take advantage of their discourse skills. One strategy used to harness the energy and focus students who are verbal involved giving students a leadership role. According to one teacher, students "talk all day in class and don't get focused, but if you give them leadership roles of leading a group or leading a class discussion, they are very successful" (Howard, 2001, pg. 190). Another teacher was successful in incorporating students' verbal skills and their need to socialize by implementing what she called "Morning Circle," which was a part of the daily routine. Each morning the students would gather in a circle to share with each other issues, people, and concerns related to their lives. This time was very valuable to teachers and students because it allowed the opportunity for students to share pertinent information with other classmates and allowed teachers the chance in a structured manner to reduce the amount of chit-chat throughout the day. In addition, the "Morning Circle" activity offered a sense of community and the sense of pride derived from being a part of a group --a family. While teachers recognized that many African American students preferred oral to written expression, one strategy used was to give students the experience of initially hearing a story and then writing about the story. According to one teacher, "kids need to be able to explore what their thinking is, and they can't always do it on paper, so doing it orally helps" (Howard, 2001, pg. 190).

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Skill-building activities centered on teachers helping students develop skills in order to increase their academic achievement. Teachers begin this process by addressing the negative perceptions students have regarding their level of smartness. Students believe that some individuals have smartness while others do not possess this ability. Teachers tried to convey that all students are smart but have different levels of skill. The distinction that teachers were trying to make with their students was that skill was something to be acquired over time and that they had to put forth a consistent effort in order to be very skilled in an area. One teacher explained why she used the "smarts" and "skills" distinction:

> One approach that I find that really works is rather than referring to "you're smarter at this" or "you're better at that" is to use the word skills. That says to the children that skills are something acquired over time. Then, if someone is more skillful at something, then it simply means they've had more practice at it. And you can rise to that skill level if you practice. So it makes it attainable. But if you use the word smart, most children interpret that as either having it or not. The key is to stress that everyone can improve skills (Howard, 2001 pg. 195).

Instructional Time

In addition to culturally responsive instruction, other classroom strategies have been used to address the academic achievement gap for African Americans. High-poverty, high-performing schools have effectively used instruction time as a strategy to improve students' achievement. When schools provided additional instructional time, researchers found improved student achievement (Carter, 2000; Mathis, 2005). Instructional time can be gained by extending the school day, school week, or school year. Some divisions have expanded kindergarten from half-day to full-day. Children who attended full-day kindergarten learned more early reading and math skills than those in half-day kindergarten (Kober, 2005). A report on high-performing, high-poverty schools indicated schools consistently found ways to provide additional instructional time for their students--or "time on task"--especially in reading and mathematics (Barth, Haycock, Jackson, Mora, Ruiz, Robinson, & Wilkins, 1999; Carter, 2000; Cawelti, 2000; Feldman, Tung, & Ouimette, 2003). Schools offered longer instructional periods and ensured that the time spent in school was "on task"--not wasted. Schools also increased instructional time by arranging for extra support by aides, parents, and even older students. Some offered intensive reading periods during which every adult in the school--teachers, aides, principals--stops what they are doing to provide reading assistance (Carter, 2000).

Cooperative Learning

According to Hurley, Boykin & Allen (2005), studies show that African American culture involves a deeper sense of community which has "a communal orientation…marked by the priority of social bonds, awareness of interconnectedness among people, and a sense of mutual responsibility" (Hurley, Boykin & Allen, 2005, p. 516). Similar characteristics can be found in cooperative learning and, as a result, can be utilized to improve academic achievement among African American students due to the fact that concepts of this learning strategy are familiar to them. In addition, Watkins' (2002) work investigated the learning styles among young African American children and determined that children tended to gravitate toward a group learning environment because they were more likely to ask their peers than the their teachers for academic assistance. Cooperative learning among African American male students was the focus of a study conducted by Wilson-Jones & Caston (2004). The aim of the study was to investigate how cooperative learning promoted the academic success of elementary African American males in grades 3 through 6 in a rural school in Mississippi. Results of the study indicated that there were overall improvement in academic achievement, behavior and

attendance, self-confidence, and school satisfaction, as a result of implementing cooperative instructional strategies (Wilson-Jones & Caston, 2004).

Affirmations

The literature regarding strategies to address the black-white gap included the well-discussed study by Cohen and his colleagues. Cohen et al. conducted a study that showed how affirmations could be used to address the stereotype threat concept and reduce the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. The Cohen and colleagues' study involved an in-class writing assignment that "unlike other interventions, benefited the targeted students while not adversely affecting nontargeted students" (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006, pg. 1309). The study results were reached after seventh graders were placed in experimental and control groups, which included roughly the same number of African American and Caucasian students. Students in the experimental group were asked to choose one value that was important to them and write a paragraph describing why they cherished the values. The control group students focused on values held by others. Students were not aware the assignment involved issues related to race and stereotype, but viewed the exercise as a normal classroom assignment. This self-affirmation exercise allowed students to reaffirm their beliefs and their own personal identity. Because the exercise did not focus on testing and the stress associated with the negative stereotype threat phenomenon, African American students in the experimental group improved throughout the school year. Cohen et al indicated as a result of this psychological intervention, African American students in the experimental group had higher end-of-year grades compared to those in the control group. This relatively inexpensive technique could provide major benefits and could be used in conjunction with other efforts to close the achievement gap. Cohen stated that "A lot of time we think we have to add resources, give teachers more skills. That's important if they are lacking, but we overlook the importance of removing the psychological and social barriers. We need to ask, why hasn't change happened yet, and what barriers can we remove to accelerate it?" (Tenenbaum, 2006, p. 1; Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006)

SCHOOL PROGRAMS

While no one program can adequately address the achievement gap between African American males and their counterparts, there were school-based programs such as early childhood programs, the Success for All program, after-school programs, mentoring, and single-gender classrooms that the literature review offered as strategies in addressing the achievement gap.

Early Childhood Programs

Offering good quality early childhood education programs have been reported as having a positive impact on the academic achievement of African American students. Early schooling has been dubbed a critical period in the time of a young child's life. As a fundamental component of school readiness, early childhood education increased achievement scores on standardized tests and is shown to increase IQ scores, placing participating children at an advantage when they first enter formal schooling. In addition to school readiness and higher achievement scores, children who have received early childhood education are better at task completion and generally more cooperative in interactions with other children (Miller & Dyer, 1975; Bronson, Pierson, & Tivnan, 1985).

After-School Program

Research has emphasized the importance of after-school programs for African American children. Toldson (2008) found in his research that youth enrichment experiences or school-based activities had very strong associations with academic achievement among African American males. Posner and Vandell (1994) concluded from their study that low-income African American children who participated in after-school programs consistently performed better in reading, math, and other subjects than their counterparts. Additionally, other research indicated that after-school programs that were associated with positive outcomes shared a clear mission, high expectations and positive social norms, a safe and healthy environment, a supportive emotional climate, small enrollment, stability, trained personnel, content and pedagogy related to children's needs, mission, integrated family, community partners, and frequent assessment (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005). Although there is sparse literature regarding effective programs geared toward African American males, three types of programs hold some promise of effectiveness for this group (Woodland, 2008). In his report, Woodland discussed extracurricular, mentoring, and the rite of passage models as well as the research related to each. His article also provided core elements of effective after-school programs for African American youth. Martin and his colleagues evaluated African American males who participated in an after-school program in order to determine their level of academic improvement. Results indicated that the after-school intervention was effective in increasing academic achievement as well as decreasing negative behavior among adolescent African American male students (Martin et al., 2007).

Mentoring Programs

Mentoring is yet another strategy that has been implemented to address the achievement gap. Mentoring programs can be used to build character, counteract the influence of peer pressure, as well as address the isolation and self-esteem issues adolescent African American males encounter. Research supported the connotation that students need to be associated with good role models who are committed to helping the student. Schools could work collaboratively with members of the African American community such as the church, social, and civic organizations to coordinate mentoring programs (Day-Vines, Patton, & Baytops, 2003). A study by Noeth & Wimberly (2002) reported the value of an interested adult was a significant factor in the college planning of African American students. Positive role models, mentors, and tutors can help students socially, emotionally, and academically. The nurturing relationship between the student and the mentor can be structured using activities that include individual discussions, tutoring, leisure activities, and cultural awareness sessions, all of which promote personal development (Lee, 1996). In addition, academic leaders can play an important role in reducing, if not eliminating, stereotypes by establishing schoolwide mentoring programs in which teachers are paired with students whose background differs from their own (Strayhorn, 2008).

Another nationally recognized mentoring program consists of men in various arenas, such as business, public affairs, and government, who share a common goal which is to improve the quality of life for blacks and other minorities. One component of the mentoring program is that it provides a support network and positive role models for young African American males - elementary through high school (Cave & Quint, 1990). Another inspiring mentoring program was formed to mentor struggling African American students at a northeast Ohio high school. This program is housed at the high school that reported SAT scores at 110 points above the national average for African American students. The number of African American sixth graders scoring proficient on the state math test has nearly doubled in three years and was more than 20 percentage points above the Ohio average for African American students at this high school (Winerip, 2005). Other mentoring programs geared toward African American males focus on

offering tutoring and encouragement for African American males to stay in school, enroll in college preparatory classes, and continue into higher education (Bailey & Paisley, 2004).

STAFF AND ADMINISTRATIVE

The essential factors in narrowing the achievement gap are the presence of well-qualified teachers who are trained in addressing the needs of a diverse student body and administrators who provide the support, direction, and resources to accomplish narrowing the gap.

Teachers

Given that many African American males are taught by the least experienced and least qualified teachers, efforts need to be made to place the most qualified teachers in the highest need schools. Local school systems in coordination with teachers' unions should draft a formal placement policy to locate the most qualified teachers and place them in the schools with the most need. This formal policy should also outline the support teachers will be provided with in order to make them want to remain at the school (Toldson, 2008). Efforts should be made to recruit African American men into teaching by implementing three strategies: (1) develop a teacher preparation program which allows African American men to work as paraprofessionals within the field and move forward toward a full teaching certification; (2) promote the Associate of Arts in Teaching program in order to attract African American men into the profession; and (3) collaborate with private organizations to provide incentives for African American men to pursue teaching, such as offering financial assistance based on race and gender for African American males working toward a teaching degree (Toldson, 2008).

Professional Development

Teachers should be provided opportunities to participate in professional development activities that address the needs of ethnically diverse populations. A study reported "improving the quality of instruction is the only way to improve overall student achievement" (Carter, 2000, p. 9). Professional development can help improve teacher quality because it serves as an investment that can pay off in better trained personnel (Kober, 2001). Professional development activities that are innovative and require teachers to learn in new ways have been shown to have a positive impact on achievement. In addition, other professional development activities that are related to literacy, diversity, specific subject content, instructional strategies, and standards and assessment also have had positive influence on achievement (Laitsch 2003; Rothman, 2002; & Symonds, 2004).

As a result of the research related to the impact teachers' expectations and perceptions have on academic achievement, schools need to incorporate into teacher in-service programs cultural competency training, specifically as it relates to African American males. In-service training should focus on understanding cultural differences and effective cultural strategies to increase academic achievement of students. Much of the literature stresses that the training includes activities related to self assessment for each teacher and exercises related to teachers examining their own cultural bias, perceptions, and attitudes about African American males (Howard, 2001; Toldson, 2008)

Administrative

The Heritage Foundation examined lessons from 21 high-poverty, high-performing schools and determined that one of the primary traits shared by the schools was that they were all managed by strong principals who held their students and teachers to the highest standards

(Carter, 2000). The principal supervised instruction and promoted the instructional program (Symonds, 2004). Russo (2006) suggested one effective method to supervise instruction and the instructional program was during "learning walks." These daily "learning walks," which are more informal, quickly allowed the time and opportunity for principals to observe teachers' instructional practices and students' responses. These informal observations gave the teachers and students a chance to get "used" to seeing the principal in their classes. The informal observations gave principals more opportunities to give teachers feedback about instruction (Russo, 2006).

Leadership is a key ingredient in increasing academic achievement and closing achievement gaps. It is essential that the school principal is a strong person who can effectively lead (Legler, 2004; McGee, 2004). Strong, confident principals know the value of including staff in making key decisions regarding school matters as well as curriculum and instruction. Principals of successful schools believe that students, regardless of race or income, can meet high expectations and standards of achievement. Strong principals also understand that how funds are spent can impact student achievement and are proactive in making efforts to ensure that adequate resources and funding are available to the school (Kannapel & Clements, 2005).

SUMMARY

The achievement gap is a focus of educators, policy makers, researchers, and writers. This literature review has provided suggested strategies that could impact and improve achievement for African American males. The strategies are interrelated and encompass elements that involve in-school advocates, the importance of good nutrition, parental involvement, culturally responsive instruction, highly qualified teachers trained in ethnic and racial diversity who view all students with the potential to succeed, and schools with adequate resources and good leadership support. In order for the achievement gap to be effectively addressed, it is essential that a comprehensive approach is taken that incorporates individual student factors as well as all other elements that impact student achievement.

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