Examining the In School and Out of School Factors of African American Students Contributing to the Academic Achievement Gap.

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Faculty of the Adler Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

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April, 2013
Abstract

In this review, the causes of the academic achievement gap between African American and white students will be examined. It will review recent research on the status of African American school achievement since the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. It will look at various factors that have been identified as the reason for the continuation of low academic achievement among African American students. It will focus on the out of school and in school factors that have been found to have a relationship to the perception of the gap. Findings suggest that both factors play a role and that the school needs to take more responsibility in working with African American families and providing a welcoming school climate. Additional research is needed to investigate whether the underperformance of African American students is related to stereotypes about the ability of African American students.
Examining the In School and Out of School Factors of African American Students Contributing to the Academic Achievement Gap.

Throughout our country’s history, African Americans have struggled for equal rights and equal opportunities to whites in areas such as voting, employment, and education. Since the passage of Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, which identified that separate was not equal, there have been many attempts to try and bridge the achievement gap between white and African American students (Paul, 2004; Roach, 2004). Most recently, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization of 2001, more commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), has brought national attention to the racial academic achievement gap as an area that needs improvement throughout the country (Paul, 2004). The act requires schools throughout the country to make adequate yearly progress and show improvement in student test scores and academic gaps between different subgroups of students (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). While the academic achievement gap has remained a central issue in our country’s education system and much research has been done to study the gap, research shows that African Americans are not performing to the same standard as whites in areas of math, reading, and high school graduation rates (Kober, 2010).

Extensive research has been done to look at the role that outside influences play in a student’s ability to achieve. Data from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) identifies the role that the community, and parental involvement play in academic success as being an area that needs to be addressed and improved throughout school communities (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). On the other side of the debate is the role that the school plays in a student’s ability to succeed. Factors such as low teacher expectations, access to rigorous
classes, and institutional racism within a school have been found to contribute to the gap (Horton, 2004; Ogbu, 2003; Howard & Reynolds, 2008). When considering racial implications within and outside of school, studies have also determined that African American students are more likely to develop academic disengagement and underperform in comparison to their white peers (Lynn, 2006; Ogbu, 2003; Howard & Reynolds, 2008). This research suggests that African American students do not have the same motivation to be successful which can be influenced by outside or inside of school factors. While it is widely accepted that all of these factors partially contribute to the achievement gap, there is limited research that has examined which of these factors play a larger role in the cause and continuation of the gap between white and African American students.

The purpose of this review is to provide more insight to the achievement gap as stakeholders are deciding where funding should be going to lessen the gap. As educators try to determine ways to close the gap between white and minority students, the controversy surrounds around the cause of the gap. This “blame game” often involves a debate between placing the responsibility on the student and their family versus the responsibility on the school (Horton, 2004). This review will look at the possible factors that are contributing to the underperformance and lower achievement scores of African American students and examine whether the in school factors contribute to the underachievement of African Americans more than out of school factors.

This review will attempt to outline the in and out of school factors that contribute to the existence of the academic achievement gap between white and African American students. The primary goals of this review will be to describe the recent research on African American achievement and the findings from NCLB as well its’ limitations, to
outline contributing factors to the achievement gap that come from outside of the school as well as in the school, and to explore the relationship between these factors to determine which may have a stronger impact on raising the achievement of African American students. While this review will not attempt to solve the problem of the achievement gap, it will try to provide insight into factors that need to be further studied. This review seeks to identify ways that people involved in the lives of student can help and take responsibility so that all students are given equal opportunities to succeed.

African Americans and the Achievement Gap

There is an abundance of research that supports the existence of an achievement gap between African American students and white students. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the achievement gap is defined as “the large difference in academic performance between students from different economic circumstances and racial/economic backgrounds” (Paul, 2004, p. 649). While there have been improvements in the gap, there is still substantial data that shows that African Americans perform at lower levels of success than white students and that this begins at an early age (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Slavin & Madden, 2001). For example, by the end of 4th grade, African American and other minority students nationally have fallen two years behind white students in reading and math (Kober, 2010). Additional studies find that African American students perform lower than white students in reading, writing and math at grades 8, and 12 (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). And every year, of the 1.2 million students who fail to graduate high school, half of them are from minority groups and low-income families (Kettering Foundation, 2010). This issue also becomes a societal issue as billions of dollars are lost yearly from Americans who are not leaving school with the
skills or education needed for jobs that stimulate our economy as well as allow America to be competitive throughout the world (Flono, 2010).

No Child Left Behind

Academic achievement is most commonly measured through the results of high stakes testing. These tests, often dictated by the state, measure where a student is performing on skills such as reading and math and then compares them to other students within the school, district, and state. Most recently with the implementation of NCLB, schools have been held to greater accountability to show that students are achieving at specific levels. NCLB allows parents more freedom in deciding where their children should go to school and puts a stronger emphasis on reading than before (Paul, 2004). Despite the good intentions of the law, there has also been considerable criticism on issues of underfunding of the law, and too much emphasis on testing. However, NCLB has provided insight into the levels of achievement between different racial subgroups and provided data to identify which subgroups are lagging behind in grade level standards (Howard & Reynolds, 2008).

Since NCLB, achievement scores have been analyzed to determine whether the achievement gap has narrowed between subgroups. Most of this data has been analyzed through the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This data indicates that as a subgroup, African Americans have improved slightly in both reading and math, but this data varies considerably across states (Reardon, Greenberg, Kalogrides, Shores, & Valentino, 2012). From 2002 to 2008, there was data to support that the gaps had narrowed in 28 states between African American and white students in proficiency in reading and math (Kober, 2010). While this is encouraging data, it is important to
understand its limitations. For instance, in 2008 African Americans were still the lowest performing subgroup in all grade levels and in all subjects (Kobor, 2010). A school district is Houston was applauded for its improvement in student’s passing achievement tests from 44% to 64%. However, on further investigation it appeared as though there had been a significant drop out rate by students who were not achieving (Paul, 2004). These findings suggest that while data has shown improvements in achievements in African Americans, they are still achieving at a lower level then white students.

Gaps can also be measured at various score levels decided by each state, which can impact and skew the results when comparing scores between states and between subgroups (Paul, 2004). Additionally, in order for the gap to narrow, African American students must improve their performance at a faster rate than white students (Paul, 2004). Therefore, African Americans can be improving but so can white students, which will not narrow the gap (Braun, et al., 2006). All of these factors must be considered when measuring student achievement among subgroups.

In summary, NCLB has brought greater attention to the achievement gap through its requirement of schools to improve performance in all subgroups of students. However, findings from NAEP indicate that NCLB has not had a strong impact on narrowing the black-white achievement gap (Reardon et al., 2012). While African Americans have shown some gain in academic achievement, there are additional factors that need to be examined such as drop out rate that may be impacting the results. And finally, although NCLB mandates schools to increase achievement, it does not lay out a plan on how to accomplish that.
Current Status of No Child Left Behind

President Obama has made significant reforms to the federal mandate of No Child Left Behind. In 2012, he announced that 10 states had agreed to make significant educational reforms and would therefore receive waivers from the mandates of No Child Left Behind. According to whitehouse.gov, these “waivers will give states the flexibility needed to raise student achievement standards, improve school accountability, and increase teacher effectiveness.” A new initiative called Race to the Top has been adopted by many states as a way for government funding to be given to schools who are willing to make critical reforms in education. The four areas of focus include developing more rigorous standards and assessments for all students, adopting a data systems that provides up to date progress information for students and parents, evaluating teacher and leadership performance, and increasing resources and interventions for the lowest performing schools (White House blog, 2012). These recent reforms have laid out specific plans on how to increase student achievement and focus on rewarding schools who are implementing reforms, instead of punishing those who are trying, but fail to have the resources needed to make significant reforms.

Out of School Factors Contribution to Achievement

Multiple studies show that African American students are lagging behind their white counterparts and much research has been done to find the causes that come from outside of the school environment (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). These factors seem to be linked to strong research that shows that a student’s home environment, community influences, and access to educational resources provide some of the strongest tools for
success (Chenoweth, 2010). While many of these out of school factors are beyond the student’s control, these factors can be tied to generalizations about the African American culture and their perceived lack of dedication to education (Chenoweth, 2010).

The most frequent out of school factor that is analyzed when studying the academic achievement gap is the socio-economic status of the families of the students (Makedon, 1992). Research shows that students who come from low income/working class backgrounds achieve at a lower-level than students raised in middle to upper class families (Kober, 2010; Scales et al., 2006). It also shows that students from low SES backgrounds gradually worsen academically as they get older and are more likely to drop out of school (Caro, McDonald, & Willms, 2009; Condron, 2009). One study by Caro et al (2009) showed that the gap between various SES backgrounds starts to widen the greatest from 12 to 15 years old which could lead to increase drop out rates and lower high school graduation rates among students from low SES backgrounds. As these students get older, research indicates that they may also believe that there is no reason to try hard in school based on their belief that college will not be affordable to their family (Caro et al., 2009).

According to the Center on Education Policy (2010), a majority of African American children come from economically disadvantaged homes where 33% are living below the poverty level (Kober, 2010). These findings can also relate to a lack of resources at home, lower quality of housing, and possible lack of nutrition, which can all affect a student’s ability to succeed in school (Condron, 2009). In addition, students who live in lower income communities are more likely to attend public schools that have higher class sizes and that lack funding needed to provide up-to-date educational
resources and technology (Condron, 2009). While students have no control of the type of environment they are raised in, the blame and sole responsibility sometimes shifts to the parents who struggle to provide for their children.

Family income is also closely linked to two parents being able to provide for the family. Financial struggle as well as single parent households can greatly affect the amount of time that parents can spend helping their children through their education. Research shows that African American households who have two parents have decreased from 37% in 2000 to 28.5% in 2010 compared to white households with two parents which is 51% (U.S. Census Bureau). Households with only one parent struggle more financially (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2012; Caro et al 2009) and also struggle to provide support to their child’s education.

When looking at a student’s ability to be academically successful, it is necessary to look at parent involvement in their child’s education and studies have shown an overwhelming correlation between parental involvement and academic success (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2012; Howard & Reynolds, 2008). A parent’s involvement in their child’s education can start a young age with parent’s reading to their children and enrolling them in early education classes. However, studies show that white children receive these opportunities at a greater rate than black children. In 2005, studies showed that 68% of white children, ages three to five, were read to daily by a parent compared to 50% of black children (Barton & Coley, 2009/2010). This early difference in a child’s life puts them at a disadvantage and slowly increases the gap even before they enroll in kindergarten.
As children begin receiving homework as early as elementary school, it is often an expectation that parents are able to provide support to their children at home in addition to exposing them to early learning opportunities. Parent involvement can also be described as the relationship between the parents and the school (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). This can include attending school events such as parent teacher conferences, helping with homework, volunteering, keeping up on academic progress of student, communicating with teachers and overall understanding the importance of an education for the future (Epstein, 2001). Based on this understanding of parental involvement, African American and Latino families have low rates of parental involvement compared to white families (Simoni & Adelman, 1993). In research done to understand the role of parent involvement in a student’s education, it has been found that parents that are involved have children that have higher academic performance than those whose parents are not involved (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). This involvement also leads to better cognitive development, and better student behavior, which leads to less discipline problems and more time spent in school (Bower & Griffin, 2011). This ultimately reduces the amount of high-risk adolescent behavior that can increase dropout rates (Caro et al., 2009). Research shows that parent involvement is especially important for African American students based on findings that link parental involvement as having a greater effect on academic success for African American students than white students (Howard & Reynolds, 2008).

It important, though, that this involvement is a partnership with the school and not just a one-sided involvement on behalf of the parents (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Schools must provide a setting where all parents can feel a part of their child’s
education and make sure that African American and other minority parents are involved in school decision making teams or committees. They must also provide services for parents who may not be able to drive to school for conferences because they don’t have a car or work at night and are not able to provide support for their children (Bower & Griffin, 2011). Studies have shown that African American parents are less likely to trust the school system in looking out for the best interest in their child and therefore, may be less likely to become involved (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010).

Until 2003, there was little research that looked at the relationship between parent involvement and race (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). John Ogbu (2003), author of *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*, explored the idea of parent involvement where he concluded that African American families do not put time in to their child’s education as much white families (Lynn, 2006). Ogbu (2003) provided research to support the claim that “school performance differences among minorities are primarily due to differences in the community forces of minorities” (p. 46). In his book, Ogbu researched African American families from a middle class background in Ohio to see if parent and community involvement would be greater than in lower class communities. He found that African American children still performed at lower rates when looking at SAT scores, AP course enrollment, and grade point average than their white peers (Ogbu, 2003). He concluded that African American parents did not support their children enough to achieve at high levels. He also said that in order for significant change to happen, it is the responsibility of the parents and their children to change their beliefs about school and work towards greater African American community involvement in the schools.
Research from the National Assessment of Educational Progress also finds that the education level attained by parents also has a strong relationship to a student’s achievement. Studies have found that children whose mothers have lower levels of education are more likely to enter school less prepared than children of highly educated mothers (Geoffroy, et al., 2010). However, investing in early childcare has found to bridge the learning gap between disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds.

Additional studies claim that it is also important to look at the level of engagement from a parent rather than just if they are involved in their child’s education (Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Ogbu, 2003). Parents who do not engage with the school may feel a greater disconnect to their child’s education. For African American parents, who are more likely to claim that their interactions and perceptions of schools has overall not been a positive one, beliefs can be formed that deter them from wanting to be involved in their child’s’ school (Howard & Reynolds, 2008).

Recent studies of parental involvement have tried to use specific categories to define parental involvement and the most common one being used is the Epstein Model (2002). Many urban schools have adopted this model in order to try and reach out to families of color and low SES backgrounds. This model outlines six types of family involvement: positive home conditions, communication, involvement at school, home learning activities, shared decision making within the school, and community partnerships. While this model has shown to be successful in increasing student achievement in some schools based on its ability to partner the school and family (Bower & Griffin, 2011), it fails to incorporate the role that a community can play in fostering student’s education. It also does not address specific concerns within some African
American families that may not align with traditional white, middle class, structures of most schools (Bower & Griffin, 2011).

A student’s background and life outside of school is largely impactful to their academic success and research still shows that African American students are at a disadvantage based on the greater likelihood of coming from a low SES background with parents who have a lower educational attainment and therefore are less involved in their child’s education.

**In School Factors Related to the Achievement Gap**

While much research has been done to look at the cause of the achievement gap within the African American student and family, it is also crucial to look at the role the school has in bridging the achievement gap. Since the passing of NCLB, schools are required to show progress in lowering the gap between subgroups of students (Kober, 2010). As schools are held more accountable for the achievement of all students, research is beginning to investigate various ways that schools can improve achievement. This includes looking closer at the classroom practices of teachers and climate of the school in order to increase student engagement to improve performance (Slavin & Madden, 2001).

Researchers agree that the most important factor in a school that can make a difference in a student’s ability to succeed is teaching practices that occur in the classroom (Wenglinsky, 2004). In today’s culture of standardized testing, there is greater scrutiny placed on teachers to prepare students for high stakes test in reading and math. Because of this pressure, teachers are more likely to “teach to the test” which does not create a learning environment that is necessarily preparing students for life after school.
This also does not help students see the relevance in what they are learning other than to prepare for the test (Kettering Foundation, 2010). Studies show that youth who come from low-income and high minority areas are more likely to be taught in traditional methods such as memorization and drills, which have shown to not increase student engagement or learning (Scales et al., 2006). Wenglinsky (2004) reported that techniques such as hands on learning that is relevant to real life issues is an important classroom technique that provides for a better learning environment for students, especially those from a struggling background, than traditional classroom methods.

While teachers are trained on practices that help students learn, they are not trained how to specifically work with minority students, which could help reduce the gap between minority and white students (Wenglinksy, 2004). In a country where African American males are overrepresented in special education and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, educators may unknowingly develop conclusions about African American students, especially boys, that can affect their teaching practices. These conclusions include viewing them as the problem students who are not as invested in their education as others (Noguera, 2008). In research done by the Kettering Foundation, Somali students in Minneapolis who are struggling academically believed that teachers in their schools were not sensitive to their culture and assumed that they were not smart just because they struggle with English (Kettering Foundation, 2010). Therefore, many suggest in order to narrow the achievement gap, teachers and schools need to mold their teaching styles, be aware of their unintended biases towards others culture, and adapt their curriculum to the diverse needs of their students and not just to state requirements (Kettering Foundation, 2010; Bower & Griffin, 2010; Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010).
The Kettering Foundation found that another factor that has been found to increase student performance is teacher proficiency in the subject they teach, which strongly relates to student performance measured by standardized tests (Wenglinsky, 2004). However, research shows a gap in qualified teachers when looking at schools that are predominately white versus black. In 2007, 88% of white 8th graders had teachers certified in their subject matter compared with 80% of black 8th graders (Barton & Coley, 2009/2010). The amount of teaching experience also seems to have an effect on student achievement. Experienced teachers, or those who have five or more years of teaching experience, tend to be more likely to teach white students than black students. Teacher turnover and teacher absences are also more common among minority students than white students (Barton & Coley, 2009/2010). Stronger teachers, those who have more experience or advanced degrees, are also more likely to teach advanced classes which may be a disservice to minority students who not as likely to take those classes. A study done by Cohen and Hill (2000) also found a correlation between teachers who focus on teaching higher level thinking skills and an increase in mathematics scores (Wenglinsky, 2004). African Americans have also seemed to academically benefit more from reduced class sizes than white students (Slavin & Madden, 2001). Ogbu (2003) also explores the teaching methods at urban schools and says that students are not given a broader perspective on how topics they are learning about in subjects like science, social studies and English are related to their life. Because of this, students at urban schools may not feel the connection to their education and become disengaged from their learning.
When looking at school factors, it is also important to look at the effects of African American students learning in a school where they are the minority. Through Ogbu’s (2003) study, he determined that some African American students believed that being successful at school meant “acting white” (Lynn, 2006). This finding suggests that African American students are capable of achieving, but are choosing not to due to the pressures they feel to conform. Therefore, it is important to look at the factor of attitude in influencing student achievement.

Research has shown that while black and white students have similar positive attitudes towards about the schools’ importance, blacks believe that factors out of their control will decrease their likelihood of educational success (Ogbu, 2003; Matthew, 2009). In a study of 12,000 8th graders, Matthew’s (2009) found that students, no matter their background, perform significantly better in school when they have a positive outlook on their school experience and future. The major factors that seemed to deter student’s positive attitude was the number of siblings in a family and their SES. This research can help schools understand the root of a so called “bad attitude” that can arise in students and make it challenging for them to succeed in school where there are negative factors that they believe are working against them.

The culture of a school can also greatly impact the ability for all students to succeed. If students do not feel as though they are understood, valued, accepted regardless of their background, or that they belong in their school, they will greatly struggle to engage in their learning and be successful (Tucker et al., 2010). This theory is supported by the notion that throughout American history, schools were developed by whites and have not yet determined best practices for a variety of cultures and races.
SCHOOL FACTORS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

(Lynn, 2006). If this is the case, it is important to consider whether it is the student’s role to fit in with the school or the schools to adhere to the culture and background of the student. This idea further looks at the current debate by examining the school’s ability to make all students feel part of the school culture no matter their background.

Studies on student engagement, or the ability to make a mental investment in one’s learning, have concluded that African American students, especially boys, are more likely to become disengaged in their education than white students (McMillian, 2004). Research on student disengagement or the lack of involvement in one’s education, has mostly focused on the student themselves and not the school factors that may be supporting disengagement (Pellerin, 2000). It is important that schools look at a variety of ways to improve achievement scores for all students. Instead of just focusing on ways to provide more academic support, they also determine whether students in their schools feel that they matter to others.

American philosopher and psychologist, William James (1890), said “one of the worst injustices in this world would be to live life being unnoticed by others”. It is an essential human need to feel significant and important to others including family, friends, colleagues, etc. (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). While most educational researchers will emphasize the need to develop relationships with students, many have not explored all that is involved and how much mattering to others can affect one’s ability to be successful. Research has shown that mattering to others is related to many factors including higher self-esteem, greater academic success and an overall desire to succeed (Dixon et al., 2009; Tucker et al., 2010). The purpose of a recent study by Tucker et al (2010), was to learn more about the experiences in a school of African American males
who were succeeding academically. This school focused on providing students with extra adult support and low student to teacher ratios. The results of the study showed that students felt that the extra adult support, as well as high expectations set by staff members, significantly impacted their internal drive to be successful. Some of the students had families that pushed them while others lacked family support and felt the need for more at school. Students described feeling protected, nurtured, and cared for at school (Tucker et al., 2010). Overall, students who felt that they mattered at school developed the skills needed to be academically successful.

Studies on student engagement have also found that students who participate in service learning activities are more engaged in their learning because they feel valued and useful to others (Scales et al., 2006). Volunteering in the community has found to be positively related to grade point average and test scores and also provides students real world connections to what they are learning in school. However, students from low SES backgrounds as well as students of color are less likely to have opportunities to serve in the community (Scales et al., 2006). Therefore, it is important for educators to consider the benefits of students becoming involved in activities and organizations in and out of the school. Students who feel as though they are giving back to others will also be less likely to have behavioral issues in school that can lead to increased absences from school.

Some research has been done to find that the disciplinary climate of the school may affect student engagement (Pellerin, 2000). Factors such as strict school truancy and suspension policies have been found to be ineffective for some subgroups of students. Also, according to Pellerin (2000) students from “disadvantaged minority groups may be especially vulnerable to alienation from their school” (p. 8). Pellerin’s study on
disengagement found that 10th grade white students were less disengaged than 10th grade African American students, and that by 12th grade, rates had dropped because some of the African American students had dropped out of school. Additional research by Lynn (2006) found that self-esteem of African American students decreases from middle to high school while these rates remained the same for white girls and increased for white boys. Overall, when students of any race feel that they are not a valued member of the school, they are less likely to perform in their classes and more likely to feel that what they are being asked to do by teachers is meaningless (Pellerin, 2000).

**Discussion**

This review has sought to examine the relevance of these out of school factors while also looking at the contribution of the in school factors such as teacher expectation, and school climate that contribute to the lower performance of African American students. While the research attempted to see which factor, out of school or in school contributed more, the research provided answers that suggest that both are equally relevant in contributing to the gap and work together to support a gap in learning and performance between African American and white students.

In Ogbu’s 2003 research on the factors contributing to the achievement gap in an Ohio community, he concluded that African American parents did not “hold up their end of the bargain” at supporting their child’s education (Lynn, 2003, p. 109). At the same time, he also faulted the schools for not actively reaching out to African American parents to be involved in their children’s school. Howard and Reynolds (2008) found that African American parents were not as involved in their child’s education not because they didn’t care, but because they didn’t want to be the only minority voice in a
School factors of African American students. Both of these studies were conducted in middle class communities, in schools with plenty of resources and demonstrate the combined efforts needed to narrow the achievement gap.

The other major issue that needs to be continually looked at is the effect that school climate has on a student’s ability to succeed especially when a student is part of the minority (McMillian, 2004). While a student shows disengagement in their education by not doing their homework or failing classes, this may not mean that the student does not wish that they could succeed. Many school factors, like quality of teachers, can impact the desire a student has to learn and therefore affect their performance. According to Ogbu (2003), some white teachers have negative stereotypes about the ability of African American students to perform and do not provide a supportive environment for them to succeed. In addition, African American students in a predominantly white school can sometimes equal success to trying to act like white students (Lynn, 2006). Students who believe that they are part of a culture that is not supposed to succeed because of all of the discussion about them not achieving through various outlooks, can underperform and avoid school instead of challenging themselves (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Taylor, 2007). Therefore, while focusing on the “academic outcomes” of grades and test scores, educators should also be focusing what they can do to change the stereotype and give confidence to all students that no matter their background, they can succeed (Lynn, 2006).

There are many schools across the country that are incorporating programs aimed at narrowing the achievement gap. Research on programs that aim to increase academic skills among students stress the need to be long term interventions and not short term
programs that do not give children a real chance to show academic gains (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). It also stresses that programs whose primary purpose is to improve standardized test scores may not provide students with the skills needed for life outside of high school. Programs that have been successful try and bridge the gap that can exist between families who are not actively part of the school system and schools who need guidance on how to reach those families. They also try to incorporate resources that address the student’s academic and social needs and give encouragement to the student and their family that success is possible. These programs are essential for families who are currently not being informed and work to provide families access to resources they might otherwise never know existed.

One program that demonstrates the need for schools and parents to work together and become involved is a program called Success for All, a model for elementary schools that specifically focuses on increasing parent involvement for minority students. In addition to providing one on one tutoring for students, it provides a family support team to give parents specific tools that will create a successful environment for their children (Slaven & Madden, 2001). While this is primarily being used in urban areas, similar programs could be implemented at schools across the country that may increase parent involvement and help students be more successful.

Empowered youth programs are another program that has developed to not only focus on the academic needs, but also social needs of the children. While initially developed with a focus on African American adolescent males, it now extends to other minority students. They have also developed a program called Parents of Empowered Youth that work with parents of EYP children. Before students are enrolled in EYP
programs, school personnel including teachers, counselors, and the student and parents discuss where they believe the student should be academically and write academic as well as personal goals (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010).

One of the many EYP programs is called Saturday Academy and is aimed at providing additional instructional time for students who are falling behind in reading and math. Students who are not meeting grade level get an opportunity to work with their teachers on key competencies that they are not grasping. They meet in larger groups with other students in their grade and also receive individual tutoring. At a public, inner city elementary school where Saturday Academy is used, many teachers and other school personnel pick up students from their homes who do not have transportation in order to get them to participate in the program. This atypical approach allows teachers the opportunity to speak with families on a weekly basis and give them strategies to use with their children at home to help improve their skills (Bower & Griffin, 2011). This not only builds relationships with the school and family, it creates a partnership between the family and the school that some African American families struggle to feel in predominantly white school settings.

Many programs that address the achievement gap also work towards giving disadvantaged students the resources necessary to graduate high school and pursue post secondary education. EYP offers specific programs geared towards high school graduation including academic advisement where students are assigned an academic advisor that keeps them on track for graduation, and exam lock-in which prepares high school students for finals by providing intensive group and individual student sessions as well as teaches study skills (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey 2010). Participation in EYP
programs has shown to be effective in schools that have implemented it. In one study, 98% of EYP program participants graduated from high school and enrolled in some form of post-secondary education (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey 2010).

Additional programs include federal programs like the TRIO programs, which are specifically designed to support and give services to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012), “TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low income individuals, first generation college students, and individuals with disabilities through the academic pipeline from middle school to high school”. According to the Pell Institute (2009), since 1997, 4 national studies have looked at the overall impact of the TRIO program and found that participation in the program has significant impact of the level of education attained by students who qualified for the TRIO program.

On the local level, initiatives like the drop out prevention program in a major Midwest city worked to increase academic and social skills based on the specific needs of the community (Bailey & Bradburg-Bailey, 2010). This 9th grade program provided academic tutoring to a group which was 99% African American and came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The students met four days a week and were paired with college students who were pursuing a degree in education, most of them African American. This group was designed to help with the transition from middle to high school, which according to research is a critical time for students (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004; Bailey & Bradburg-Bailey, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). An interesting finding of this study showed that while GPA did not differ significantly between students in the program and those not in the program, dropout rate for students who completed the
program was significantly lower than those students who did not complete the program (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). This finding indicates that the adult tutors who were paired with the students and were able to develop a relationship with them gave the students a reason to stay in school despite the fact that their grades might not have dramatically improved (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). Overall, students who have a mentor or advisor that can provide them one on one attention and guidance will be more academically successful.

While this review focused primarily on the role of the school and the family, research has also shown that the community must be involved (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010; Kettering Foundation, 2010). From 2007-2009, The Kettering Foundation met with more than 3000 citizens in 10 major cities across the country to look at the issue of the achievement gap. One of the most surprising findings of the study was that most of the community members who came to the forums had little knowledge of the achievement gap (Kettering Foundation, 2010). Many expressed that they did not fully understand it and did not realize it existed to the extent it did in their community. Participants reflected the dynamics of many communities, which are much less connected and hesitant to get involved in school issues based on challenges that communities may be facing on their own.

Findings of the research stressed the need for schools to better communicate the struggles in the schools, to align with the needs of the community, and to find members of the community who are willing to support them (Kettering Foundation, 2010). The achievement gap has long been looked at as a school issue, but this research project looked at ways that communities could embrace this as a societal issue. For example, the
Kettering Foundation found that as the causes of the achievement gap were broken down, a consensus was formed that it should not solely be the schools responsibility but also the communities to support families in difficult situations and to help teach parents way to help their children be successful in school (Kettering Foundation, 2010). Other research stresses the importance of schools using the faith community to collaborate with African American families (Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Dodson-Sims, 2005; Bower & Griffin, 2011). The church is a central part of African American communities, specifically the minister, who parents often approach for help when their children are struggling academically or behaviorally (Bradley, Johnson, Rawls & Dodson-Sims, 2005). By working with the church community, school leaders may be better able to bridge the gap that can exist between the school and African American families.

One of the most successful examples of a community partnership with schools is the Harlem’s Children Zone (HCZ) established by Geoffrey Canada in 1970. These charter schools, which occupy a 97 block area of Harlem, rely on numerous social supports including but not limited to parent education classes, nutrition and fitness programs, mentoring, leadership training, financial planning, health centers that offer physical and mental health care, and career and college readiness program (HCD, n.d.). Educational leaders who have studied this project credit the success to the numerous networks of support offered to students and their families. Canada also credits the success to the expectations and norms that are now set in a community surrounded by the ideas of striving for success instead of surrounded with the struggles of poverty, low graduation rates and high levels of crime. Studies also show that HCZ has essentially
eliminated the achievement gap between students at their schools and the average white student in New York City public schools (Dobbie & Fryer, 2009).

Another program in Newport News, VA, has created a partnership between the public school district and the business community to give additional support to students in a school where 98% of the population is African American and 100% of the population qualifies for free and reduced lunch. This partnership provides students and families additional resources such as extended school day, enrichment programs, access to technology, parent training and involvement groups and an onsite health clinic. This school has also seen improved scores in state tests and reduced discipline referrals and absenteeism (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010).

**School Counseling Implications**

The role of the school counselor is critically important in reducing the achievement gap. While this review has examined the relationship that exists between schools and families of students who are lagging behind, school counselors must be the resource and leader in the school that bridges the gap between the school and family. The most important task of the school counselor in helping to reduce the achievement gap is working to create a partnership between the family, school, and community that is built on trust and understanding rather than mistrust and blame.

No matter if a school is in a rural or urban community, there is continual need to explore cultural competence in students, teachers, parents, and community members. The Kettering Foundation made huge gains in cities across the country when all parties involved sat down and had an honest, open conversation about their hopes for their schools. Community members who attended these forums were often shocked to learn of
the discrepancies between white and minority student’s academic success. Minority students throughout the country expressed the need for schools to set high expectations for them and not to assume that because of their cultural background, they were not capable of succeeding (Kettering Foundation, 2010). These examples demonstrate how people’s perceptions, whether conscious or unconscious, may affect their ability to effectively work towards solving a problem like the achievement gap. School counselors are trained to work with students to teach skills in problem solving, mediation, and interpersonal communication and must extend this to staff in schools, families, and community members (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010).

As school counselors work towards this partnership, they can also help to identify additional areas that are lacking in the school or community that would help all parties involved including mentoring programs, parent education services, medical resources, volunteer programs, etc…(Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). While the importance of school, family, and community partnerships have been emphasized federally through the U.S. Dept. of Education and No Child Left Behind, there needs to be key people within a school, such as a school counselor, who can lead the initiative from an idea to action.

Through this partnership, school counselors must work to involve parents in their child’s education and teach parents skills on how to help their child be successful. Throughout the country, African American parents are slowly beginning to have a greater role in the school. More parents are serving on school committees and offering their perspective in community forums which are helping to provide a deeper level of understanding of the needs of the community and allows a feeling of mutual respect toward a shared goal of student success (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). However,
in many communities, traditional techniques of trying to involve parents are not working (Bower, & Griffin, 2010). Inviting parents to school activities or parent-teacher conferences are found to not be effective in making parents feel involved in their child’s education for families of color or who come from low SES backgrounds (Scales, et al., 2006). Instead, school counselors could advocate to have flexible meeting times in order to meet the needs of a variety of working schedules (Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Dodson-Sims, 2005). It is crucial for school counselors to allow parents of different races to feel comfortable expressing their concerns for their children in a safe, welcoming environment. The open forums that the Kettering Foundation organized provided this type of framework where honest conversations about race and academic achievement could be discussed without fear of judgment.

School counselors must also work to familiarize themselves with the varying cultures of the community and find a variety of ways to involve parents, which may be different based on a variety of cultural backgrounds. The most important step towards greater involvement and cooperation among parents is to develop a relationship with the family. This will help to earn the trust of parent and the student. One way school counselors can achieve this is by establishing a positive rapport with parents and contacting them before there are academic or behavioral problems to discuss mutual goals they have for the student in order to create an open dialogue with parents from the beginning of the school year (Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Dodson-Sims, 2005). It is also crucial to become familiar with the resources that can be available to families in need of extra support. When school counselors understand the cultural barriers that may lead to misunderstandings between the family and the school and make it harder for the family to
feel apart of the school community, they can better work to support the families which
will ultimately lead to greater academic success for the student (Bower & Griffin, 2010;
Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010).

Within a school, school counselors need to help create a school environment
where all students are held to the same level of high academic standards as well as feel
that they belong, are valued and treated with respect regardless of their background.
With many African American males are still being portrayed negatively by media
images, it is important that school counselors don’t unfairly label them as at risk and
therefore set lower expectations (Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Dodson-Sims, 2005).
School counselors need to be the leaders at examining the school climate and helping to
determine the effect it has on the academic success of its students (Tucker et al., 2010).
Tucker et al (2010) showed that one of the most important reasons that students choose to
be engaged in their academics is because they feel they make a significant contribution to
the school and feel that they matter. School counselors must find ways, especially in
large schools, to involve students in matters of the school where adults can be present to
witness their contribution (Tucker et al., 2010). They must also partner with teachers,
administrators, and community members to create an awareness of the importance of
fostering a school climate where all students feel welcome and are recognized regardless
of the color of their skin or past issues they have had within the school (Tucker et al.,
2010).

Specifically when working with the staff, it is important for school counselors to
have honest conversations with teachers about the variety of cultural backgrounds of
students that attend their school and explore how teachers can best meet the needs of all
of their students (Kettering Foundation, 2010). This could be communicated to the whole staff at a staff meeting or in smaller, staff development sessions. This information would allow teachers to have an open discussion on struggles they have in the classroom with certain groups of students. It would also provide a time for them to reflect on their own teaching and ways they could improve without feeling that they are the ones to blame for their student’s lack of success.

As schools work towards bridging the achievement gap, they must find alternative, culturally competent, ways to work with students who struggle with traditional academic and behavior methods. One way that school counselors can be involved in this process is to use core academic standards and blend them with school counseling standards. This can enhance academic lessons by providing relevant context to curriculum that connects to the daily lives of students. Standard blending can also address cultural needs of the students as teachers and students learn more about each other’s background (Schellenberg & Grothaus, 2011).

One study explains the process of how a school successfully implemented standards blending where there was a disproportionate number of students of color who were not succeeding in their language arts classes. The school counselor, along with support from administration, designed a large group intervention that involved working with language arts teachers to blend the two sets of standards. The school counselor believed that a career theme would help students see the relevancy of their writing assignment and allow them an opportunity to explore their employability skills as well as help them identify their strengths. The results of this study showed that students who were not experiencing success in a language arts class scored significantly higher when
their curriculum was blended with school counseling standards (Schellenberg & Grothaus, 2011). This shows the importance of adapting curriculum to fit the needs of the students while maintaining high standards for all students. School counselors must work with teachers and department leaders to find culturally appropriate interventions that can positively impact student success.

As school counselors work with the school, families, and community to try and reduce the achievement gap, they must continue to demonstrate the services that they are providing and continually analyze if they are working. Collecting data is a critical part of a school counselor’s role for many reasons. They can-use data techniques to discover issues within the schools, identify gaps, and then apply interventions to the students who need them (Hartline & Cobia, 2012). This will not only provide the necessary data to see if the gap is narrowing, but it will demonstrate the role that the school counselor has in working with families and the school.

There are barriers to what school counselors can do that are important to be aware of. The first is getting all parties involved to stop blaming each other for the failures of their students in order to facilitate a partnership of trust and cooperation, which may take longer in some communities. Another factor is the amount of time that is needed for a school counselor to fully implement these strategies, which many currently do not have. Principals must reevaluate the role of the school counselor and delegate administrative tasks, like testing, to others in order to allow school counselors to devote the time needed to foster the relationship between students, parents and the community (Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, 2010). Challenges also exist in large, public schools where there are currently not enough personnel to develop the type of one on one relationships that some students
need. Therefore, school personnel must think beyond what has been traditionally done and work to facilitate new partnerships in the community to provide resources that students need.

**Adlerian Implications and Conclusion**

As previously mentioned, schools must consider the culture of their school and examine whether students feel apart of the school community when looking at ways to close the achievement gap. According to Alfred Adler, the concept of feeling part of a group or community is called social interest (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Humans are social beings and parent’s and educators must help develop children’s social interest by ensuring they feel a sense of belonging and providing them opportunities to contribute to society (Dreikurs, 1964). Adler points out that anyone who feels inferior or inadequate to others will not be able to feel as though they belong (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Therefore, minority students who do not have the confidence in their ability or encouragement from adults will deeply struggle to find a sense of belonging in their school.

A sense of belonging also helps children build resilience in order to deal with difficult issues that they encounter throughout their life (Dreikurs, 1964). As research has shown, students who comes from disadvantaged backgrounds will have a better chance at succeeding when they feel as though they belong in their school and have positive relationships with adults who they can trust. Educators can also help develop student’s social interest by going beyond focusing solely on academics, but making curriculum interesting and relevant to their lives. Students from different cultures or backgrounds must feel that educators care to learn about their lives and accept them for who they are.
Students who are struggling to achieve need to be encouraged, and understood instead of preached to about the benefits of an education from adults. Once students find their education to be relevant to their lives and specific circumstances, they will better be able to see the benefits of learning and have a better chance of meeting their full potential.

Students who don’t feel as though belong along may also feel discouraged and therefore believe that they are not capable success. Adler discusses the four mistaken goals of children, which serve to help adults understand why children behave the way that they do. The fourth mistaken goal of misbehavior is a display of inadequacy from a discouraged child (Dreikurs, 1964). African American students who have struggled socially in school to feel as though they belong, grown up in a family that struggles with financial troubles, or have struggled academically, have a greater chance of becoming discouraged, and therefore may exhibit feelings of helplessness and give up. A discouraged child will not be able to succeed academically and adults must be able to recognize these students and give them extra encouragement in order to make them feel worthy of success.

In conclusion, there is not one cause that contributes to the achievement gap between African American and white students. While many stakeholders look for someone to blame, it is an ongoing issue that deserves more attention from all who are involved in the lives of students. It is not solely the parents’ fault or the schools fault, but rather a combination of multiple factors that are allowing the gap to continue. Students, parents, teachers, principals, legislators, etc… must equally take responsibility for the underperformance of African American students and work together to make changes that will benefit students and increase their achievement.
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concern, but solution continues to elude educators, scholars and policy-makers.


