A Phenomenological Case Study of the Experiences of African American High School Students

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Abstract

In a progression of scholarly research on the achievement gap, the results remain the same. The data show that there is a statistically significant difference in the achievement of African American and Hispanic students compared with their Caucasian and Asian academic counterparts. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the implications of the gap in achievement for young urban adults. The participants were five African American students who had dropped out of traditional school. These students described their academic decline through interviews and focus group sessions at two alternative educational sites. The data were collected and the results indicated that the students felt disconnected from their teachers and the process of education. As a result of this disconnection, they became adrift in the educational system and were eventually swallowed by the undertow.

Bridging the Gap in Academic Achievement

Education in America is the means to achieving success in life. The research indicates, however, that African Americans begin schooling at a tremendous disadvantage. If education and success are synonymous, the lack of an education is tantamount to a lifetime of frustration. According to Jencks and Phillips (1998),

> African Americans score lower than European Americans on vocabulary, reading, and math tests, as well as on tests that claim to measure scholastic aptitude and intelligence. The gap appears before children enter kindergarten and it persists into adulthood. It has narrowed since 1970; however, the typical American Black still scores below 75 percent of American Whites. There is a lot of overlap between the two groups. Nonetheless, the test score gap is large enough to have significant social and economic consequences. (p. 24)

Johnson (2002) further interjected that despite a multitude of school reform efforts directed at closing the gap in achievement, we begin the 21st century with the same problem. These gaps are in evidence with large percentages of low-income African American, Latino, and Native American students when compared with their middle- and high-income Caucasian and Asian counterparts.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the implications of the gap in academic achievement for young urban adults. The achievement gap will generally be defined as the discrepancy in academic achievement among different groups of students. The gaps appear by income, race, and ethnicity.

This review of the literature was designed to determine the research currently available to address this discrepancy, and future research needed to gain a total perspective of the economic, social, and political issues involved in this educational conundrum. This research study has been conducted to answer the following research question, "How has the gap in academic achievement impacted the lives of young urban adults?"

A considerable body of knowledge suggests that the purpose of education is to provide each student with the opportunity to excel. The forum for that success will be both in the classroom and in life. Schools are expected to provide an appropriate education to all students, which in turn will serve as a social catapult to upward mobility and the cultivation of

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young adults who will make a positive contribution to our democratic society. Because educational attainment is positively correlated with life achievement, schools play a significant role in the lives of children.

Empirically, too, there is substantial scholarly evidence that the challenges of providing equal access to all students are of sizable measure in public education. According to Hunter and Bartee (2003), "Public schools face critical challenges when defining equitable access and equality of opportunity for racial minorities in today's standardized system of education" (p. 151). These standardized assessments link access and opportunity to contrived outcomes aligned with those in power. Placing blame in a wagon and leaving it at the urban schoolhouse door is a single-sided view of educational reform. Using standardized tests as battering rams will not bridge the gap in academic achievement because the root system goes far deeper than these simplistic, topical solutions. According to Hunter and Bartee, "Closing the performance gap between the racial minorities and the racial majority in schools requires more systemic and institutional approaches that cannot be achieved through standardized testing" (p. 157).

Boykin and Noguera (2011) asserted, "What has become increasingly clear is that doing more of what hasn't worked over the last eight years is unlikely to produce a different set of results." They continued, "Requiring public reports of test score results by race has exposed the lack of focus on educational equity, even though the law does nothing to help school districts address the problem" (p. 140). The need to provide effective educators is underscored by Ladson-Billings (2009).

Moreover, Lipman (2004) stated, "To me it just seems obvious that guiding kids in the process of becoming lifelong critical thinkers, learners, readers, leaders, and participants for change is not related and cannot be 'measured' on a standardized test bereft of context" (p. 1). Burbridge (1991) has identified in her study that socioeconomic status, more than any other variable, determines educational outcomes. V. E. Lee and Burkam (2002) further corroborated the importance of socioeconomic status, as did Payne (2005). Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) indicated, "Far more relevant than race or gender as academic predictors are the education levels of students' parents (as well as other adults) and family socioeconomic status" (p. 424).

Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) further explored the causes of the gap in academic achievement. Extending a multifaceted theory that takes into consideration the child, parenting and the home environment, the teacher, and the schools helps us to see that addressing this issue will require a multifaceted approach. This research aligns with the theory offered by Lareau (2003). In her qualitative study of 12 families, she looked at several variables that contribute to the gap in academic achievement. Through in-depth observations and interviews conducted with a purposeful sample that comprised members of upper-middle-class, working-class, and poor families, Lareau determined that social class is the most powerful influence in the lives of children. This theme influences the organization of daily life, the use of language, and the interaction between families and institutions. These themes governed activities such as participation in outside activities, requesting a specific teacher, and selecting a certain school, and knowledge of professionals in a capacity to provide assistance and services. Utilizing the social dominance theory, Van Laar and Sidanius (2001) reiterated the research of the powerlessness inherent in low social status. This powerlessness, in turn, leads to the low academic performance of the disenfranchised.

Furthermore, in a study conducted by Ladson-Billings (2001), the important role of the teacher in closing the gap in student performance is reiterated. High expectations on the part of the teacher, aligned with a positive relationship, will provide the academic foundation necessary for educational success. Talbert-Johnson (2004) identified the structural inequalities in urban schools. The redeeming factor will be providing professional development that will increase the pedagogical skills of the teachers on staff. Ferguson (2003) has studied the achievement gap extensively. The Tripod Project is his effort to eliminate this gap through a rigorous curriculum, rich in academic content and high standards for mastery, provided by teachers who have developed positive relationships with their students, utilizing an effective, research-based instructional pedagogy. Unfortunately, Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) have identified low expectations on the part of classroom teachers as a continuing problem in their research. Furthermore, their study determined that Black students seem to be more sensitive to their teachers' perceptions than their White counterparts.

Notwithstanding, Carter (2005) provided research that offers a different perspective on the manner in which culture is used to explain the engagement of urban minority students. According to Carter, culture is a critical feature in the lives of urban children. The full spectrum of cultural interactions spans the range of social and political responses to schooling. Rather than marginalizing and minimizing the import of culture in the psyche of urban minority students, we should choose instead to understand it in relationship to socialization processes in our educational institutions. We must respect our children for who they are and give credence to the journey they have traveled to secure their identity. However, to move them to the next level, we must set high standards for academic achievement and high levels of expectation for content mastery. Fryer and Torelli (2005) focused on the important impact of culture in closing the gap in academic achievement. Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) have written a book titled *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, in which they state,

> Excellent schools deliver a clear message to their students: No Excuses. No excuses for failing to do your homework, failing to work hard in general; no excuses for fighting with other students,

Table 1. Study Participants.

Student pseudonym	Sex	Interview participant	Focus group participant	Center demographics
Jane	Female	Yes	Yes	Large urban, Center 1
Karl	Male	Yes	Yes	Large urban, Center 1
Mark	Male	Yes	Yes	Large urban, Center 1
Annette	Female	No	Yes	Large urban, Center 2
Barbara	Female	No	Yes	Large urban, Center 2

running in the hallways, dressing inappropriately, and so forth. Americans need to say to their schools as well: No Excuses. Given the challenges urban students face, more money well spent could improve education. But it does not cost more to set high academic and behavioral standards, and inadequate funding and overcrowded classes do not explain the racial gap. Neither does racial isolation. Family poverty is no excuse for failing to teach kids. (p. 272)

Accordingly, the research on the gap in academic achievement is replete with causes and possible solutions. There is, however, a paucity of research on the student casualties of this educational and sociological disconnection. The disconnection begins with the inability to gain meaningful employment and ends with economic and social disenfranchisement. This qualitative study depicted, in detail, the educational experiences of five students who fell through the gap in achievement. These are the students described by Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) as being "left behind." The research added human qualities to the data and sought to personalize the dramatic impact of this experience.

Given this abundance of information about the gap in achievement, most of us would expect what V. E. Lee and Burkam (2002) elucidated, "A key goal of education is to make sure that every student has a chance to excel, both in school and in life" (p. 1). Schooling is the dominant factor in the future success of adults. The impact of education reverberates into the areas of college admissions, professions pursued, and salaries paid. Closing the gap in academic achievement, as stated by the authors, more than any other single strategy under consideration, would serve to promote racial equality in the United States.

Method

This was a phenomenological study, which utilized a critical qualitative approach. My goal was to research the effects of the gap in achievement on the lives of young urban students utilizing the social and political aspects of the educational system, which served to shape their reality of American schooling. My application was first submitted to the Human Subjects Review Board at Ashland University for approval. Upon the approval of my application, the study was conducted with the use of two gatekeepers who served to identify students who had dropped out of traditional urban public schools. The program administrators at each campus approached five students who agreed to participate in this study. The project was thoroughly detailed in a meeting with each student. Each participant was then subjected to an intensive review of the goals of this study and the requirements for the collection of data. The participant consent form was introduced, read orally, and discussed. Each student signed and dated the form once all questions were answered. The youngest member of this study was required to obtain signed parental permission in order to participate.

Data were collected in the form of one 90-min interview of three of the five study participants; two 90-min focus group sessions; two unobtrusive observations, one at each campus; and a review of artifacts in the form of report cards, attendance data, and documents pertinent to the students' matriculation through and eventual graduation from the alternative high schools. The time line for data collection and corroboration of results was 8 weeks.

Participants

Five African American students between the ages of 16 and 22, who had previously dropped out of school, served as my purposeful sample. Two students were male and three were female. Please refer to Table 1 for a delineation of the study participants. This population was selected because they all were pursuing their high school diplomas at an alternative educational facility. Each student in this study was raised in an urban area in a large metropolitan city. Each had attended public schools and had failed at least one grade level. According to the Ohio Department of Education (2003) extremely large numbers of children from low-income communities are leaving school unprepared for the demands of the workplace or postsecondary education. These students are representative of populations from our African American and Hispanic communities, along with our children with disabilities.

Data Collection Methods

The data collected for this phenomenological study were guided by the following research questions:

> *Research Question 1*: In what ways are the aftereffects of the gap in academic achievement magnified in the lives of young urban adults?

Research Question 2: What experiences have these students undergone as a result of this phenomenon?

Research Question 3: What meanings have these individuals ascribed to these experiences?

Research Question 4: What are the structural themes that facilitate a description of these experiences?

To utilize qualitative research to respond to the aforementioned questions, data were collected in the form of 90-min tape-recorded interviews and focus group sessions, two unobtrusive observations, along with report cards and attendance records for each of the five participants. Triangulation of the data was conducted through detailed journaling of the entire data collection process, member checks, and clarification of researcher bias, along with rich, thick descriptions.

This was a phenomenological study that utilized intensive open-ended interviews and follow-up interviews for data collection. Initial interview sessions were structured to get to know the participants and to establish trust. Each member of the study signed a participant consent form detailing the goals and data collection requirements of the study. One participant, below the age of 18, also required parental consent. Questions for the subsequent interviews and focus group meetings expanded the perceptions and experiences of formal schooling of the initial study participants of Jane, Mark, and Karl. The study participants were selected through the use of two gatekeepers, the two administrators at the alternative education facilities at which the interviewing occurred. In addition, two focus group sessions were conducted. Two observations, one at each campus, were completed.

Interviews. The interviews were of 90 min in duration and were conducted in an office on the site of each educational facility. The open-ended questions were as follows:

> Tell me about yourself. What are your interests and hobbies? Please share your childhood memories. Tell me about your experiences in elementary school. What do you remember about your middle school years? How about your experiences in high school? What did those experiences mean for you? Who was a part of your support system? Which teachers do you remember? If you were to put all of your school memories in order, which do you feel made the greatest difference in your life? Do you think others feel as you do?

Focus Groups. The focus group interviews were coordinated following an analysis of the data from the initial interview sessions. A new consent form was generated, as the need to expand the source of data became apparent. This new permission form thoroughly described the study for the benefit of the participants. This was necessary because the study was described in detail to the first focus group participants. This amount of detail was not provided for the second focus group participants. In the first focus group session with the initial study participants, extensive information was provided about the goals and purposes of the study. The consent form was reviewed thoroughly before they were asked to sign it. They were queried for concerns; however, when formulated in a focus group, they indicated that they were in different labs. We spent time at the beginning of the session with introductions and a brief overview of the expectations for this session. Their questions were generated from previous interview responses and were as follows:

> Describe the connection you felt to school. Did you find school boring? Why? Did your peers feel the same way? Did you feel your academic challenges were related to real-world events? Did you feel your teachers had high expectations for your learning? Were you prepared by your earlier schooling when you entered high school? Did you get help when you needed it? Did repeating a grade keep you from continuing in school? Did you cut classes and refuse to go to school before actually dropping out? Was there an adult who tried to get you to go to class? Do you feel you had too much freedom and not enough rules? Did your parents know that you were about to drop out of school? Do you feel that not having a diploma makes it hard to find a good job? What is different for you now?

The second focus group session was held with the same orientation to structure, introduction to the process, and refined questions. The two students in the second session knew each other well and were in the same lab.

Observations. Unobtrusive observations were conducted at each alternative educational facility. The first was conducted in early spring. This center is located in Urban Area 1. I arrived in the classroom of Karl at 1:20 p.m. Upon entry, I introduced myself to the teacher and instructional aide. They knew about my anticipated arrival. I asked for a place in the classroom where I would not disturb the structure of the session. I was offered a seat at the teacher's desk. As I looked around the room, prior to the beginning of class, I detected the Center's mission statement posted above the doorway for each student to read upon entry and departure. According to the guidelines provided, the Center seeks to impart to all students the knowledge, desire, and confidence needed to succeed with academic and workplace goals. The Center strives to teach, guide, and support all students through their educational growth and development.

As each student arrived, he or she signed in on a clipboard that was located on the instructor's desk. Seventeen students poured into the classroom in a single file line. They retrieved work packets from a file cabinet and embarked on their personalized assignments at their designated computer workstations. Karl, the youngest study participant, looked over and smiled at me in recognition as he passed by my observation location at his teacher's desk. I smiled in return. All computers in the lab were in service, with the exception of one. This incapacitated machine was turned so that the screen faced the back wall. All students in attendance wore muted colors, with an emblem bearing the Center's logo printed in a vivid contrast over their hearts. The students ranged in age from 16

to 22. Students settled down to their assigned coursework and began completing the tasks that would help them to earn the credit necessary for graduation. The teacher and the assistant, a male and a female, circulated among the students to assess progress. The instructors would sit very close to each student in each interaction. This continued throughout my visit. As students completed mandatory assignments, they turned them in to the instructional assistant and began another. Karl kept his jacket on as he worked through his sequence of activities. All assignments were located in two stuffed file cabinets in the front of the classroom. The students were focused on their individual goals and remained on task. On the faces of some, I could read contentment. Others had unreadable countenances. Karl was one whose emotions were not readily visible.

The posters in the classroom reflected the following themes: "What would you try if you heard that you would not fail?" "If you don't have time to do it right, you must have time to do it over." "Those who stand for nothing will fall for anything." I drew a diagram of the classroom, and quietly thanked the teachers for allowing me to observe their class. I departed at 2:30 p.m.

The second site was a center located in an urban area several miles away from the first center. I arrived at this center on a crisp, sunny morning in April. The center's mission was to provide an education tailored to the needs of each student. The receptionist greeted me as I approached her enclosed area and notified the administrator of my presence. I waited in the reception area with two women who were interviewing for jobs at this center. I watched as they waited in nervous anticipation. One had selected to review her notes; the other was nibbling away at her fingernails. A parent arrived to withdraw her son who refused to attend school. She shifted from foot to foot in apparent agitation at her son's educational apathy. This parent struggled with a baby carrier upon her arrival. I wondered if the child was her grandson or granddaughter. So many guardians of adult children and grandparents are finding their child-rearing responsibilities to be perpetual. I watched as students arrived to class. Attendees dressed in jeans, sweatshirts, short skirts, tennis shoes, and flip-flops arrived and departed as I observed and scripted notes. The students enrolled in this program attend class 4 hr each day, 5 days a week. Instruction is highly disciplined, utilizing the support of a teacher facilitator and an instructional assistant in each laboratory setting. Once the students graduate, they receive a state-recognized high school diploma, not a General Equivalency Diploma. This 1-hr observation session was structured by the following questions:

What are the places where social activity occurs? Who are the people involved in the social action? What are the individual activities in which people are engaged? What are the group activities in which people are engaged? What are the objects people use? What is the sequence of activity? What things are people trying to accomplish? What emotions are expressed?

The computer labs were operated on a staggered daily schedule that would accommodate 500 students. As students arrived and departed with no interruption of the educational process, and an even flow of the academic procedures, it appeared as if this center had established a very organized program structure. This occurred throughout my unobtrusive observation period. The students came and left in a predetermined manner. The social activity occurred in the front parking lot, as students either drove to their places of employment or to other destinations of their determination. All students were enrolled in a computer curriculum, which will allow them to earn the Carnegie Units required for graduation. That goal is kept alive with the oversized diploma prominently displayed in the office of the school's administrator. The students are assigned to time slots based on their employment schedules. Jobs are secured, coordinated, and assigned by career guidance counselors. For the vast majority of the students, this is the first meaningful employment in which they have participated. The students were actively engaged in exuberant conversation as they arrived and departed. I concluded my observation at 11:30 a.m.

Document Review

A review of documents and products brings to light the following themes: Attendance patterns became sporadic as students became detached from formal schooling. Students attended several different schools in their academic careers. Students began to fail prior to actually dropping out of school. The participants had repeated at least one grade level in their school careers.

Jane began her sixth grade year at an urban campus, which accommodated students in Grades 6 through 8. She received a letter grade of D in language arts, a C in social studies, a D in math, a B in physical education, a C in science, and a C in a course titled Star 6. By the third quarter of this academic year, there were no grades posted. Jane's radical decline began in the fourth quarter in which she failed most of her major subjects. She began her seventh grade year with failing grades in every major subject, with the exception of mathematics. Karl's academic records indicate that he never attended a traditional high school. Instead, his father selected to enroll him in an alternative learning facility at the conclusion of his eighth grade year, at the age of 16. Mark earned credits in mathematics, social studies, and two electives.

Annette's transcript shows that she has been in attendance for 1 year at the alternative educational facility and earned one credit. She has neither taken any portions of the Ninth Grade Proficiency Test nor the Tenth Grade Graduation Test. Barbara began attending the center 2 years ago, and dropped out the following year. She has returned this school year to

complete the process. She, too, will need to complete the state-mandated testing.

Data Analysis Procedures

The typological data analysis strategy (Hatch, 2002) was utilized to organize the data in this study and to make judgments about the meaning of the data. The data were analyzed by identifying the topologies present. The initial interviews led to a set of focus group studies. This expanded process allowed important themes and categories to emerge. The following topologies from the initial set of interviews and archival research were present in the data sets of each study participant:

1. The participants were a part of a nomadic home culture that required them to move among several schools in the same district, and in some cases, among different school districts. This created a disconnected and discombobulated educational foundation permitting students to be lost in the system and experience early academic failure.
2. The study participants were required to grow through their formative years with only one parent or legal guardian, causing feelings of abandonment and loss. This would point to the need for establishing this emotional connection in the formal setting of school.
3. All participants verbalized the need to have instructors who took a personal interest in them. The subthemes apparent in the focus group sessions were that the study participants did not feel a connection in school. In addition, the teachers did not have high expectations for their students' learning; therefore, their instruction was not challenging and related to their real-world experiences. The final subtheme was the regret verbally expressed by each participant for not having earned his or her diploma in the traditional school format.

Research has shown that a relationship exists between school system effectiveness, the socioeconomic status of families in the community, and the education level of parents (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002). In the research of Ferguson (2003), the importance of an enriched curriculum taught by teachers exceptionally trained in the pedagogy of their field and committed to providing an outstanding education to their young urban students is reiterated. Ladson-Billings (2001) asserted that successful teachers focus on students' academic achievement, develop students' cultural competence, and foster a sense of sociopolitical consciousness. Payne (2005) described the physical, emotional, and physical resources necessary for these students to succeed. Critical in this process is an educational system that is accepting of all students and an instructional environment that maintains high expectations for achievement throughout the academic process.

The patterns, relationships, and themes within the typologies are aligned with the research on the achievement gap. Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) asserted that closing the gap in achievement requires that educators recognize the inherent social complexity associated with the educational process. It is critical that we understand the road traveled by each student present in the classroom, appreciate the process, and build on prior knowledge. Competent, caring educators hold the key, as corroborated in the research and in this study.

Results

The data were consistent throughout the collection process. The participants uniformly agreed on specific aspects of their schooling. Their academic records provided documentation of the following themes and subthemes:

Theme 1

Mark verbalized the first theme of a disconnected educational structure in the following transcript:

I moved around a lot. I went to M., E.C., G., L., and also another school I can't remember. I been to like five elementary schools. We moved to different schools each year. We lived in E., E.C. Can't remember none of the rest. . . I failed sixth grade the first time because I didn't know nothing. I was always skippin' and stuff, but then after I failed, I started going to school every day and stuff and started doing my work. And then, toward the end of my eighth grade year, that's when I started getting in trouble in the streets and stuff like that. All the teachers in the school knew me as being bad, and like I was with the wrong crowd and stuff.

Karl described his experiences as follows:

I went to E. B. D., C., S., W., a lot of schools. We used to travel everywhere. Can't remember the names of some of the schools. We used to move all of the time.

Jane stated,

It is probably where I belonged (gifted classes). But I was so used to being in regular classes. Cause I was going to so many alternative schools, skipping around from school to school, I never really noticed that work was too easy or the work was not hard enough. I do the work, make noise. Make straight A's, one F. I make an F, and probably tell 'em I don't like the teachers and don't go to class.

Annette remembered,

I bounced around from school to school, to school until I just stopped. I went to like three elementary schools, seven middle schools, and two high schools until I just stopped.

In the words of Barbara,

I went to several schools. I've been to like five elementary schools, every middle school in this city, and about five high schools.

The documents for each candidate were peppered with the names of various schools in two large urban metropolitan areas used in this study. The same school names were replicated at a later date on their high school transcripts, which indicated that the study participants withdrew and reenrolled at the same school within a matter of a year or two.

The subtheme was a lack of connection to school and the educational process, and thereby finding school to be boring with no connection to their futures. In the focus group sessions, each participant was asked to describe the connections he or she felt in school. The responses were sometimes choral in agreement as they stated,

I didn't feel no connections in school. No connections! I went to school because I didn't want to be like my sister. The family be down on me and my sister. Others responded, I hated going to school! I went to school because my mother made me . . . certain things were boring and others were not. I like science and math with hands-on stuff. I like hands-on stuff, too. I did not know how much I needed school until I got older. I didn't think I needed to go. Everybody was telling me that I needed to, but it wasn't clicking in.

The study participants willingly shared that they felt no connections to school. They went to school because they were forced to do so by a parent or legal guardian. Comments such as "I hated school!" were uttered in the tape-recorded focus group sessions. They all shared regret for not having completed their schooling; however, their lack of connection—a firm grasp on the educational system—allowed them to slip into the abyss of the huge gap in achievement and become statistics. Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) stated that Black students seem to be more sensitive to their teachers' perceptions than their White counterparts. One of the persistent topics in the achievement gap literature is high expectation for educational attainment. Teachers must believe that their children can master complex instruction taught in a pedagogy that is appropriate. Each of the study participants moved among schools in a rudderless fashion. It is very difficult for students to master the expectations of so many different teachers in elementary school. If special learning needs existed, it was difficult to detect them and provide the necessary remediation accordingly. V. E. Lee and Burkam (2002) posited that social inequalities increase as students advance through school because of the differentiation in educational experiences that begin as early as the first grade. The participants in this study began their race at a decided disadvantage and never gained their educational footing to advance in alignment with their nondisadvantaged peers, students who remain in one school district their entire academic career and students whose parents advocate for educational placement services for their children as

necessary. Van Laar and Sidanius (2001) observed that socially powerful parents possess a great deal of cultural and social competence, along with capital that will prove beneficial to the academic achievement of their children. These parents can more easily navigate their way through public and private bureaucracies and pull the necessary strings within these institutions. The participants in this study did not have the benefit of this level of advocacy in their process of schooling.

Theme 2

The second theme of abandonment and loss was expressed in the words of Jane.

I really didn't have a childhood. My childhood was skipped, my father was in jail till I was 18. Went in when I was 2 and got out when I was 18. My mother was off doing God knows what, so I lived with my grandmother and my little sister. I really didn't have a childhood. I had to grow up faster than I wanted to. My toys went to my sister; I had to clean up after my little sister. I had to do a lot of stuff after her. I didn't have no childhood. I am just now getting a childhood at 20.

Jane is soon to become a mother. She is both emotionally and physically removed from the father of her child. In Jane's interview, she described the loss of her grandmother, who was her primary caretaker throughout her formative years. She shared her lucid memories of the demise of her third-grade teacher from cancer, the same cause of death as that of her grandmother. She lost an uncle to a heart attack at an early age, and another uncle was tragically removed from her life as he was swept away in the violence of the streets. This was in addition to the loss of her mother and father.

Karl shared his childhood memories in the following fashion:

I don't remember nothing. I don't know why. Playing with my uncle and them. We used to be fighting and stuff. He taught me football and karate. I remember getting my hand cut and going to the hospital. My father left his job to take me to the hospital. I was trying to open a can of milk when I was 9 or 10. I been livin' with my dad for a year or two. We made the change because we was getting on my mother's nerves. We was good kids, though. I played football in the projects with my brother— everybody looked up to us because we was so good. We played outside my house and on other peoples' streets. We bet money to see who would win.

Karl talked about the time he spent in the custody of his mother. He turned 17 years of age during the year of the study, and to date has only earned one Carnegie Unit toward his high school graduation. Karl left middle school and was immediately enrolled into the alternative learning facility. He never attended a traditional high school. The oldest male participant in this study, Mark, shared the following:

I am the oldest in my house now. My older sister and her baby were hit by a car last year in April. She was 1 year older than me. There's mostly boys and four girls in my family. The youngest is 2. Everybody stays with my mother. I don't know where my father is. He left when I was little . . . I can only remember him in pictures. I look like him. . . .I was in jail most of my teen years from like 15 to 17. My friends was in jail too. My older brother gave up on school . . . he started getting in trouble in the eighth grade.

Mark spoke in a quiet monotone as he shared the atrocity of losing his sister and nephew to a drunk driver a year ago. He has been involved in the juvenile justice system, the overworked social system that has been unable to provide for the academic and social needs of children like Mark. He lost 2 years of his life to incarceration. At the tender age of 18, he has experienced so much; however, his current sense of direction is refreshing. Completing school to earn his high school diploma is very important to Mark. In conjunction with this, Talbert-Johnson (2004) concluded that,

African American males, compared to White males, regardless of socioeconomic level, are much more likely to be suspended at a younger age, to receive lengthier suspensions, to be placed in special education classes, to be programmed into punishment facilities such as juvenile court rather than into treatment, and to be given more pathological labels than warranted . . . Punitive techniques are ineffective, counterproductive and overzealous, especially for situations involving African American males. (p. 26)

In the second focus group setting at the alternative educational facility in Urban Area 2, Annette shared her thoughts in the following manner:

When I was going to school, it wasn't like it is now. Like now if you don't do your work, you don't show up, the teachers call home the same day you weren't in class. But, back then it was just basically like if you come to school, or come to class you just come. If you don't come, the teachers don't care. They ain't gonna send you no homework. You get suspended 10 days. They don't care. I had really just stopped going.

Barbara, from the same center, added the following:

I really didn't feel no connection. I was about tired of school. I was going to F [name of a high school] and the teachers up there did not care. And I was tired of it, it was like I would be there doing the work and like I was pregnant and some days I couldn't come. Me and my mother were going through some things, where she wouldn't excuse my absences. And I had seven unexcused absences and you on noncredit status. And I'm like what's the point of me coming.

The subtheme of the need for emotional connections to fill the void, resound in the achievement gap literature. This can occur with smaller class sizes, as suggested by Jencks and Phillips (1998), who posited that having smaller classrooms and competent teachers with high expectations will serve to close the gap in academic achievement. These teachers would be able to connect to their students to create the emotional bridge necessary to provide academic instruction to pupils who have experienced this level of loss. Talbert-Johnson (2004) described the feelings of alienation reported by African American youth within the school community. This research indicates that these students fail to see school as rewarding. Because American schooling is a middle-class concept, which identifies the academic process as the means to the end, the members of the middle class will be required to form the bridge to those who are alienated to perpetuate this perspective. A lack of identification, according to this author, is shaped by negative teacher expectations.

Theme 3

Each participant adamantly expressed the need to have qualified, committed, competent instructors who took a personal interest in him or her. Jane shared,

Teachers told me that I wouldn't amount to nothin'. They say I don't even know why you come to class. Whether you learn or not, I'm gonna get paid anyway . . . I was like in the sixth grade . . . I had to go back to [an urban middle school] and the principal tell my grandmother, "I don't like her, I don't know why you sent her here, I don't know why she come here, stay out of my way or she's gonna be suspended.

Mark concurs with the following:

They told me, you know, they told me I was smart, you know how they be saying that you intelligent. You should be coming to school and stuff like that and some of 'em told me the same thing that they told them, too. They say they gonna get paid anyway . . . I started cuttin' classes and hangin' out.

According to Karl, the youngest participant,

Teachers wasn't fun if they didn't have hands-on, or stuff like that. A couple taught that way, but not everyone. If they didn't explain it, it was hard for everybody to get it . . . I wasn't achieving. I don't remember the name of the teacher, but I remember his face. He used to like use the blocks to explain it and keep going over it so we could know.

Talbert-Johnson (2004) reported that a well-qualified teacher can be the single most powerful variable affecting student performance in schools. Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) stated that teachers represent the front line in education. Ladson-Billings (2001) identified the critical components of academic achievement for all students as follows:

- The teacher presumes that all students are capable of being educated

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes: Bridging the Gap in Academic Achievement.

I. Lack of academic stability
Students moved among several different schools during their formative years of education
Students lacked the adult support system necessary to guide them through the pitfalls of the educational process
Students failed one or more grades in school
Students dropped out of school
II. Feelings of abandonment and loss
Students grew up without one or more of their biological parents
Students experienced loss of significant others in their lives and/or a part of their lives in the juvenile justice system
Students did not feel a connection to formal schooling
Students expressed grief over dropping out of school
III. The need to form bonds with their teachers
Students felt no connection to the academic process
Students felt no connection to most of their teachers
Students felt that their teachers did not have high expectations for their learning
Students felt that their instruction was not challenging and related to the experiences of their lives

- The teacher clearly delineates what achievement means in the context of his or her classroom
- The teacher knows the content, the learner, and how to teach content to the learner
- The teacher supports a critical consciousness toward the curriculum
- The teacher encourages academic achievement as a complex conception not amenable to a single, static measurement. (p. 74)

Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) offered the argument that closing the achievement gap means that educators must recognize the inherent social complexity associated with the educational process. We must accept our students as they come to us, build on their prior knowledge and levels of experience, and expect high levels of performance. Teachers are our front line of defense as they spend the greatest amount of time with our children in classroom settings.

The limitations of this study begin with the sample size. There are only five participants who were interviewed for this study, and their perceptions cannot be generalized to a much larger group of adults who have experienced the aftereffects of the gap in academic achievement. However, their views provide us with direction for future research. In addition, the youngest participant, Karl never attended a traditional high school. He technically never officially dropped out of school. Karl continued to attend traditional schools, despite the fact that he was 16 years of age and never entered high school. His father enrolled him in this alternative learning facility. Another source of concern from a research validity perspective was that the male members of this study were less loquacious and far less verbose than their female counterparts. It was necessary to conduct several member checks to make sure the data I had transcribed were their perception, and not my opinion of their tape-recorded sessions, which were heavy-laden with pregnant pauses. There were also concerns regarding the duration of the study. The minimum time in the field obtaining, collating, and triangulating data for a study of this magnitude would be 12 months. This would have permitted observations in alternative settings for each of the study participants. Finally, the entire sample comprised students who have selected to return to school to earn their high school diplomas. This study could not be utilized for those who have not selected to complete the process or those who have instead chosen to obtain their General Equivalency Diploma.

Please refer to Table 2 for a summary of the themes and subthemes developed in this section.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to provide a window into the lives of the students who have fallen victim to the gap in academic achievement. This study was designed to give a voice to and personalize the data. The responses to the research questions that gave direction and focus to this study provided an intensely personal perspective of this educational conundrum.

Each participant in this study expressed the importance of obtaining a traditional high school diploma, and regret for having not completed his or her education originally. The aftereffects have involved incarceration at one extreme and an inability to locate gainful, meaningful employment at the other. Each of the female participants either is or will become a mother. Perhaps the early involvement of social services in a proactive capacity in conjunction with our urban educational institutions would help these young mothers to be able to provide for their children economically, educationally, and emotionally. Each young mother expressed a desire for something better for her child or children. In each case, the road to the alternative learning facility was long and punctuated with challenges. Each expressed a desire to attend college.

The most dramatic experience these students have shared is a lack of preparation for their desired avocation. They feel they have been left behind by and disconnected from the traditional educational process. The first comment made regarding their current schooling is the size of the classes and the caring of their instructors. The research aligns with this perception. In the unobtrusive observations conducted at each facility, the close proximity of the teachers to the students was demonstrative of the connection each participant sought. The educators appeared to be committed to making sure that the students in their charge mastered the personalized, individualized instruction developed for them.

The meanings the students have unanimously ascribed to their educational experiences were that their teachers did not care about them or about their learning process. The instructors and role models they remembered were those who connected their instruction with creative activities and had high expectations for them. The teachers were culturally competent. Carter (2005) has determined that the requisite knowledge base in American society needs to be expanded and culturally inclusive. All teacher education programs must be imbued with this culturally relevant knowledge base in theory and in practice. As Ladson-Billings (2001) so elegantly stated, we can and must educate all children. This can occur when teachers have high expectations for learning, and understand that all children are capable of learning. These teachers must know the content, the learner, and how to teach that content to the learner, as well as support the development of critical consciousness and cultural competence. When high academic standards are maintained, achievement is the by-product of all instruction.

And, finally, the themes expressed were those of a lack of academic stability, feelings of disconnection, and the need to establish positive relationships with their teachers. This perfectly aligns with the research of Ferguson (2003), in which the quality of the instructor, in conjunction with the high level of expectation, and the provision of an enriched curriculum utilizing effective pedagogy are required for closing the gap in academic achievement. This must occur in the classroom of a caring, conscientious professional who not only understands his or her children but is also willing to establish a positive rapport with each one. The attitude must be that expressed by Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003). They reiterate the importance of accepting no excuses for failing to instruct all children. In the words of Gates (2006),

> Once we realize that we are keeping low-income and minority kids out of rigorous courses, there can be only two arguments for keeping it that way—either we think they can't learn, or we think they're not worth teaching. The first argument is factually wrong; the second is morally wrong. (B. Gates, personal communication, March 30, 2006)

The current research indicates that teachers and administrators must move beyond blaming children and their parents for low achievement. This was evident in a survey administered by Boykin and Noguera (2011). According to the surveys and interviews that were conducted with educators, it was reported that the quality of their work was fine and that it was up to parents to do something to improve student achievement outcomes. The authors continue by reviewing schools successful in making a difference for all children. They conclude that ultimately, the only way to close the achievement gap is by paying careful attention to creating learning conditions in which academic success is more likely. Providing enriched learning opportunities after school will extend learning time in ways that are most likely to make a difference. According to Rod Paige, the former U.S. Secretary of Education, we must first understand the ramifications of the Black–White achievement gap, then we must accept responsibility for closing this gap, and we must develop a sense of urgency about accomplishing this critical academic challenge.

Giving a voice to the students who have personally experienced the results of the gap in academic achievement helps us to understand the importance of bridging this crevasse. Because a key goal of education is to assure the success of all students, we can no longer continue to ignore a large portion of our students. We owe our commitment to Jane, Karl, Mark, Annette, and Barbara. We owe our determination to their offspring.

We owe our perseverance to all children. According to V. E. Lee and Burkam (2002), closing the gap in achievement, more than any other single strategy under consideration, would serve to promote racial equality in the United States. The results of this phenomenological study provided a personalized perspective of the research that will lead to the attainment of this most noble goal.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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