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The African American male achievement dilemma through the eyes of the African American Male Superintendent

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this study to my wife Tonya and our daughters Jamara, Janelle, and Jacia. Thanks for supporting me during this challenging, but rewarding, journey. I could not have completed this process without your encouragement and understanding. Countless hours were spent completing this study that I would rather have spent with you lovely ladies. I promise to make up for the lost time.

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Finally, The Green ladies, Tonya, Jamara, Janelle, and Jacia: Thanks for supporting me during this journey. Your love and encouragement made this accomplishment possible.

ABSTRACT

This research study explores the perspective of African American male superintendents on the African American male achievement dilemma. How do African American male superintendents theorize and respond to the underachievement of African American male students? Do their experiences give them greater insight, and how has this potential insight contributed to the implementation of initiatives that have improved the performance of this subgroup?

Three major theoretical perspectives were explored during my review of the literature. Critical Race, Social Reproduction, and Oppositional Culture Theory encompassed the most consistent themes during my research, and helped to situate the study within the broader education context.

The primary research method involved the interview of four African American male superintendents leading districts in the state of South Carolina. In addition to exploring their perspective of the African American achievement dilemma, the study sought to investigate the likelihood that there was a cultural connection that provided greater insight into strategies and practices that positively impacted African American achievement.

The results of the study indicated that the primary explanation for the achievement dilemma experienced by African American male students was a shift in social and cultural dynamics. Specifically, the disintegration of the family unit and the

diminishing influence the extended community and church has had on young men and families were identified as having the greatest impact.

The most prevalent response to the achievement dilemma has been the establishment of comprehensive mentoring programs. Three of the four superintendents have established Bow Tie Club mentoring initiatives structured around the 5 Well's of Dr. Benjamin E. Mays. All activities support the goal of ensuring that the participants are Well Read, Well Spoken, Well Dressed, Well Traveled, and Well Balanced.

Although the research identified systematic inequities and racism as having a significant impact on the African American male's ability to experience academic success, this study did not support that perspective.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Introduction of the Study

The underachievement of African American male students has been a dilemma that districts across this nation have struggled to resolve. This subgroup consistently experiences higher rates of suspension, poorer graduation rates, and lower achievement scores than any other demographic group. According to the Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males, only 47% of African American males graduated with their correct cohort, compared to 78% of white males. Although there has been much reported on the educational progress of African American males in the state of South Carolina compared to others nationally, their graduation rate of 46% is nearly identical to the national average. Conversely, the White male graduation rate of 62% significantly trails White male students nationally. This report also revealed that African American male achievement in the core subject areas significantly lagged behind that of their counterparts.

An evaluation of a sample district in South Carolina reveals that in 2013 African American male students trailed White females, White males, and African American females in their performance on the Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS). This assessment is administered to South Carolina students in grades 3-8 in the areas of Writing, English Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, and Science. Average scales scores in Writing were 643 for White females, 631 for African American females, 625 for

White males, and 612 for African American males. In ELA, the average scale score was 644 for White females, 630 for White males, 620 for African American females, and 608 for African American males. Finally, the average scale score in Math was 638 for White females, 637 for White males, 613 for African American females, and 608 for African American males (South Carolina Department of Education, 2014). While this data provides insight into the performance of African American male students in South Carolina compared to other subgroups, the data does not provide an understanding of African American male achievement in South Carolina compared to other states. Although the No Child Left Behind Legislation requires that each state administer assessments to students in grades 3-8, there is no consistency of standards, depth of rigor, or cut scores across states. As a result, comparing scores or proficiency rates between students from different states leads to inaccurate conclusions. Consequently, graduation rates and National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores have been the primary tools used to compare the achievement of subgroups across states.

National Association of Educational Progress 2013 data revealed that only 12% of African American males were proficient in Grade 8 Reading, 17% for Latino males, and 36% for White males. Comparably, the 8th Grade Math data for African American males, Latinos, and Whites showed virtually identical proficiency levels. Only 12% of African American males exhibited proficiency on the 8th grade math assessment; 18% for Latinos, and 33% for Whites. While African American male's proficiency rates lag behind that of Latino and White males nationally, the picture is even more discouraging in South Carolina. Only 8% of South Carolina 8th grade students were identified as proficient in Reading and 9% in Math, compared to 12% nationally in both tested areas. Connecticut

has the highest percentage of African American male 8th grade students reading at or above proficient at 19%, while South Carolina ranks in the bottom quartile at 6% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Tables 1.1 and 2.1 provide the disaggregated 2013 NAEP Reading and Math Assessment data by race and gender. With 50% scoring at the Below Basic level in Math and 45% in Reading, African American male student performance lags behind that of all other identified subgroups. Surprisingly, we see that there are 9% more African American male students scoring at the Below Basic level than Latino males. When we consider the fact that 9% of students tested in 2012 were English Language Learner (ELL), and therefore exposed to English as a second language, this is extremely disheartening (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

I offer the following personal story to illustrate the dilemma with African American male achievement. During my tenure as a high school principal, I was continually frustrated with my inability to provide an educational environment in which African American males consistently performed as well as other subgroups in the school. The student enrollment at this particular school was approximately 45% African American. Yet, in my four-year tenure as principal, I recall only one African American male that was recognized as being one of the top ten graduates in his class. Although this school was integrated in 1967, it has never recognized an African American male as the Valedictorian or Salutatorian. In addition to not being among the top graduates, there were only four African American male students during my tenure that were recognized for achieving 1100 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) (Verbal and Math), or a 24 on

Table 1.1

Percentage at each achievement level for reading, grade 8 by gender (GENDER), race/ethnicity use to report trends, school reported (SDRACE), year and jurisdiction: 2013.

Race/ethnicity used to report trends, school-reported	Year	Jurisdiction	Male								Female							
			below Basic	Standard Error	at Basic	Standard Error	at Proficient	Standard Error	at Advanced	Standard Error	below Basic	Standard Error	at Basic	Standard Error	at Proficient	Standard Error	at Advanced	Standard Error
White	2013	National	18	(0.4)	43	(0.4)	36	(0.4)	4	(0.2)	11	(0.3)	37	(0.4)	44	(0.5)	8	(0.3)
		National public	19	(0.4)	43	(0.4)	35	(0.4)	3	(0.2)	11	(0.3)	38	(0.4)	43	(0.4)	7	(0.3)
		National private	9	(1.7)	36	(2.4)	46	(2.2)	8	(1.4)	5	(0.9)	27	(1.6)	54	(1.8)	14	(1.7)
		Large city	19	(1.4)	41	(1.8)	36	(1.7)	4	(1.1)	12	(1.0)	33	(1.8)	46	(1.9)	9	(1.2)
Black	2013	National	45	(1.0)	42	(0.9)	12	(0.6)	≠	(†)	32	(0.7)	47	(0.8)	20	(0.7)	1	(0.2)
		National public	46	(1.0)	42	(0.9)	11	(0.6)	≠	(†)	33	(0.7)	46	(0.7)	20	(0.6)	1	(0.1)
		National private	28	(5.8)	50	(5.6)	21	(4.1)	1	(†)	13	(3.8)	49	(7.8)	33	(6.1)	4	(2.2)
		Large city	51	(1.5)	39	(1.5)	10	(0.8)	≠	(†)	37	(1.5)	46	(1.5)	17	(1.1)	1	(0.3)
Hispanic	2013	National	36	(0.9)	45	(0.8)	17	(0.7)	1	(0.2)	28	(1.0)	47	(1.0)	24	(0.8)	2	(0.2)
		National public	37	(0.8)	45	(0.9)	17	(0.7)	1	(0.2)	29	(1.0)	47	(1.0)	23	(0.8)	1	(0.2)
		National private	19	(4.4)	43	(4.3)	34	(4.6)	4	(1.7)	13	(4.5)	41	(5.2)	39	(4.6)	7	(2.3)
		Large city	39	(1.2)	45	(1.3)	15	(1.0)	1	(0.3)	31	(1.3)	46	(1.3)	21	(1.4)	1	(0.3)
Asian/Pacific Islander	2013	National	18	(1.2)	38	(1.7)	38	(1.7)	7	(1.0)	11	(0.9)	30	(1.6)	45	(1.7)	14	(1.2)
		National public	19	(1.3)	39	(1.7)	37	(1.8)	6	(0.9)	11	(0.9)	31	(1.6)	45	(1.7)	13	(1.3)
		National private	9	(4.8)	23	(7.0)	50	(7.9)	18	(6.2)	3	(1.4)	18	(5.1)	52	(7.3)	26	(5.9)
		Large city	22	(2.6)	41	(4.1)	32	(3.5)	4	(2.2)	14	(2.1)	36	(4.2)	41	(4.2)	9	(2.2)
American Indian/Alaska Native	2013	National	42	(2.7)	43	(3.0)	15	(2.4)	1	(0.4)	33	(2.7)	45	(2.6)	21	(2.1)	1	(0.4)
		National public	41	(2.7)	43	(3.2)	15	(2.5)	1	(0.4)	33	(2.8)	45	(2.7)	21	(2.1)	1	(0.5)
		National private	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)
		Large city	43	(10.8)	43	(11.7)	13	(3.9)	1	(†)	28	(8.5)	50	(9.5)	20	(4.6)	1	(†)
Two or more races	2013	National	24	(1.6)	43	(2.1)	29	(2.0)	4	(0.9)	15	(1.4)	38	(2.0)	39	(2.0)	8	(1.4)
		National public	26	(1.7)	43	(2.0)	28	(1.8)	3	(0.8)	16	(1.3)	38	(2.1)	39	(2.1)	7	(1.2)
		National private	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)
		Large city	27	(4.9)	41	(6.1)	30	(4.4)	2	(†)	13	(2.6)	44	(5.6)	39	(5.2)	5	(2.1)

† Not applicable.
≠ Rounds to zero.
‡ Reporting standards not met.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Educational Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2013 Reading.

Table 1.2

Percentages at each achievement level for mathematics, grade 8 by gender (GENDER), race/ethnicity used to report trends, school-reported (SDRACE), year and jurisdiction: 2013

Race/ethnicity used to report trends, school-reported	Year	Jurisdiction	Male								Female							
			below Basic	Standard Error	at Basic	Standard Error	at Proficient	Standard Error	at Advanced	Standard Error	below Basic	Standard Error	at Basic	Standard Error	at Proficient	Standard Error	at Advanced	Standard Error
White	2013	National	16	(0.3)	37	(0.6)	33	(0.5)	13	(0.4)	16	(0.4)	40	(0.5)	34	(0.5)	10	(0.3)
		National public	17	(0.3)	38	(0.5)	33	(0.5)	12	(0.3)	17	(0.4)	40	(0.5)	33	(0.5)	10	(0.3)
		National private	11	(1.7)	34	(2.3)	37	(1.9)	18	(2.1)	12	(1.4)	38	(1.9)	36	(1.8)	14	(1.6)
		Large city	17	(1.3)	36	(1.7)	32	(1.8)	15	(1.2)	15	(1.3)	38	(1.8)	34	(1.8)	13	(1.6)
Black	2013	National	50	(0.8)	36	(0.9)	12	(0.6)	2	(0.2)	46	(0.9)	39	(0.8)	13	(0.6)	2	(0.2)
		National public	50	(0.8)	37	(0.8)	12	(0.5)	2	(0.2)	47	(0.9)	39	(0.9)	13	(0.6)	2	(0.2)
		National private	47	(7.1)	32	(7.1)	16	(4.8)	5	(2.6)	37	(5.1)	40	(4.8)	19	(4.3)	4	(1.9)
		Large city	52	(1.4)	35	(1.4)	11	(0.9)	1	(0.5)	50	(1.4)	38	(1.2)	11	(0.9)	1	(0.3)
Hispanic	2013	National	38	(0.8)	40	(0.9)	18	(0.6)	3	(0.3)	38	(0.9)	42	(0.9)	18	(0.7)	3	(0.3)
		National public	38	(0.9)	40	(0.9)	18	(0.7)	3	(0.3)	38	(0.9)	42	(1.0)	18	(0.7)	2	(0.3)
		National private	25	(4.5)	40	(5.2)	24	(4.0)	11	(3.6)	34	(4.8)	37	(4.6)	22	(4.1)	8	(3.2)
		Large city	40	(1.2)	40	(1.2)	17	(1.1)	2	(0.4)	39	(1.5)	42	(1.4)	18	(1.1)	2	(0.3)
Asian/Pacific Islander	2013	National	13	(1.1)	27	(1.7)	33	(1.6)	27	(1.8)	12	(1.0)	28	(1.4)	37	(1.9)	24	(1.5)
		National public	14	(1.2)	27	(1.7)	33	(1.6)	27	(1.8)	13	(1.0)	27	(1.4)	36	(1.9)	24	(1.4)
		National private	5	(†)	34	(5.8)	33	(7.3)	29	(6.9)	5	(2.7)	30	(6.9)	41	(6.6)	25	(6.5)
		Large city	18	(2.1)	29	(2.8)	31	(3.2)	21	(3.3)	16	(2.3)	31	(3.7)	35	(3.8)	18	(2.4)
American Indian/Alaska Native	2013	National	40	(2.2)	37	(2.6)	19	(2.2)	4	(0.9)	42	(2.7)	38	(2.9)	16	(1.8)	3	(1.0)
		National public	39	(2.4)	38	(2.7)	19	(2.2)	4	(0.9)	42	(2.8)	39	(2.9)	17	(1.8)	3	(0.8)
		National private	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)
		Large city	31	(6.9)	44	(8.9)	24	(8.6)	1	(†)	28	(5.1)	38	(8.1)	28	(9.4)	5	(3.2)
Two or more races	2013	National	24	(1.7)	38	(2.1)	27	(1.9)	12	(1.6)	23	(1.8)	39	(2.3)	28	(1.7)	10	(1.4)
		National public	25	(1.8)	39	(2.2)	26	(2.0)	10	(1.2)	24	(1.9)	38	(2.3)	28	(1.9)	10	(1.5)
		National private	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)	‡	(†)
		Large city	26	(5.9)	34	(4.8)	27	(6.6)	12	(2.8)	22	(3.4)	33	(5.9)	31	(4.6)	14	(4.1)

† Not applicable.
‡ Reporting standards not met.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Educational Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2013 Math.

the ACT. As a result, the number of African American male students that qualified for the Life Scholarship was small. Life scholarships were established by the South Carolina General Assembly and award up to $5,000 per year for eligible students who attend in state institutions. Students qualify by meeting two of the following three criteria:

1. Earn a cumulative 3.0 GPA based on the S.C. Uniform Grading Policy upon graduation;
2. Score a 1100 on the SAT (Verbal and Math) or 24 on the ACT;
3. Rank in the top 30% of the graduating class.

Unfortunately, the refusal of many African American male students to enroll in Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses contributed to their poor performance on college entrance exams. Advanced Placement courses were predominately populated with Caucasians (males and females) and African American females. I vividly recall a year when there was an African American male student who requested a schedule change from AP Calculus to a Driver's Education course. I was greatly disturbed by this request, particularly since he was the only African American male student enrolled in the AP Calculus course. I contacted his father by cell phone because he was a truck driver making an out of state delivery. Fortunately, I was able to convince the father that his son would benefit more from taking AP Calculus than Driver's Education. The student withdrew his request, successfully completed the course, and attended one of our state institutions on a full scholarship. Although I celebrate this victory, I lost many more battles than I won. Frequently, parents would defer to the wishes of the child, often justifying their decision to avoid the most challenging courses by suggesting that these "hard" courses would adversely affect their child's grade point average (GPA).

Ironically, because of the Uniform Grading Policy, in which courses are weighted, the students at the top of the class were always the students who took the most challenging courses.

Many days I observed my most academically challenged students walking to the bus lot with no books or material. How would these students review the standards that were presented earlier in the day, or prepare for the standards that would be presented the next day? The reality is that for these students, homework or academic preparation was not a priority. Surprisingly, contacting parents for assistance with this issue often resulted in little to no change. Very often these parents would express as much powerlessness and frustration as I was experiencing. I do not want to suggest that I did not have motivated, academically accomplished African American male students. Or, that my tenure as a principal, assistant superintendent, or superintendent did not result in substantial increases in performances for all subgroups of students. To the contrary, my experiences as an educational leader have been marked by significant successes. However, I must acknowledge that African American male students as a collective group have not been as academically prepared as other subgroups in our system. Unfortunately, many education leaders across the nation have experienced similar frustrations, and African American male students continue to experience significant academic struggles.

This problem has a significant impact in our communities. African American male underachievement often leads to greater involvement in gang activity, illicit drug use, and youth violence. Research indicates that African American males who fail to earn high school diplomas have a higher rate of arrest, incarceration, and conviction. They lead the nation in homicide, as both victim and assailant (Martin, 2007). A 2005

report titled *Saving Black Boys* by Rosa Smith revealed that 75% of incarcerated youths were African American or Hispanic. While African Americans comprised only 8.6% of the nation's public school enrollment, they made up 60% of the offenders housed in U.S. juvenile facilities (Smith, 2005). A solution to this dilemma has the potential of not only improving the quality of life for these individuals, but the quality of life for others in the community.

The era of accountability has increased the attention that education leaders have placed on improving the performance of "all" students. No Child Left Behind legislation forced schools to evaluate student performance data in a manner that many had not done in the past. Where it once was acceptable to evaluate a school's effectiveness based on the "average" performance of the student body, administrators now have to insure that every subgroup is successfully meeting state and federal benchmarks. This responsibility ultimately rests with the chief instructional leaders of our respective school districts, the superintendent.

The multiple duties of the superintendent include managing the financial matters of the district, developing an instructional program in which all students can experience academic success, and making recommendations to the local school boards to fill the many teaching, support, and administrative positions necessary to operate. African American superintendents represent only 2.5% of all superintendents nationally. This study will explore their perspective and responses to the African American male achievement dilemma. Because these superintendents and students share a common cultural experience, I feel that they confront this dilemma with a more thorough understanding of the issues experienced by African American male students.

Specifically, how does their unique position contribute to their understanding of this dilemma? Several theories attempt to explain why African American male students collectively continue to underperform when compared to other subgroups. This study explored three particular theories that I feel explain the academic performance of the African American male student: Critical Race Theory; Oppositional Culture Theory; and Social Reproduction Theory.

I utilized multiple instrumental case studies to explore the African American male achievement dilemma through the eyes of African American male superintendents. The superintendents that were the subjects of my study; all led districts in the state of South Carolina. I utilized individual interviews to gain an understanding of their perspective and response to this dilemma.

This study addressed two research questions:

1. How do African American male superintendents in South Carolina theorize and respond to the African American male achievement dilemma?
2. Do the shared cultural experiences of African American male superintendents and African American male students provide superintendents with greater insight into strategies and practices that improve the academic performance of this subgroup?

African American Superintendents

The growth in the number of African American superintendents has failed to keep pace with the growing diversity of our school population. In 2010, there were only 366 African American superintendents employed in the United States. These individuals were concentrated in 34 states. This number represented only 2.5% of the 14,559 school districts in the nation (NABSE, 2010). Most African American superintendents led urban

districts that had a student population that was majority African American. Of the 366, nine of these superintendents led districts that had only one school. The majority of these superintendents, 191, lead districts of 1-10 schools, while 21 lead districts of 100 or more schools. Nearly half of these superintendents, 180, led districts located in the Southern part of the United States. Close to three-quarters of the students enrolled in districts led by African American superintendents were minorities (Taylor, 2011).

African American Superintendents in South Carolina

Although African American's make up only 2.5% of the superintendents nationally, African American superintendents led 25% of schools districts in South Carolina (South Carolina Department of Education, 2012). Census data from 2010 showed that approximately 28% of South Carolina's residents were African American, while only 14% of residents nationwide were African American. Because of the racial history of South Carolina, I was surprised to see such a large concentration of African American superintendents. Even accounting for an African American population that is twice as large as the African American population nationally, I would not have predicted the number of superintendents would be 10 times the national rate.

As of 2012, State Department of Education data showed that of the 85 school districts in South Carolina, African American superintendents led 22 districts. Twelve of those African American superintendents were male, while ten were female. It is interesting to note that the female superintendents generally led the smaller school districts. There were five school districts led by African American superintendents that had less than 1,000 students, and four of those were led by female superintendents. Male superintendents led all districts that served 9,000 or more students.

As is the trend nationwide, African American superintendents are primarily given the opportunity to lead districts where the student population is predominately comprised of African Americans. Of the 22 school districts led by African American superintendents, only two have student populations that were majority White. African American superintendents were charged with educating 123,776 of the states 727,130 students (South Carolina Department of Education, 2012). This represents 17% of the state's total student population. However, the majority of South Carolina's 274,128 (37.7%) African American students attended schools in districts led by White superintendents.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Introduction

As a practitioner in the K-12 education arena, I have spent the last several years exploring theories that provide greater insight into the academic experience of African American male students. In addition to exploring the literature, I have utilized multiple opportunities to solicit the perspectives of my K-12 counterparts. Although I acknowledge that no one theory provides a complete explanation of this issue, there are three primary theories that influence my conceptualization of the topic, Critical Race, Oppositional Culture, and Social Reproduction Theory, reflect the dominant themes in the literature examined. Although an evaluation of these theoretical perspectives may at times seem contradictory, they have collectively contributed to our understanding of this issue. For example, Oppositional Culture Theorist's contribute a significant portion of the responsibility to the aspirations and motivations of the African American male, while Critical Race Theorist's assign the greatest responsibility to the inequity that exists within our economic, political, and educational systems. Is this dilemma primarily a function of cultural dynamics and individual choices, or systematic discrimination?

My research specifically seeks to explore the perspective of African American male superintendents on the African American male achievement dilemma. How do African American male superintendents theorize and respond to the underachievement of African American male students? Do their experiences give them greater insight, and

how has this potential insight contributed to the implementation of initiatives that have improved the performance of this subgroup? African American Superintendents have been the subject of multiple research projects, and even more studies have explored the achievement dilemma of African American males, but virtually none have explored the relationship between the two. In addition to examining the prevalence and dynamics of school districts lead by African American male superintendents, I focused considerable attention on the investigation of theories that establish the most comprehensive understanding of this research topic.

Critical Race Theory

Many educational scholars subscribe to the perspective that African American males fail to perform at the academic level of other subgroups because of racism in our educational institutions. Those who subscribe to this perspective generally support the tenets of Critical Race Theory. The Critical Race Movement is a component of a larger movement against power and oppression over minority groups (Zuberi, 2011). This movement originally began in the arena of law in the 1970s as numerous legal scholars observed that many accomplishments of the civil rights era had stalled, or were being systematically rolled back (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical Race Theory shifts the paradigm from a goal of equality to a goal of social justice (Price, 2010). The early authors of this movement were Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Although there is some variance, Critical Race Theorists generally subscribe to three basic tenets. First, racism has become so prevalent in our society that it virtually goes unnoticed. Our educational institutions, government agencies, economic and

business relationships, in addition to multiple other aspects of our society have been stained by the prevalence of racism and oppression. The issue of racism becomes virtually impossible to address because members of the dominant class refuse to acknowledge that it exists. They frequently describe it as a past injustice that has since been corrected. Members of the dominant race acknowledge that it may not have been totally eliminated, but believe it to impact the lives of minority groups to a minimal extent (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). These individuals refer to our society as a "color blind society." From their perspective, the concept of meritocracy exists for all citizens, regardless of an individual's race. The notion that our society is now "color blind" falsely equates political rights with social equality, while ignoring the many ways that racism contributes to reproducing ongoing social inequality (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). As greater numbers of African Americans excel academically and professionally, the perspective that America is a post racial society becomes more prevalent. How could racism be prevalent to the extent that Critical Race Theorists assert if there are large numbers of African American experiencing success at the highest levels? Because of these successes, they conclude that the problems of racism have been resolved.

The second tenet is referred to as interest convergence. This tenet can be explained as the benefits racist policies and practices have on promoting the interest of both elite (materially) and working class Whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Because of the benefits the dominant class experiences, there is very little incentive to confront and address the issue of racism. Until White's are convinced that the issue of racism

adversely affects their social, political, or economic condition, they will resist any attempts at reform.

The third tenet of Critical Race Theory acknowledges that race is a "social construct" produced by social thought and relations. Race does not correspond to any biological or genetic reality, but instead races are categories that society invents or ignores at its pleasure (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Skin color represents a very minimal aspect of an individual genetic makeup and ignores all of the distinctly human traits such a personality and intelligence that individuals have in common (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). I recently had a conversation with an individual from Kenya whom I considered Black because of his skin color. To my surprise, he considered himself to be Kenyan, and not Black. He explained to me that a close friend of his, who is of Asian descent, and also raised in Kenya, considers himself to be Kenyan, not Asian. Their self-identification is based on the multiple things that they share in common, not the amount of melanin in their skin.

Critical Race Theory in the Field of Education

The Critical Race movement has provided a voice to people of color and other oppressed groups. Lisa Delpit makes the argument that particularly in the field of education; people of color have traditionally depended on others to tell their story (Deyhle, Parker, & Villenas, 1999). The African American story of a quest to obtain education equality was most vividly chronicled during the process of the landmark legislation, *Brown vs. The Board of Education.* Most Americans appeared to agree that equal educational opportunities should be afforded to all citizens if we were to live up to our ideals as a country. However, equal educational opportunities had become defined as

African American students having the same access to curriculum, instruction, facilities, and funding as White students (Deyhle, et. al, 1999). Although this was an important step in the journey to provide educational equality for African American students, it failed to address the past inequities that existed for generations. Equality as it relates to curriculum, instruction, facilities, and funding will never achieve the desired results if oppressive systems are not reformed. Critical Race Theory asserts that the curricula developed in our educational institutions are designed to maintain a White superiority master script. This master script mutes the story of African Americans, while prohibiting a challenge to the dominant cultures authority or power (Deyhle, et al, 1999). Critical Race Theorists would not only assert the curriculum is culturally biased, but also restricted if total access has the potential of upsetting the current balance of power.

For Critical Race Theorists, race-neutral instruction ignores the historical impact of oppressive practices and policies on the African American student. Those who do not accept the tenets of Critical Race Theory see failure to achieve as a function of the individual, not the system (Deyhle, et al, 1999).

Critical Race Theorists view intelligence testing as a tool used by the dominant culture to validate the African American student's inferiority, and restrict his/her access to educational opportunities. In the state of South Carolina, the University of South Carolina was among several colleges that implemented SAT scores as a requirement for admission, after receiving assurances from the test developers that it would restrict the number of African American students that would gain access (Baker, 2006). Working class Whites who achieve at a higher level than African Americans maintain their feeling

of superiority; a condition necessary for the Whites in power to exploit both working class Whites and African Americans (Deyhle, et. al, 1999).

Although the level of school funding inequities that existed over the past century has been reduced, African American students collectively continue to experience funding levels below that of their White counterparts. This inequity primarily exists because of the three legged stool strategy of funding educational systems in the U.S. The three legs refer to funding from the national government, state government, and local district or county government. As you would expect, the funding from the state and national level are relatively consistent across districts in particular states. Where the gross inequities exist is the amount of local funding each school receives. Local funding is primarily based on property values, therefore affluent communities generally experience greater funding than impoverished communities. In *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol chronicles the funding disparities that exist between our urban and suburban areas. His research revealed a funding disparity in the Chicago area of almost $4,000 per student, and in the New York City of nearly $6,000 per student (Deyhle, et. al, 1999). Data from the South Carolina Department of Education reveal that there were funding disparities across districts of nearly $9,000 in 2012. An evaluation of the fiscal capacity of counties in South Carolina reveals huge differences. Based on 2012 statistics from the South Carolina Association of Counties, the value of a mil in Allendale County was $19,343, while the value of a mil in Lexington County was $1,024,619. While local school boards have some latitude in their ability to levy additional mils, differences in property values make it impossible for districts in these two counties to provide comparable levels of local funding. This funding structure accounts for why some districts are able to

construct $100 million dollar facilities equipped with cutting edge instructional technology, while others are unable to replace dilapidated schools with virtually no technology. The practice of funding schools based on local property values will maintain the funding inequities that exist in our public schools. Critical Race theorists would assert that because of institutional racism, African Americans do not have access to adequate educational or employment opportunities and therefore, will be unable to afford homes in the more affluent communities. This maintains the cycle of substandard education, underemployment, and housing opportunities in impoverished communities.

Oppositional Culture Theory

John Ogbu's Cultural Ecological Model asserts that many African Americans view their oppression as systematic and enduring because of the historical context of slavery, job discrimination, and structural advantages afforded to Whites. Because of this perspective, they develop theories of success that contradict the dominant class's concept of status attainment, and produce disillusionment about the instrumental value of school (Horvat & O'Connor, 2006). In addition to the disillusionment experienced by African Americans, they develop a distrust of teachers and administrators. These factors ultimately suppress their commitment to school norms. According to the theory, this failure to embrace school norms results in African Americans viewing schools as a White domain that requires them to think and act White in order to experience academic success (Horvat & O'Connor, 2006). Ogbu determined that many African Americans eventually see academic success as a compromise of their racial identity. Because these individuals view academic success as a characteristic associated with "Whiteness", they

elect to curtail their efforts in school. Ogbu identified this posture as the Oppositional Culture Framework.

Many scholars who reject Ogbu's theory present the academic success of African American immigrants in our educational institutions as evidence of its flawed reason. If African Americans reject the dominant cultures idea of academic success, why do African immigrants perform among the top students in our country? Ogbu explains this discrepancy by differentiating between immigrants who have voluntarily sought residence in the United States, and immigrants that were formally enslaved or colonized. Immigrants, who were brought to the host country against their will, signified their antagonism against their oppressors by rejecting school goals. Conversely, voluntary immigrants, those that migrated to the host country of their own free will, had a sense of optimism that educational and occupational success was within their grasp. These individuals also have a positive dual frame of reference. The United States and their home country are viewed positively (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). If Ogbu's theory is correct, the only group of individuals to whom the theory would apply would be American Blacks and Native Americans. While Native Americans were not brought to the United States against their will, early settlers colonized their native land.

Although the achievement differences among African Americans and Whites can be verified by an evaluation of standardized test score data, scholarly debate continues about the reason the perceived "effort gap" exists. Ogbu's study of an affluent school district in Ohio found that the African American students at Shaker Heights were not as committed to educational excellence as White students. By their own account, they took less challenging courses, and spent less time studying and preparing for each days

instructional activities. Some students suggested this gap was due to poor study habits and a lack of motivation to excel at the highest academic levels. As one student put it, "some African American students believed that it was cute to be dumb" (Ogbu, 2003). Consequently, we can conclude that the achievement gap cannot be fully explained by simply suggesting that African American students see academic success as a White, and therefore undesirable characteristic.

Even if we accept Ogbu's assertion that minorities that were formally enslaved or colonized reject the achievement ideology, why is it that the oppositional culture phenomenon appears to impact African American males so much more than African American females? Are African American males more concerned with maintaining their ethnic identity? A study of Maryland Adolescents suggests that this phenomenon may be tied to the amount of discrimination that African American males encounter. Because African American males encounter greater instances of racial discrimination, they are more likely to have negative perceptions about school (Brown, 2010). This achievement phenomenon would be consistent with other issues involving African American males. This subgroup has experienced greater incarceration rates, more frequent suspensions & expulsions, and higher homicide rates. Historically, African American males have shouldered a greater share of this country's systematic oppression, and therefore are less trusting and more defiant about conforming to the practices of the dominant class.

Skepticism of Ogbu's claims

Ogbu's theory on African American underachievement does not go unchallenged. Social theorist Paul C. Mocombe asserts that the failure of African Americans to embrace educational opportunities is not a function of their opposition to

academic success, but of their perspective that academic success does not translate into financial and economic reward (Mocombe, 2011). In fact, Mocombe proclaims that African Americans embrace the American capitalist structure as much as Whites, and vigorously pursue the materials signals of wealth and prosperity. Unfortunately, the bleak employment opportunities that exist in the post-industrial economy have led many African Americans to envision their path to economic success through athletics, entertainment (rapping, etc.), drug dealing, and other illegal activities. Mocombe states that African Americans are not concealing their academic prowess and abilities when they focus on athletics, music, entertainment, etc. for fear of acting White as Ogbu suggests. They are focusing on racially coded socioeconomic actions or roles commodified in the larger American postindustrial capitalist social structure of inequality that are more likely to lead to economic gain, status, prestige, and upward mobility in the society as defined for, and by, the African American underclass (Mocombe, 2011).

To further expand on his theory of the attitude and social consciousness of the African American youth of this generation, Mocombe conducts and analysis of the 1999 rap song, *Bling Bling*, by the rap group Hot Boyz. He describes them as part of the class elite for the African American underclass. Their lyrics exemplify a failure to embrace the use of "standard English" in favor of the Black English Vernacular, and support of misogyny, gang life, and the illegal drug trade. These individuals become the standard bearers for success in a capitalist society where legal, lucrative opportunities do not exist. Mocombe distinctly presents an argument that African American youth, like the Hot Boyz, are not "acting white" when education no longer becomes a priority or the means to economic gain, status, and upward mobility.

> As these black youths get older and consistently underachieve vis-à-vis whites; they are attempting to be white and achieve bourgeois economic status (the "Bling bling" of cars, diamonds, gold, helicopters, money, etc.) in the society by being "black," speaking Ebonics, rapping, playing sports, hustling, etc., in a racialized post-industrial capitalist social structure wherein the economic status of "blackness" is (over) determined by the white capitalists class of owners and high-level executives and the black proletariats of the West, the black underclass, whose way of life and image ("athletes, hustlers, hip-hopsters") has been commodified (by white and black capitalists) and distributed throughout the world for entertainment, (black) status, and economic purposes in post-industrial capitalist America. (Mocombe 2011, p.173)

Social Reproduction Theories

Why do children from the dominant class more often excel academically and become the beneficiaries of the most prestigious and powerful employment opportunities, while children from parents that have traditionally experienced academic struggles and minimal employment opportunities, reproduce these experiences? A student's social class is a more accurate predictor of his/her future academic success, than race or ethnicity (Rothstein, 1995). Social Reproduction theorists differ in their account of human agency on an individual's ability to attain a level of educational and economic success substantially greater than his/her parents. On the economic determinist end of the spectrum, theorists Samuel Bowles & Hebert Gintis argue that there is virtually no opportunity to overcome the structural inequities present in our educational and economic systems. They suggest that schools train the wealthy to take up places at the top of the

economy, while conditioning the poor to accept their lowly status in the class structure (MacLeod, 2008). While Bowles and Gintis are more absolute in their perspective, theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Paul Willis conclude that structural forces alone do not account for an individual's educational and economic attainments. These theorists emphasize the importance of aspirations in determining an individual's ability to rise above the social and economic class in which he/she was born. In fact, they conclude that aspiration has a greater impact on educational success than tracking, social relations of schooling, or class based differences in linguistic codes (MacLeod, 2008). Bourdieu's most significant contribution is the concept, cultural capital. This term refers to the preferences, behaviors, experiences, informal knowledge of the school, linguistic competence, and general cultural background passed from one generation to the next (Macleod, 2008).

Bourdieu defines the three states of cultural capital as the embodied state, the institutional state, and the objectified state. The embodied state refers to the cultural preferences, taste, and perspective of an individual. Bourdieu refers to this state as the "external wealth converted to an integral part of the person, into a habitus," and therefore cannot be transmitted instantaneously (unlike money, property rights, or even titles of nobility) by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange." (p. 210) Ultimately, the multiple cultural experiences of an individual help to shape his or her actions and perception and therefore takes place over the lifelong process of socialization (Kraaykamp, 2010).

The institutional state primarily refers to the education credentials obtained by an individual. The offspring of parents that earn college degrees benefit from their understanding of the value of education. Bourdieu asserts "school success is strongly

determined by the embodied cultural capital students bring from their families of origin" (Kraaykamp, 2010. p.210). Therefore, the perspectives, values, and experiences handed down by parents largely determine academic success, in lieu of inherent differences in academic aptitude.

Finally, the objectified state generally refers to cultural goods possessed by individuals. These goods include items such as pictures, sculptures, books, and musical instruments (Kraaykamp, 2010). These items are easily handed down from parents to offspring, but its impact is generally thought to be minimal in the transmission of cultural capital.

Social Reproduction Theorists assert that because some individuals have a wealth of cultural capital, while others have very little, students from poor and working class backgrounds are at a distinct disadvantage. Not only are schools unsuccessful at creating systems that eliminate this inequality, their systems exacerbate the stratification that exists (Bourdieu, 1977). Because institutions develop educational experiences that reflect the experience of the dominant class, this disparity continues to be perpetuated. Children from the dominant class are familiar with the key social and cultural cues immediately, while less privileged students must acquire the skills to negotiate their educational experience after they enter school. While Social Reproduction theorists acknowledge the possibility of "all" students acquiring the social, linguistic, and cultural competencies of the dominant class, students that have traditionally had a deficit of experiences can never achieve the natural familiarity as those born into these classes, and are therefore academically penalized on this basis. Thus these educational institutions help to reproduce systems of social stratification. (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Because

educational institutions are viewed as meritocratic systems, academic success is seen as a function of intellectual aptitude and motivation. Individuals who realize this success are described as academically gifted and committed, while those who experience academic struggles are seen as academically deficient and unmotivated. This meritocratic perspective legitimizes the claim that specific cultural norms and practices are superior, and therefore must be embraced as a component of academic success.

What about Race?

Many Social Reproduction theorists fail to account for the impact that race has on the reproduction of economic and educational success through successive generations. Most Social Reproduction theorists acknowledge that a disproportionate percentage of minority students lack the economic, social, and cultural capital of the dominant class. However, many do not acknowledge the impact of racism on this dynamic.

Akom (2008) makes a compelling case for why cultural and social reproduction theory is incomplete due to a failure to include institutionalized racism in the construction of social inequality. This theoretical perspective is consistent with the ideals introduced by Oscar Lewis in his thesis "Culture of Poverty." Akom describes the central claim of this thesis as a pathological set of behaviors that distinguish African Americans from the American mainstream. This dysfunctional culture is characterized by a sense of resignation, nihilism, inability to delay gratification, low educational motivation, and low economic and social aspirations. In essence, the fundamental reasons African Americans experience academic underachievement, unemployment, high incarceration rate, etc., are negative attitudes and inappropriate behaviors. These theories assign limited, to no responsibility to the pervasive racism that African Americans have endured over

centuries. In lieu of describing the U.S. as a meritocracy, Akom coins the term Ameritocracy to acknowledge the restrictions that exist in realizing the "American Dream" because of racial identity (Akom, 2008).

Akom references three federal laws passed in the 1930's and 1940's to illustrate the systematic manner in which whites were provided advantages that would endure for multiple generations. (The Social Security Act, the Wagner Act, and the Federal Housing Act) The Fair Housing Act resulted in 120 million dollars in federal backed home loans being provided to aspiring home owners between 1934 and 1962. Less than 2% of those loans were awarded to African American citizens, therefore restricting their opportunity to realize that aspect of the American Dream (Akom. 2008). Because white parents owned property that could be passed down to their offspring, while African Americans did not, this injustice reverberated for multiple generations.

To be clear, Akom does acknowledge the value of Reproduction Theory. However, he highlights the need to include aspects of race, gender, and other social differences in our explanation for why some within our society appear to be left behind. Capitalism most definitely contributes to the stratification that exists, but we must not forget the role that racism and white privilege play in maintaining the current state of social inequality.

Structural vs. Cultural Explanation

It is highly unlikely that an issue as complex as the African American male achievement dilemma can be explained in totality by any single theory. Surprisingly, many theorists attempt to do just that, either assigning responsibility to structural inequities in our society, or the cultural dynamics that exist within the families and

communities of these young men. Is it possible that the most accurate explanation falls in neither of these two extremes, but somewhere between the two? Theorist, Pedro Noguera (2003) provides an excellent explanation of the divergent perspectives. He states that:

> Structuralists generally focus on political economy, the availability of jobs and economic opportunities, class structure, and social geography. From this perspective, individuals are viewed as products of their environment, and changes in individual behavior are made possible by changes in the structure of opportunity. Cultural explanations of behavior focus on the moral codes that operate within particular families, communities, or groups. For example, the idea that poor people are trapped within a "culture of poverty," which has the effect of legitimizing criminal and immoral behavior, has dominated the culturalists' perspective of poverty. For the culturalists, change in behavior can only be brought about through cultural change. (p. 438-439)

Although I agree that both perspectives assist in providing insight into this dilemma, neither provides a complete explanation. Instead, I am in agreement with a growing body of research that seeks to "synthesize the important elements of both perspectives while simultaneously paying greater attention to individual choice and agency (Noguera, 2003, p.439). While potential structural inequities undoubtedly contribute to an individual's ability to achieve academic, political, or economic "success", so do his/her aspirations, commitment, and freedom to make individual choices. Noguera (2003) states that:

> The choices made by an individual may be shaped by both the available opportunities and the norms present within the cultural milieu in which they are

> situated. However, culture is not static and individual responses to their environment cannot be easily predicted. (p. 440)

Agency and individual choice are vital elements of the African American male's ability to achieve academic and economic success, but we must factor in the constraints of poverty, poor health care, and inadequate education facilities if we are to be honest about their opportunity to experience a level of success enjoyed by other subgroups.

The Elephant in the Room

Although the scholarly community, educational officials, and political leaders have acknowledged the urgency of addressing the African American male achievement dilemma, this sense of urgency is rarely presented to communities by school boards and superintendents. There are several factors that contribute to this paradox, but I would like to highlight the three that I think have presented the most challenges. First, many superintendents fear the potential turmoil this public discourse creates in their communities. A 2001 study involving 15 superintendents from the state of Virginia and their response to the Black/White achievement gap, revealed that most felt presenting disaggregated test data in a public setting would create unrest in the community (Sherman & Grogan, 2003). An open discussion of this data has the potential of diminishing the community's faith in the education system. In addition, a loss of confidence in the educational system often translates to a loss of confidence in the leadership that the superintendent provides. Several superintendents from the earlier referenced Virginia study indicated that a public discussion of disaggregated achievement data could potentially result in the termination of their contracts (Sherman & Grogan, 2003).

Not only are superintendents apprehensive about this public discourse, so are many of the elected officials that make up our school boards. These individuals understand the potential political impact of acknowledging these failures. It is of vital importance that they maintain the trust and confidence of their constituents. In addition to adversely affecting the public's trust, many school boards are apprehensive about publicly identifying particular subgroups as "priorities." Often special attention given to poor or minority students is seen as a sacrifice to the needs of the general population of students, and cries of inequality surface (Sherman & Grogan, 2003). These cries of inequality are grounded in the belief that "equality" demands we treat all individuals the same, regardless of their needs.

Finally, school districts are ultimately defined by average student performance, not the performance of individual subgroups. The reality is that a Blue Ribbon School, in which African American males significantly lag behind that of other subgroups, is still a Blue Ribbon School. School and district administration, school boards, and the community celebrate them just as vigorously. The U.S. Department of Education recognized the state of Iowa as having the highest graduation rate in the nation, at 88%. During that same year the Schott Foundation identified the state of Iowa as having one of the lowest graduation rates for African American males in the nation, at 41%. As we reflect on the systems and schools that are recognized as the most effective, what has been their level of success with African American males? I suspect in most instances, this is a question that is rarely asked.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter has hopefully provided the reader with greater insight into the dynamics that contribute to the African American male achievement dilemma. Because of the complexity of this issue, three major theoretical perspectives were explored during my review. Critical Race, Social Reproduction, and Oppositional Culture Theory encompassed the most consistent themes during my research, and help to situate my study within the broader education context. In addition, my research explored the prevalence and perspective of African American male superintendents around the topic of African American male achievement.

This research has the potential of providing valuable insight into the African American male achievement dilemma. I acknowledge that in many instances, African American male superintendents share a cultural experience that is far different than large numbers of African American male students. However, because most of the superintendents in this study are the product of working class families in which they were a part of the first generation to attend college, they should be uniquely positioned to identify with many of the cultural, economic, and social dynamics experienced by young African American male students of today.

The African American male achievement dilemma is frequently identified as the most significant issue facing educational systems located in the eastern and southern regions of the United States. Educational leaders and policymakers acknowledge the urgency of identifying strategies that will change the current trends. As stated earlier, failure to adequately address this dilemma will maintain the current condition of low graduation rates, high unemployment, and high incarceration for large numbers of

African American males. Although this is a multifaceted problem, that will require assistance from our government officials, faith based organizations, and families, the superintendent is in a unique position to lead the change needed to reverse the current trends. As is the case with many other movements such as desegregation, healthy eating, and teen-pregnancy prevention, the school system will likely serve as the laboratory for change in our society. It is my hope that superintendents will embrace the opportunity to make fundamental changes to a system that has failed to address the needs of many African American boys. Because the African American male superintendent shares many of the same experiences as this subgroup of students, they are in a unique position to lead the dialogue about how we reform our system to accommodate the needs of all students. As one of the 360+ African American male superintendents, I am committed to doing all that is within my power to reverse the current trend of African American male underachievement.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Introduction

In this research study, four African American male superintendents were selected to represent a diversity of district size, demographic composition, and regions of the state of South Carolina. Each of the superintendents selected led districts that uniquely contributed to my understanding of the research topic. One of the districts selected had the distinction of being one of two African American male led districts with a majority white student enrollment. Also included in the study is the largest district in South Carolina led by an African American male superintendent. Of the last two selected, one holds the distinction of being one of two African American male led districts to receive an "Excellent" state report card rating for the past two years, while the other has been recognized as a leader in the implementation of strategies aimed at addressing the achievement gap. I have assigned the participants of the study pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. Each participated in an interview with questions developed with the purpose of exploring their perspectives and response to the African American male achievement dilemma. To ensure that an accurate perspective of each participant was captured, each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition to recording the interviews, I recorded field notes of non-verbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, and voice pitch.

The study addressed two research questions:

1. How do African American male superintendents in South Carolina theorize and respond to the African American male achievement dilemma?
2. Do the shared cultural experiences of African American male superintendents and African male students provide superintendents with greater insight into strategies and practices that improve the academic performance of this subgroup?

The interview protocol was structured to encourage open-ended responses and conversational style interviews. Although the questions were established before the interviews were conducted, follow up questions were asked when needed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the topics discussed.

Positionality

I was the primary instrument used in this study. In addition, it is important to identify that I am one of the 10 African American male superintendents currently serving in the state of South Carolina. There is a professional and personal connection between most of the African American male superintendents in South Carolina. Although a review of the literature contributed to the interview protocol, my experiences as an African American male superintendent significantly informed my perspective, and thus the questions selected.

Description of Districts

In order to provide context to the leadership study, participants were asked to provide a brief description of the districts in which they served.

District 1 had a total student enrollment of 22,695 students with 52 student facilities including 28 elementary schools, 9 middle schools, 8 special schools/centers,

and 7 high schools. The student population was 73% African American, 19% White, and 8% other.

District 2 had a total student enrollment of 1,636 students with 5 student facilities including 2 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, and 1 high school. The student population was 68% African American, 29% White, and 3% Hispanic.

District 3 had a total student enrollment of 9,178 students with 16 student facilities including 8 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, 3 special schools/centers, and 2 high schools. The student population was 40% African American, 47% White, 9% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 2% other.

District 4 had a total student enrollment of 7,154 students with 16 student facilities including 7 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, 5 special schools/centers, and 1 high school. The student population was 55% African American, 32% White, 5% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 3% other.

All of the study participants led districts that had a large concentration of African American students. I purposefully included one of the two African American superintendents that led districts with a student population that is majority White. These superintendents had to navigate the political terrain of identifying African American students as a district priority, while maintaining the White community's trust that these decisions did not compromise the district's commitment to their children. As was stated earlier, many constituents view an increase in attention and resources for African American students as neglect to the greater student population. The reality is that the parents of African American male students generally do not have the voice or political influence that White parents have in these communities. Therefore, identifying African

American male student achievement as a district priority is more difficult in districts with this demographic makeup. It is interesting to note that although there are only two African American male led districts with a majority White student population, seven of the 10 districts are governed by school boards made up of majority White members. This dynamic also has the potential of influencing a superintendent's willingness and capacity to address the African American male achievement dilemma. School boards collaborate with superintendents to identify district priorities and provide fiscal management. Political support is necessary for any initiative to be successful. In addition, superintendents understand that their employment is contingent on the political support of school board members, which inevitably influences the decisions they make.

Data Collection

All interviews were scheduled in advance, and conducted in the office of the interview participants. Although I have a personal relationship with all of the subjects, the familiarity with the setting contributed to an increased level of comfort and openness during the interview. Participants were made aware that the confidentiality of their responses would be maintained, and pseudonyms would be used. In addition to the identified questions, participants were provided an opportunity to expand on themes that provided greater insight into the research topic.

Research Design

Because this study sought to examine the African American male achievement dilemma through the eyes of several African American male superintendents, I utilized a qualitative methodology. The complexity of this subject necessitated that the researcher conduct in depth evaluations of the individual experiences related to the research topic.

In my opinion, this in depth evaluation could only be accomplished by providing the research subjects with an opportunity to thoroughly expand on their personal perspectives. More specifically, Multiple Instrumental case studies were examined. According to Baxter & Jack (as cited in Stake, 1995):

> This type of case study is used to accomplish something other than understanding a particular situation. It provides insight into an issue or helps to refine a theory. The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else. (p. 549)

Although the subjects of the study were African American male superintendents, the focus of the study was to gain a more thorough understanding of the African American male achievement dilemma. While understanding that context matters, and African American males cannot be defined by any single cultural experience, the case study approach enables the researcher to answer the "how", and "why", while taking into consideration how a phenomenon is influenced by the context in which it is situated. Finally, the case study approach enabled the researcher to gather data from multiple sources and to converge the data to illuminate the phenomena being investigated (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Data Analysis

The function of analyzing data is a continuous process that begins at the inception of the study and continues after all data has been collected. Before conducting interviews, which was the primary method of collecting data, I developed an understanding of the identified subjects based on the districts in which they worked, and their occupational and personal experiences. In addition, the literature that was reviewed

prior to the interviews expanded my insight into the topic being explored. As noted earlier, all interviews were recorded and later transcribed to ensure the perspectives of the subjects were accurately represented. Field notes, which provided insight into nonverbal cues such a voice inflection and facial expressions, were also transcribed.

Summary

Qualitative research methods were selected because of the nature of the research questions explored. Each of the African American male superintendents was asked to share his thoughts on why this dilemma exists, and how he has responded to it. In addition, I sought to investigate the likelihood that there was a cultural connection between the superintendent's and the identified student subgroup, and how this connection contributed to greater insight into strategies and practices that improved academic performance. Because of the complexity of the topic explored, it was important to provide the study participants with an opportunity to expound beyond the predetermined questions. This research approach is ideal for the investigation of complex social issues (Cronin, 2014).

Although most appropriate for this study, qualitative research methods have several limitations. Because the researcher is required to synthesize and interpret much of the data obtained, the potential for researcher bias exists. This potential bias, along with the small sample size leads many researchers to conclude that the qualitative research results are anecdotal and unscientific (Cronin, 2014).

After considering the strengths and limitations of the qualitative research approach, I recognized that the implementation of qualitative research methods was best suited for this study. The rich data obtained from this study will hopefully contribute to

the body of knowledge we currently have on the African American male achievement dilemma.

CHAPTER IV

Results of the Study

Introduction

This study provides an analysis of four African American male superintendents in the state of South Carolina. I captured their thoughts and perspectives of the research questions through a combination of individual and focus group interviews. Although I synthesized the data around consistently recurring themes, I used the actual words of my interview subjects to provide an in depth understanding of their individual stories. The interview data was organized in the following manner: (a) a description of each superintendent to include his educational background and family history, (b) responses to the interview questions, (c) a presentation of the consistent themes related to the research questions.

The interview questions reflected both my experiences as an African American male superintendent, and the literature examined in Chapter II. I felt that a vital component of this research was to avoid the selection of interview questions that did little more than reinforce my individual perspective of the research topic. As the primary instrument in this research process, it is inevitable that my individual perspective influence multiple aspects of the study; however question selection should primarily be influenced by the literature explored. Although the questions were developed prior to the interview, questions were open ended as to afford study participants the opportunity to

expand on topics that contributed to a more thorough analysis of the research questions. The research questions addressed in the study were as follows:

1. How do African American male superintendents in South Carolina theorize and respond to the African American male achievement dilemma?
2. Do the shared cultural experiences of African American male superintendents and African American male students provide superintendents with greater insight into strategies and practices that improve the academic performance of this subgroup?

The Trailblazing Superintendent

It will become evident as the story of this superintendent is revealed why I refer to him as the Trailblazing Superintendent. He was the only child of parents who had little formal education. Although neither attended school past the 6th grade, they were extremely adept at reading and writing, and had a tremendous commitment to education. Their scholarly prowess could be attributed primarily to their efforts to learn after reaching adulthood. Although his mother was from Bluffton, South Carolina, he recalled that she had virtually no "low country" accent and had virtually eliminated the Gullah dialect from her speech. Many African Americans from this region not only had a distinct manner in which they pronounced particular words, there was also a distinction in the vocabulary and grammar used. Therefore she worked to eliminate the accent and dialect from her speech pattern. She felt that speaking with this dialect could ultimately hinder her opportunities to experience economic success.

> My mom and aunt worked on their dialect so they did not sound like people in the low county. They practiced, and practiced, and practiced one with the other until you could not tell they were from the low country.

For them, the "geechie" dialect of the low country represented educational and economic limitations; therefore they focused on speaking standard English.

His elementary and middle school experience was relatively consistent with what other southern African Americans experienced during this era. The schools were segregated by race and extensions of the community. Virtually all of the teachers lived in the community, attended church with the students' parents, and saw the academic success of students as a reflection of the success of the African American community. Because these teachers were an integral part of the community, trust and communication between home and school were at levels much greater than they are today. Collaborative relationships between parents and teachers normally have a positive impact on a student's ability to experience academic success, while adversarial, non-trusting relationships generally have the opposite effect. "They drilled and drilled and drilled until we all got it because they knew that we weren't just representing us, we were representing them. That was a factor."

In addition to ensuring that students experienced academic success, appropriate and respectful behavior was greatly emphasized in these segregated institutions. Suspensions were rarely, if ever, used to punish students for inappropriate behavior. One of the male teachers assumed the responsibility of discharging the necessary consequences, and it was most often in the form of a leather strap or wooden paddle.

> Mr. Doe was the male teacher at our elementary school and he helped you understand that you needed to be disciplined. If you weren't, you went down to his class, he had a leather strap, he took that strap and tore your butt up, and you went back and tried to sit down. Well, we did not have out of school and in

school suspension during this era. You went down to his room, got what you needed and came on back to class.

In 1965, the Trailblazing Superintendent became one of 15 students identified to integrate the local "all white" high school. The cultural adjustment of moving from an "all black" middle school to an "all white" high school of 2400 students was nearly overwhelming. As he reflected on that experience, he recalled that he did not want to be one of the 15 asked to integrate. However, one of the gentlemen influential with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People met with his parents and expressed the importance of this sacrifice. Proponents of integration wanted to ensure that the students selected had the academic talent and temperament to endure all that they would experience. The following statement captures how he viewed this experience: "In this life you give a service for the space that you occupy. If I don't do anything else, and I'm sure I probably will, but that was my service. That was my sacrifice."

He became a part of the first graduating class at this school to include African American students. This academic training would ultimately prepare him to earn a Bachelor's degree from Savannah State University, a Master's degree from the University of Georgia, and a Ph.D. from Georgia State University.

The Trailblazing Superintendent feels that the most significant factor impacting African American boys has been the disintegration of the family unit. Two parent households have become the exception, where it once was the rule. The African American community has transitioned from more than 70% of children raised in two parent households to approximately 30% raised in homes with a mother and father. Ironically, the Trailblazing Superintendent also feels that integration exacerbated the

problems created by the disintegration of the family unit in the African American community. Although integration provided opportunities for African American families to live in the community of their choosing, it also resulted in fewer male role models in the African American community. Before integration, the teacher, principal, pastor, attorney, etc., all lived in the African American Community, and therefore provided an example for young African American boys. After integration, many elected to move to communities with more extensive housing options, superior educational facilities, and greater recreational outlets.

> The major incentive for me was that the role models (lawyers, business people, teachers, principals, policemen, bankers, etc.) lived across the street and in the neighborhood. I can remember 25 doctors that lived in my neighborhood at that time. During segregation, blacks did not have access to equal housing and could not move to the suburbs. I could see them every day. I was inspired by their accomplishments, which made me want to achieve. Role models did not have to drive in from the suburbs to spend an hour or two a week with me. Today many of our black male students live in communities where there are no resident role models. In many areas they don't see working males.

Although he acknowledges the effects of racism and poverty on the African American male's ability to experience educational and economic success, it pales in comparison to the racism and poverty that individuals from his era endured. Because of the pervasive structural inequities that existed during his childhood, his teachers constantly drilled in them that they "had to be two times better." Students found ways to overcome those obstacles. They studied hard even though they had second hand books that frequently had

missing pages. They rarely missed school even if they had to walk, and the facility wasn't appropriately heated in the winter or cooled in the summer. Although many of their parents could not provide academic support, they supported each other.

> We had a three star general, we had a police chief, we had a head nurse at the hospital, we had several teachers, and all of those kids came from what we call shotgun homes. In other words, you could look in the front door and see through to the back door. These homes were so small they could barely accommodate the families that occupied them.

Because of social factors present in the African American community, mentoring efforts are an essential component to closing the achievement gap. Although there are multiple mentoring programs, including the Lunch Buddy program and the 100 Black Male mentoring initiative, targeting African American males in his district, participation and consistency continues to be a concern. Many of the African American men that could be effective mentors fail to participate because of work schedules and other commitments. Many others get involved but fail to remain consistent in their engagement.

African American male achievement is an issue that virtually all stakeholders acknowledge needs to be addressed. However, some express reluctance in committing disproportionate time and financial resources to this specific subgroup. Unfortunately, they see it as a "zero sum" game, resources committed to this group results in fewer resources for other groups. This perspective often deters superintendents from committing the resources necessary to substantially improve this dilemma. The following statement summarizes the Trailblazing Superintendent's perspective on superintendents fearful of committing the resources needed to tackle this issue.

> You've got to go beyond fear. What are you going to feel like at the end of the day? Are you going to feel like you did a service? Are you going to feel like you're just sitting up there? I guess you have to ask yourself that question. I know some people say man, hey, I just got here. I don't want to get run out of town before I settle down.

The Traditional Superintendent

The Traditional Superintendent was the eldest of nine children raised in rural South Carolina. Although his parents had a strong commitment to education, they had little formal education. As was the case with many African Americans during this era, his mother attended school through the sixth grade and his father through the third. Very few African Americans in rural South Carolina attended school past the middle grades during this era. He was raised in a traditional home in which faith, family, and education were the institutions that served as the pillars of his upbringing.

The Baptist Church in which he was raised and still attends, had a profound impact on his spiritual, ethical, and surprisingly, educational development. He recalls that his church was very active in promoting and supporting Benedict College. His father often served as the chairperson for the fundraising campaigns, and would visit families throughout the neighborhood soliciting financial support for Benedict College.

> Because we were Baptist, the churches had these annual giving campaigns. My dad would go around to the community and say, "Tomorrow is Benedict's giving," and so he would make sure that everyone gave something to Benedict College. Just like the Methodists would give to the Methodist colleges, the

> Baptists would give to the Baptist colleges. So he pushed, I mean he really pushed.

The African American community understood that it was essential that they support private institutions like Benedict College, because in many cases, these were the only educational options that many would have. During this era, "state sanctioned" segregation, and exclusion, was the reality for African Americans. It should be no surprise that as the first of his family to attend college, his choice was Benedict College.

His mother worked in the cafeteria of the local school and his father worked as a carpenter. Although he recalled that they always had what they "needed," his parents knew the only way to improve their economic condition was through education. He spoke about his parents expectations in the following manner:

> My daddy had a third grade education and my mamma had a sixth grade education. But you knew you were going to school, and you were going every day. And if there were a chance to go to college, you were going to be there.

The Traditional Superintendent readily acknowledges that his success would not have been possible without the support and encouragement provided by his parents. Specifically, he speaks about his father and the guidance that he provided.

> I learned a lot from him. That's why I have so much respect for him now, even in his absence. He really pushed me. I dare say that I would not have done anything, not much of anything at least, if he had not pushed that way.

Remarkably, the Traditional Superintendent attended the same school for grades 1-12, led by a principal that was there for over 30 years. This principal, along with the teachers, reinforced the message he regularly received from his parents and church community.

That message was that education would be the essential component to a "better life." Because of the support of all of these individuals, along with many others at Benedict College, he eventually earned a Bachelor of Science Degree from Benedict College, a Master's Degree in Agricultural Education from Clemson University, and a Doctorate of Education from South Carolina State University.

As expressed also by the Trailblazing Superintendent, he feels that the most significant factor impacting African American boys has been the disintegration of the family unit. The family structure that he credits for providing him the support necessary to experience success does not exist for far too many of our African American boys.

> A lot of them just don't have the two-parent family. Now I say that because I know what a difference it made for me. If you just stop to think, you've got grandparents raising these black boys, a mother maybe or sometimes an aunt or other relative.

The obvious missing influence in many of these family structures is the strong, positive male figure. Although he acknowledges that many of our boys who have this structure still do not maximize their opportunity, and others that have little family support find ways to overcome, this is an essential component for most. He speaks about the importance of a male influence in the following statement: "Some of these young boys don't even know their fathers. I think that it takes a man to raise a boy, and the absence of one, whether it's the father or a significant other male, has a tremendous impact." Because he feels that positive male influences will be an instrumental component to improving the performance of African American male students, he is committed to maintaining comprehensive mentoring programs in his district. These efforts can only

be successful if the men of the communities make a commitment to serve as father figures for those in need of that influence.

> I'm not exactly sure how we are going to turn it around, other than to give back. I'm talking about some serious giving back. It can't be lip service, because I hear a lot of that. People talk about what needs to be done. The charities have their thing, the fraternities, boys and girls club, but I don't see the consistent commitment. How serious are we about changing the condition of young black males? I don't know.

The Bow Tie Club mentoring group was established recently for young boys in grades 9-12. Many of these young men were experiencing behavioral or academic difficulties. In addition to others goals, he was hopeful that this initiative would reduce the number of students that elected to leave school before earning their diploma. This is one of several mentoring initiatives occurring in his district. Although he does not suggest that mentoring efforts alone have resulted in these improvements, the dropout rate in his district has reduced from 7% to 1% and the graduation rate has improved from 66% to 82%. The performance of all subgroups has improved, but the performance of the African American males has been the most significant.

The Traditional Superintendent is skeptical of the perspective that racism and structural inequities have been the primary contributors to the dilemma experienced by African American male students. Particularly when he contrasts the current climate with the realities that he endured when he was a child. He attended segregated schools with inadequate facilities, insufficient material, limited educational and employment opportunities, and a definite unequal protection of the law. However, in the face of all of

those dynamics, young men found ways to overcome. The following statement describes his perspective:

> There was not a more racist time in this country than from which I came. I was born in 1950, if you want to talk about racism. What was it that allowed so many who were born during my era to excel? Racism, bad or worse, I don't know, but I can tell you that it can't be any worse. The bigger problem to me is that if we allow racism to be the excuse, then how and why does this dynamic ever change? You've got to pull yourself up, and I think now you have something that you didn't have then, and that's a support system. We now have a legal and educational system that is as fair today, as it has ever been.

The Traditional Superintendent is also skeptical of the perspective that African American males have a general distrust of the educational system. The larger issue is that far too many do not see education as the way to improve their economic and employment opportunities. Because they do not see the value of maximizing their educational opportunities, they use the excuse that the system is against them.

> If as a black male you don't see education as your ticket, then you can sure use that as an excuse. The system is against you. However, how is it that some take this educational opportunity and use it to their advantage? Education is like anything else. It is a strategy that you use to try and move yourself forward. Now if you don't believe in that, if there is no one constantly reinforcing the value of an education, you never fully commit to being successful. How do you decide that the system is against you, when you never really try the system?

He asserts that it is virtually impossible for the system to effectively serve someone that never fully engages the system. Therefore, the failure of the system to serve certain students is as much about their engagement of the system, as it is about the system itself. This failure to engage the system is likely the result of multiple factors. However he theorizes that the most significant factor influencing their failure to engage is their inability to recognize the connection between academic achievement and economic prosperity. For these students, educational success does not lead to lucrative careers and a realization of the "American dream."

Although most education leaders acknowledge the need to address the African American male achievement dilemma, how much of a financial commitment should a system invest? This is a question all educational leaders must answer. Superintendents must be attentive to the issues of African American males, but must also be sure not to overlook the needs of other subgroups. The Traditional Superintendent acknowledges that this concern exists with many leaders, particularly leaders in districts governed by school boards made of majority White members, or districts with a substantial population of White students. He expresses this concern in the following statement:

> If you want to help them, you've got to keep the job. You can't lose the job and think that you will be able to help. The reality is that once you have been replaced, there is no guarantee that the new leadership will have the same commitment to addressing this issue. You have a responsibility to help them, but you've got to be careful that you don't lose the job trying to help them, because then the help's gone.

He shared a story of a school board member that expressed apprehension with the decision to dedicate resources specifically to African American students.

> He didn't seem like he was sure that we ought to be wasting the effort, time, and money trying to address the Black male achievement dilemma. He did not think that it would pay dividends. I said, "You may be right, but what have we got to lose, other than a little time, money, and effort." If we don't, these kids are going to still be going down that same path. "If we don't do something with them, we're going to put them back on the street. Now they are going to survive one way or the other, so it behooves us to try and turn them around.

After listening to a report that outlined improvements in the school report card, test score data, and graduation statistics, he and the school board member had the following exchange:

> "Hey listen, I might have been wrong about our decision to target a greater amount of resources to black male students." I said, "It's still a little early to tell, but let's see how it goes in the long run, but I think we've got to plug at it because we might be onto something." He said, "I'm in."

The Unconventional Superintendent

This superintendent has a story unlike any other educational leader I have come to know. He was raised by his grandmother in the projects of a small rural South Carolina community. In addition to rearing him, she also accepted the responsibility of caring for four other grandchildren. The circumstances that led to this arrangement were not as one would initially expect. When he was very young his mother and father brought him to South Carolina to stay for a short period while they prepared for a future

life in New Jersey. Upon their return, his grandmother would not allow his parents to take him back to New Jersey. She had grown attached to him and did not want him to leave. An emotional connection had developed that paralleled more of a mother/son relationship in lieu of a grandmother/grandson relationship. He describes the story in this manner: "My mother brought me down to stay with my grandmother who was also keeping several other grandchildren. When she returned to get me, my grandmother said 'Oh no. That's the baby, I'm keeping him.' You know how that goes."
He has two other siblings that were raised in New Jersey with his parents.

His grandmother was not unlike many African Americans from her era in that she did not have much formal education. Although he was not certain, he thinks that she may have attended school through the middle grades. She was a moderately proficient reader and writer who earned a living as a domestic, and custodian at one of the local schools. Other than the extensive spiritual foundation that she provided, education was the priority in their home.

> She was a forward thinker in that she wanted all of her children to be educated. Working as a school custodian, she realized early on that the one thing we could do was to get an education. When she cleaned other people's homes she would make it a point to bring home books for us to read. She would always tell us about Ms. Stein and what her children knew about going to college.

It was obvious that the spiritual foundation established by his grandmother continues to be an influence in his life today. Throughout the interview he made several references to church, religion, and the importance of spirituality in the African American

community. He describes the religious foundation provided by his grandmother in the following manner:

> She had a PH.D in GOD. She was solid in that every Sunday we were going to church. Every Wednesday we were going to Missionary meetings. She didn't just take us with her, we would participate. She made sure that when we came out of Sunday school, we could tell what happened in the Sunday school lesson.

The Unconventional Superintendent recalls not being fully committed to academic excellence while in high school. In fact, he remembers the pressure of conforming to the cultural expectations of his neighborhood adversely affecting his grades and behavior.

> When raised in the projects, the worst thing that can happen to a young black guy is to be called a white boy. I can hear it plain as day, Richie called me white boy. He called me that because I was making pretty good grades and was pronouncing my words correctly. So because of my vernacular ability, I was called white boy, which caused me to act out and get into trouble on purpose. I did this so that when I went home, I wouldn't get called these names. That happened now and it still happens today. It hasn't changed.

His reaction is consistent with Ogbu's theory which asserts that young African American males reject the dominant culture norm of academic success because they see it as a compromise of their racial identity. This perspective was reinforced by the reaction he received from his classmate for excelling academically and speaking standard English. His assessment differs from the perspective expressed by the Traditional Superintendent who asserts that young African American males do not vigorously embrace their

educational opportunities because they do not see the connection between academic success and economic prosperity.

The fact that he experienced no African American male teachers during his K-12 experience exacerbated this issue. The presence of African American male education professionals could have potentially provided an alternative message to what he was hearing from classmates and individuals in his community. The lack of African American male role models in our educational institutions continues to exist today. In far too many instances, our educational institutions fail to provide African American boys with African American male role models. Many of these boys fail to develop authentic, trusting relationships with any education professionals. This inevitably impedes their ability to form a sense of connection, and belonging in the educational setting.

> I didn't have any African American male teachers. We did have one African American male PE assistant. That was one of the shortcomings that I had growing up. I did not have anyone that I could go to in the academic realm.

Although the schools provided very little in terms of African American male role models, his uncles, community coaches, and church members provided insight into the African American male experience. These influences helped him to overcome the consistent stream of negative messages from peers. He successfully completed high school and eventually earned a Bachelor and Master's Degree from Winthrop University, and an Ed.D from South Carolina State University.

After completing his undergraduate degree in English, he accepted a position as a business writer for one of the major newspapers. Eventually, he left this position to pursue a career in the field of education. With no certification or experience in

education, he accepted a position as a full time custodian while he completed his certification requirements. The multiple roles he has assumed in the education arena give him a unique perspective. Those include custodian, substitute teacher, full time English teacher, coach, assistant principal, principal, director, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. These experiences contribute to why I refer to him as the Unconventional Superintendent.

Consistent with the perspective of other superintendents interviewed, he feels that that the most significant factor impacting African American boys has been the disintegration of the family unit. He discussed his experience and how his father's absence resulted in feelings of abandonment and disappointment.

> Children born to single mothers are probably one of the biggest situations that need to be addressed in the African American community. When fathers don't get involved, it has an impact on black boys. I played sports all the way through school and never had a male figure since my father was not involved. It had an impact on me. I never said anything to anyone. But when we were out there playing, other kids had their fathers there. We never had that.

The Unconventional Superintendent draws an interesting correlation between school involvement and church involvement. He asserts that a decline in church attendance has resulted in a decline of educational support.

> We have so few black males involved in the church. If they don't go to church, what makes you think that they are going to come to the school? Those fathers that are involved with their sons' or daughters' education, I guarantee are the ones going to church. They don't even respect the Supreme Being, much less

> the school house. That has an impact, not just on the boys, but on the girls and the whole landscape of the Black family.

In addition to the disintegration of the family unit, the Unconventional Superintendent feels that structural inequities and racism play a role in why African American male students don't achieve at the level of other subgroups. As an example, he references the small number of African American male educators.

> I think the system is stacked against them. Like I said earlier, every group other than African American males has someone that they can emulate. We have African American female teachers that African American females can relate to. We have white male teachers, white female teachers, but very seldom do you see an African American male teacher.

He also stated that he felt it was unfair for teachers to reprimand African American males for things such as failing to look them in the eye, or walking to the front of the class with a bit of "swagger." A greater understanding of the African American cultural dynamics would significantly reduce these conflicts.

> I think that we need to make more accommodations, not exceptions. You need to be accommodating because if I'd never been taught something, how can you hold me accountable for it. If I had not been raised on Plato and Aristotle, yet you speak about it as if it represents my experiences, you make an assumption that is not accurate.

The Unconventional Superintendent has been a leader in the establishment of comprehensive mentoring programs. He feels that these programs are an essential component to overcoming the effects of absentee fathers. Bow Tie clubs have been

established in several of the district schools that provide young men with guidance in what is referred to as the 5 Well's. All activities support the perspective that young men should be Well Read, Well Traveled, Well Dressed, Well Spoken, and Well Balanced. At the time of the interview, two of the mentoring groups were on a field study to Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. Tours had also been scheduled to visit the University of South Carolina and Paine College. He describes the importance of these experiences in the following manner: "I feel like it's important for those boys to understand and experience college life. They need to see it." The two most essential components stressed in the mentoring initiatives are respect and effort. Young men are constantly reminded that a part of this journey from boyhood to manhood involves respecting themselves and others. In addition, they owe it to themselves to always to their best.

As a superintendent serving a district with a majority White student population, and a school board in which the majority of the members are White, I was curious if he experienced any resistance to committing substantial financial and human resources to addressing African American male students. He acknowledged that the key to avoiding this tension was to frame the dilemma in the appropriate manner. The question that he continues to present to school board members, faculty, parents, and other constituents, is "What is our lowest performing subgroup." This question should determine where we commit our greatest resources. Today, all of the data suggest that the group experiencing the greatest difficulty is African American males. He referenced a conversation that he had with board members to illustrate this point.

> I've asked several board members, if we want to improve the performance of this district, we have got to tackle it for everyone. Once we look at the students that are performing at the very lowest, that's the group we've got to target. If we don't spend some extra time and resources on the lowest performing subgroup, how can the district improve? Right now the lowest performing subgroup is African American males. I look forward to the day that the lowest performing subgroup is not the African American male. Then we can focus our attention somewhere else.

The Innovative Superintendent

I refer to this superintendent as the Innovative Superintendent because of the tremendous business and community partnerships; along with the cutting-edge initiatives he developed to address the need of children from poverty. He was one of three siblings born to parents who finished one of the many segregated high schools in South Carolina. He recalls a very comfortable, but modest, upbringing. His father spent several years working in one of the local industrial plants before becoming the first African American sheriff's deputy in his county. As a former military man, his father instilled in the family a tremendous sense of discipline and order. Along with the structure provided in his home, his local faith community provided a substantial level of guidance and support that remains evident today. The Innovative Superintendent frequently referenced the importance of the faith community in transforming the lives of children and adults mired in a cycle of poverty.

Although he eventually earned a Bachelor's Degree from Wingate University, and a Master's, Education Specialist, and Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina,

the Innovative Superintendent did not initially embrace his educational opportunities. His focus was athletics, more specifically, football. He recalls that the praise and encouragement received from family and friends was most often related to how he performed on the football field, not in the classroom. As a result, his athletic talents were what he took an interest in cultivating, in lieu of his academic talents. This mindset is far too prevalent with young African American boys. They aspire to be professional athletes instead of educators, accountants, or engineers. They strive to do "just enough to get by." Even more disappointing is that many role models perpetuate this mindset by supporting and encouraging athletic success, with virtually no mention of academic success. This dynamic must change if we are to see African American boys substantially improve their academic performance.

> I did not get pushed academically. The push was always athletically. They could care less what my report card might have looked like. I truly had the mentality that it was entertainment and sports, and sports were going to be my ticket.

Although his older brother attended culinary arts school, his athletic talents earned him a scholarship and the opportunity to be the first in his family to attend a four year institution.

Like the Unconventional Superintendent, the Innovative Superintendent can recall no African American teachers during his high school experience. African American male role models consisted of his father, uncles, and men from his faith community.

> I didn't have those influences and those models. Now, what I did have were folk from my church. These were good men. They taught me the value of hard work, respect, and those sorts of things. Which, I would say is just as important as the academic side.

The Innovative Superintendent asserts that the influences of positive role models are more important today than they ever have been. This is primarily due to the disintegration of the family unit. As expressed by all of the superintendents interviewed, the collapse of the family structure has had the single greatest impact on African American male achievement.

> So my question is why are our families not staying intact? Why aren't we having the presence that we need to have in the lives of these young men? Why is it that we refuse to address these issues head on in our churches? We tiptoe around this issue when we clearly see that is the primary problem.

He rejects those voices that suggest that these dismal outcomes are a function of an inequitable system that fails to provide African American males with a fair opportunity to experience success. We discussed a recent article from a Midlands (South Carolina) newspaper in which a group of disgruntled African American parents publicly expressed concern over the disproportionate number of African American students suspended or expelled. His response to the article was as followed:

> I started to think about my situation here, and I'm just going to tell it like it is. When I look at the number of suspensions and expulsions in my district, it is disproportionately African Americans. And more specifically, it's lots of African American males. When I look at the number of fights we have dealt

> with over the past five years, it rarely involves one of my White students. When you compare the number of suspensions between Blacks and Whites for fighting it is going to be disproportionate. I don't think the issue lies solely with the schools. It doesn't lie with the schools.

As the father of African American boys, he reflects on why their experiences and outcomes are so different than the African American males experiencing such difficulty. If we have truly created an inequitable system that is unfair to the African American male, how is it that his boys do not experience the same kind of challenges?

> My two boys are straight A students. They are both a part of the Honors program, and test in the 99th percentile. My 10 year old is at a predominately White School that is among the top schools in the state, and he leads them in a number of indicators. They have never had a referral. One has perfect attendance for eight years running, and the other has missed one day of school. So, those are African American boys. So what's the difference? From the time we decided to have children, there was a commitment that we knew we were making. When they were born, we talked to them on a regular basis; we read to them on a regular basis, we encouraged them on a regular basis. Our boys didn't sit in front of TV's. They don't have TV's in their rooms to this day. This is something every can parent can do.

The academic success of the Innovative Superintendents' children supports the theories of researchers such as MacLeod, Bourdieu, and Lareau who assert that academic success is most often realized by students from the dominant class. Many would recognize the education credentials earned by him and his wife as representing a structural advantage

for his children. Because of their academic accomplishments and the economic success realized, his children have an appreciation for the value of an education. In many respects his children do not share the experiences and cultural norms of the African American males experiencing academic difficulty. Not only are their schools unsuccessful at creating systems that eliminate the advantage experienced by students of the dominant class, their systems exacerbate the stratification that exists (Bourdieu, 1977).

The Innovative Superintendent feels that the system is more equitable and accommodating than it has ever been, particularly, when he contrasts the current system with the system experienced by his parents.

> I think about my mom and dad. They grew up in a system where adequate resources were not provided. They had the worst textbooks. They had minimal extracurricular opportunities. They had substandard physical environments. But, they went there with a determination and for one reason or another, they did all right.

He contrasts that with what all students in his district are provided with today:

> Now all students have the same textbooks. They have access to the same lessons. We will even provide you with a computer. You want to be in orchestra and can't afford a violin, we will purchase you one. You want to be in the band and can't afford a saxophone, we will purchase you one. You want to travel to Washington DC on a field trip and can't afford it; we will pay your way. So, the system is not stacking the deck against you. I'm giving you every opportunity. Where the system is stacked against many of these students is

> when they leave me and return to their communities. I get frustrated when people tell me that we aren't doing enough to close the gap. I think that we are going above and beyond what schools should be asked to do.

He views the failure as one of the family and faith community, not of the educational system. He speaks about the African American community in the following manner:

> Back then we had a system of ownership, responsibility, and community. Although the system back then was not perfect, it was a family system. There was a system in our faith community that was in place back then. There was a safety net for these kids that went beyond the school bell.

Because the support provided by family and the faith community is not where it once was, the Innovative Superintendent has implemented multiple initiatives to provide students and families with greater support. His district has created an early learning center that serves all "at risk" 3K and 4K students with an additional component that serves students birth to three. This center houses a clinic with a full time physician that provides medical care to students and their parents. The center also provides child care for high school students that have children of their own as they complete their graduation requirements. An additional 25 days have been added to the calendar of the school with the highest poverty rate in order to provide those students with additional instructional support. Those teachers are required to work under a 215 day contract. This initiative has been extremely popular with parents and the greater community.

> That's been the best thing I've ever done. I thought parents would hate it, but enrollment is up about 120 students. What is most encouraging is that the community is not saying fix the school and we're going to have a better

> community. They are saying, let's create a better community and we will have a better school. So they are also working on housing, health care, and those sorts of things. The goal is to change the entire environment. So, we are trying to add grocery stores, a recreational center, and mixed income housing.

He has also added an early college academy specifically for minority boys that provide them with the opportunity to earn an Associate degree by the time they graduate from high school. And finally, the district purchased MacBook Air computers for every child in grades six through twelve, and iPads for every child in grade three through five. One of the local foundations supplemented the purchase of MacBook Air computers for third, fourth and fifth grade students at his most high poverty school so they could provide assistance to families with online banking and computer proficiency.

As was the case with the other superintendents interviewed, the Innovative Superintendent has multiple mentoring initiatives in place. He acknowledges that the breakdown of the family unit, in addition to the substantial number of absentee fathers, make these efforts essential. His ultimate goal is to create a mentoring division at the district level. Although the Bow Tie Club and other mentoring efforts have proven to be successful, they are not nearly as effective as they could be with a dedicated staff, and a formalized strategic plan. He describes one of the local community mentoring partnerships in the following manner:

> The Citizens Scholar program pays a full time person to run their program. Students are paired with a mentor in sixth grade and they stay with them through graduation. If they complete the program, they are given $10,000 towards their college expenses.

The Innovative Superintendent has done an effective job of outlining the importance of committing resources to the students that experience the greatest difficulty. This is only accomplished by presenting the community with the "brutal facts."

> Three years ago during my state of the district, I talked about our priorities and identified our achievement gaps. My White families saw how they stacked up against the rest of the county. They were knocking it out of the park with a graduation rate of 90%. Then I presented the African American male graduation rate that was 55% at that time. It was evident that the only way to improve the district was to see significant improvement in this subgroup. I don't mind presenting the brutal facts, because it's not my fault. The fault lies with us all.

Emerging Themes

As the individual stories of the four superintendents unfolded, I observed common themes that enhanced my understanding of the African American male achievement dilemma. Although they all share the characteristic of being African American male superintendents, there was a broad range of experiences that informed their perspectives. The emerging themes were as followed:

1. The disintegration of the family unit was the most significant factor that contributes to the achievement dilemma experienced by African American male students.
2. Structural forces and racism have had a minimal impact on the African American male's ability to experience academic success.

3. The decrease in support provided by extended community and faith organizations have had an adverse impact on African American male students.
4. Resources provided to students of color today far exceed those provided in years past.
5. Mentoring initiatives are a very important component to providing support for students from poverty, particularly African American males.
6. Superintendents must be willing to commit the financial and human resources to students that are experiencing the greatest difficulty.

Disintegration of the Family Unit

There was consensus among all of the superintendents interviewed that the disintegration of the family unit was the most significant factor affecting African American male achievement. This breakdown has resulted in a diminished structure and support system for many African American boys. The absence of fathers in the home has led to an increase in negative behavior in school. In addition, many single mothers are unable to provide the structure needed to ensure consistent educational preparation in the home, and academic focus during the school day. As a result, the academic performance of African American males lags behind virtually all other subgroups. The Trailblazing and Traditional Superintendents were raised in homes in which both parents were present. Both of these superintendents were raised during the civil rights era, a time in our country's history when equality of opportunities was not a reality for many in the African American community. Consistent with the cultural norms of that era, most of the homes in their community were headed by strong male figures, normally the father. Family and faith were the backbone of the African American culture during this time

period. Even when financial resources were limited, African Americans developed comfort in knowing "they had each other." Although raised by his grandmother, the Unconventional Superintendent developed a strong appreciation for the role that a "traditional" family structure plays in supporting young men of color. On a couple of occasions during his interview, he reflected on the impact his father's absence had on his emotional well-being.

Structural Forces and Racism

There was a general perspective that structural inequities and racism had minimal impact on the African American male's ability to experience academic success. In 1965, the Trailblazing Superintendent became one of 15 African American students to integrate a school of over 2,400 students. He and his African American classmates experienced a level of overt racism that rarely occurs today, yet found ways to overcome and realize success. They ignored the taunts and derogatory remarks from those students unhappy with their presence. He shared that many White teachers would leave class in order to provide an opportunity for White students to harass he and his fellow African American classmates. Unbelievably, he indicated that there were certain hallways that he and the other African American students did not travel for fear of being assaulted. When the White students refused to socialize and interact with them, they formed a support network with each other. When their teachers refused to provide academic support outside of school hours, they sought support from the African American teachers that remained at the segregated schools. All 15 successfully completed high school, and nearly all earned college degrees. The Traditional Superintendent also expressed great skepticism towards the perspective that racism and structural inequities were significant contributors to this

dilemma. He acknowledged that racism had not been eradicated, but its prevalence and impact was not where it once was. During his era, some districts in the state of South Carolina willingly provided bus transportation to White students, while requiring African American students to walk many miles to attend school. While White students attended school in comfortable facilities, many African American students attended schools that did not even have adequate heat during the winter. African American students rarely received new textbooks, but the used material from the White schools, many of which were incomplete and had missing pages.

> There was not a more racist time in this country than from which I came. I was born in 1950, if you want to talk about racism. What was it that allowed so many who were born during my era to excel?

The Unconventional Superintendent acknowledged the impact of structural inequities more than any of the other superintendents. His perspective was primarily grounded in the fact that there were so few African American male teachers for students to model themselves after, and the failure of White teachers to have an understanding of the cultural dynamics present in the African American community.

Because of the multiple initiatives developed by districts to ensure that all students have an opportunity to experience success, the Innovative Superintendent felt that structural inequities have had a minimal impact on the African American male's ability to experience academic success. In fact, he viewed the playing field as more equitable today than it has ever been. As support for this perspective, he referenced the fact that many districts are providing students with laptops, establishing early childhood centers, and providing financial support for extracurricular activities. Many of these

initiatives have been developed specifically for children from poverty, and thereby often benefit a large percentage of African American students.

The perspective that structural inequities and racism have had minimal impact on the African American male's ability to experience academic success is in contrast to the literature explored in Critical Race and Social Reproduction Theory. Critical Race theorists would assert that racism has become such an integral part of our educational system that it goes unnoticed, even by African American superintendents. In addition, educational leaders and policy makers mistakenly evaluate equality of resources, when the goal should be social justice (Price, 2010). How does the system address past injustices that have existed for generations?

The literature exploring Social Reproduction theories supports the perspective that social class and culture is more important than race when evaluating the African American males' ability to experience academic success. However, the literature also emphasizes the impact that institutional structures have on maintaining the current system of inequality. Social Reproduction Theorists assert that because some individuals have a wealth of cultural capital, while others have very little, students from poor and working class backgrounds are at a distinct disadvantage. Not only are schools unsuccessful at creating systems that eliminate this inequality, their systems exacerbate the stratification that exists (Bourdieu, 1977).

Extended Community and Faith Organizations

Church and the extended community was an integral component in the personal and academic development of each of the superintendents. The Traditional Superintendent attended Benedict College primarily because of his exposure to the

college through the Baptist church. The Unconventional Superintendent described his grandmother as having a Ph.D. in GOD. She made sure that he attended, "church on Sunday, and Missionary meetings on Wednesday." The Innovative Superintendent acknowledged that although many of the men from his church may not have had extensive formal education, they taught him respect and the value of hard work. Unfortunately, the prevalence of these influences has been greatly diminished in the African American community over the past 50 years. The supportive communities that defined the African American culture have disappeared in many instances. Church attendance and the influence of the faith community are arguably at its lowest. These dynamics have resulted in reduced support for African American males, but more importantly, for African American families.

Access to Resources

Although the academic performance of large percentages of African American male students appears to be on a downward trend, the resources committed to addressing this dilemma has increased. Educational leaders such as the Traditional Superintendent find it difficult to support the perspective that the system has not committed the resources, or attention necessary to adequately address this issue. Unequal access to resources was an established reality during the civil rights era, yet African American male students appeared to avoid many of the dilemmas experienced today. The achievement gap debate is arguably one of the most discussed topics in the education arena. In attempts to address the achievement gap, districts such as the one led by the Innovative Superintendent, have committed extensive resources towards closing the digital divide, providing academic support to three and four year olds students, providing

dual credit opportunities, and funding various mentoring initiatives. Multiple districts have made the achievement of African American male students a funding priority.

Mentoring Initiatives

Extensive mentoring initiatives are present in each of the districts. The Traditional, Unconventional, and Innovative Superintendent have collaborated to provide support through a Bow Tie club mentoring initiative. This initiative attempts to ensure that all young men are Well Read, Well Spoken, Well Dressed, Well Traveled, and Well Balanced. (Appendix B) The clubs are exclusively male and supported by male mentors. Club sponsors feel that this dynamic increases the likelihood that club members will be open and honest during discussions, in addition to providing an opportunity to address topics not easily addressed in a mixed gender setting. Although the structures of the Bow Tie clubs vary, most meet with the young men two or three times a month. Club members are provided with bow ties, in addition to instructions on how one is tied. A remarkable sense of accomplishment is realized when these young men master the art of tying a bow tie. Most are keenly aware that they ultimately mastered a skill not understood by many men in their community. In addition, the requirement that they wear their ties during meetings provides an opportunity for many to "dress up" for the first time in years. This change in dress positively impacts their self-perception, and almost always leads to more positive behavior.

During the year, club members are asked to read and discuss multiple poems ("Invictus and "If") and biographies of figures such as Benjamin E. Mays and Fredrick Douglas. In addition to addressing gaps in literacy for many of these students, these poems provide an opportunity to highlight the importance of commitment and

perseverance. In particular, the club sponsors have an opportunity to engage young men on the tools necessary to navigate the journey from boyhood to manhood. Topics such as sex, manhood, fatherhood, etc. are addressed.

Field studies are a vital component to providing these young men with experiences outside their communities. Trips to college campuses, in addition to cultural excursions to Charlotte N.C., Columbia S.C. and Charleston S.C, are components of most of the clubs.

Finally, club members regularly discuss the importance of respecting themselves and others. Sponsors engage mentees on the values of integrity, civility, compassion, and why those characteristics should be a component of the men they hope to become.

As the numbers of young men that come from homes led by a single mother increases, these initiatives become even more needed. The Traditional Superintendent is convinced that these types of initiatives are absolutely essential for this student population.

> Some of these young boys don't even know their fathers. I think that it takes a man to raise a boy, and the absence of one, whether it's the father or a significant other male, has a tremendous impact.

The decline in influence of the faith community has also increased the need for comprehensive mentoring programs. This dynamic has unfortunately affected African American male students more than any other subgroup. In the absence of positive male influences, African American youths have adopted the value system portrayed in the media and popular music. Thus, we have seen a proliferation of sagging, misogynistic behavior, and educational apathy. Although these dynamics have increased the need for

faith inspired perspective, many times this need goes unfulfilled. Unfortunately, one of two things has often occurred. The young men in need of guidance have no affiliation with the local churches, or the churches do not have enough willing men to meet the demand. The demand for positive guidance is increasing substantially, while the supply of African American men willing and able to provide that guidance appears to be dwindling.

Allocation of Resources

All study participants agree that it is important to educate the school board and community as to why it is necessary to commit resources to the students that are experiencing the greatest difficulty. They acknowledge that the equitable distribution of resources does not ensure equity within the system. Issues such as culturally biased curriculum, the presence of African American role models, and a cultural awareness of students experiencing the most difficulty must be addressed if the system is to improve. However, appropriate allocation of resources is an essential component to ensuring a more equitable system. It is vitally important that educational leaders and policy makers acknowledge the need to allocate greater resources to this subgroup of students if we are to address the past injustices and current cultural dynamics.

Although the Unconventional Superintendent is the only one that leads a district with a majority White student population, they all are governed by school boards made up of majority White members. The political reality is that there are some that view the allocation of resources as a "zero sum" endeavor. Any resources that you are committing to one subgroup represent resources that you could be committing to another. Therefore it is important to secure political support as you develop initiatives that will require

substantial resources. The Unconventional Superintendent described how he explained why this should be a district priority.

> I've asked several board members, if we want to improve the performance of this district, we have got to tackle it for everyone. Once we look at the students that are performing at the very lowest, that's the group we've got to target. If we don't spend some extra time and resources on the lowest performing subgroup, how can the district improve? Right now the lowest performing subgroup is African American males. I look forward to the day that the lowest performing subgroup is not the African American male. Then we can focus our attention somewhere else.

Summary

It was evident that each of the superintendents interviewed had given much thought to the African American male achievement dilemma, the causes, and how it could best be addressed. Although the cultural dynamics that existed during their childhood was in many respects much different than large segments of the African American male population of today, I sensed they felt a connection with this subgroup of students that likely only exists with African American male superintendents. These superintendents recognize the supports that enabled them to experience academic and professional accomplishment, as well as the cultural dynamics that exists in many African American families today that hinder students from realizing this same level of success. Although most of their immediate family members often experience a comparable level of academic and professional success, there are inevitably members of their extended family that continue to fall victim to these dismal realities. Because of

their heightened sense of understanding, I feel these superintendents have a greater awareness and commitment to initiatives that positively impact the performance of African American male students. This passion and commitment was evident during the conversations I had with each of the superintendents. Although they acknowledge solutions to this dilemma are difficult, they remain steadfastly committed to improving the achievement outcomes for this subgroup. The unfortunate reality is that awareness and commitment does not necessarily lead to answers. Regrettably, we must acknowledge the limitations of educational institutions to address the many structural issues that have contributed to this dilemma. Finally, because all of the superintendents interviewed understand the impact that the breakdown of the family structure has had on African American students, they have committed their personal time and district resources to mentoring programs targeted at addressing the needs of this population.

CHAPTER V

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary

Countless studies have examined the leadership of African American male superintendents, and even more studies have explored the dilemmas experienced by African American male students, but virtually none have investigated how African American male superintendents theorize and respond to the African American male achievement dilemma. The research community has devoted tremendous energy documenting the dismal graduation rates, subpar standardized test score performance, and disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates for African American male students. However, I wanted to explore specifically, how African American male superintendents in South Carolina perceived this dilemma. In addition, do their shared cultural experiences provide them with greater insight into strategies that may prove successful with this population? I determined that this type of investigation could best be conducted through a qualitative study in which the experiences, perspectives, and responses of these superintendents could be explored in depth. Before developing the interview protocol, I spent an extensive amount of time reviewing the literature pertaining to theories that sought to explain why this achievement dilemma exists. I particularly felt that this was important in order to avoid the likelihood that my personal experiences as an African American male superintendent would overwhelm the study. Because I was the primary

researcher, my experiences as an African American male superintendent would inevitably influence the study, but must occupy a secondary tier of influence behind the literature.

When I began the study, there were twelve South Carolina school districts led by African American male superintendents. By the conclusion of the study, two of the identified superintendents had their contracts terminated, and a third was notified that his would not be renewed. I selected four of the remaining nine African American male superintendents to be a part of the study. The superintendents that were selected represented a solid cross section of districts. One has the distinction of heading the largest school district lead by an African American superintendent in South Carolina. Another has the distinction of being one of only two district lead by African American superintendents that serves a student population that is majority White. Of the remaining two, one is an identified leader in initiatives focused on addressing the achievement gap, and the other is the only African American male led district that has received an "Excellent" rating from the South Carolina Department of Education for the past two years.

There were two research questions that I sought to answer during this study.

1. How do African American male superintendents in South Carolina theorize and respond to the African American male achievement dilemma?
2. Do the shared cultural experiences of African American male superintendents and African American male students provide superintendents with greater insight into strategies and practices that improve the academic performance of this subgroup?

Discussion of Findings

Why does this dilemma exist and what has been the response?

The first research question that I sought to address was, "How do African American male superintendents in South Carolina theorize and respond to the African American male achievement dilemma?" Study participants consistently acknowledged that the African American male achievement dilemma is a complex issue. Although not exclusively, the primary explanations for the underachievement revolved around social and cultural dynamics. Specifically, the disintegration of the family unit and the diminishing influence the extended community and church has had on young men and families were identified as having the greatest impact. With the exception of the Unconventional Superintendent, who was raised by his grandmother, all other superintendents were raised in homes where the mother and father were present. Several research studies have concluded that children from homes in which the mother and father are not present have poorer attendance, lower grades, and more frequent discipline problems (Huffman, 2013). A 2011 study of a rural Appalachian high school revealed that 9th grade students from homes in which both parents were present outperformed their peers from single parent homes in Algebra I and English I. In addition, these students missed fewer days of school and received significantly fewer suspension days (Huffman, 2013).

All of the interview subjects acknowledged their local church family as instrumental in their personal and academic development. This is of particular significance since the percentage of families that identify as "plugged in" to a faith community has been diminishing over the past several years (Ely Pearson, 2014)

Although the research identified systemic inequities and racism as having a significant impact on the African American male's ability to experience academic success, this study did not support that perspective. Most of the study participants felt that the system was more equitable today than during any other time in this country's history. Two of the superintendents were raised during the civil rights era. The Traditional Superintendent attended segregated schools during his entire K-12 experience, while the Trailblazing Superintendent became one of 15 students to integrate an "all white" high school in his ninth grade year. These individuals were the victims of overt racism and documented inequities, such as substandard facilities, inadequate materials, and unequal funding. Yet, they and other African American boys of their era did not experience many of the struggles identified with African American males of today. If systemic inequities and racism are the primary concerns today, why were these dismal indicators not more prevalent during that era? This perspective is at odds with much of the scholarly discourse around race and class stratification. Social Reproduction theorists would assert that the behaviors exhibited by these African American males are in large part embedded in the social structure. The superintendent's assessment that agency and culture contribute to the reproduction of social equality is accurate. However, they deviate from the research in that they do not acknowledge structure as the source of inequality (Macleod, 2008). In addition, their inability to recognize the racial injustices of our political, economic, and educational systems confirms the extent to which these injustices have been woven into our social fabric. Their assessment is largely grounded in the recognition that the overt discrimination prevalent during their era has been greatly curtailed. However, defining equal educational opportunities as

African American students having the same access to curriculum, instruction, facilities, and funding as White students ignores the extent to which past injustices contributes to continued social inequality (Deyhle, et. al, 1999).

Before deciding how to best address the African American male achievement dilemma, superintendents acknowledged the importance of educating school boards and community members on the significance of the problem. Specifically, policymakers and constituents need to understand the value of committing greater resources to this particular issue. This perspective deviates from the philosophy of many educators, policy makers, and community members. They define equity as ensuring that all students are provided with an equal level of funding, in lieu of providing the greatest resources to the students that have the greatest need. Unfortunately, many see the allocation of resources as a "zero sum" endeavor. Resources allocated to this subgroup or initiative, represent resources that could be allotted to other students. Therefore, it is essential that the superintendent effectively make the case for why this is not only in the best interest of students that will be affected, but also in the best interest of the school district. Most presented their initiatives as commitments to addressing the lowest performing subgroup, not a commitment to any particular ethnicity or gender. All of the study participants informed their boards that these were efforts that were essential if their respective districts were to experience significant achievement increases.

This study revealed that the most consistent response to the achievement dilemma experienced by African American males has been the implementation of comprehensive mentoring initiatives. Three of the four study participants have collaborated to implement a Bow Tie Club mentoring program targeting minority male students. This program is

structured around the 5 Well's developed by Benjamin E. Mays. All activities address the commitment to ensuring that all young men are Well Spoken, Well Dressed, Well Traveled, Well Read, and Well Balanced.

The Innovative Superintendent has been the most creative in his attempts to address achievement gaps. He has developed an early learning center that serves the most "at risk" 3K and 4K students. In addition, he has added a facility to this center that houses a physician who provides health care to students and parents. The district has added 25 days to the academic calendar for their elementary school with the highest poverty level. An Early College Academy was developed that provides minority males with an opportunity to earn an Associate's Degree by the time they complete their high school graduation requirements. And finally, in an attempt to close the digital divide, he provide MacBook Air's to all students in grades sixth through twelve, and IPAD's to all students in grades three through five.

Shared Cultural Experiences

The second research question addressed was, "Do the shared cultural experiences of African American male superintendents and African American male students provide superintendents with greater insight into strategies and practices that improve the academic performance of this subgroup?" Although I recognize the cultural connection that exists among many African American males, I also acknowledge that there is no single cultural experience that defines the African American male. In many respects, the family and cultural dynamics of the African American males experiencing academic struggles today, is significantly different from the family and cultural dynamics experienced by the study participants during their childhood. Although African

American students of today have greater access to resources, the family and community support that enabled the study participants to succeed has been greatly diminished. While a large percentage of the students currently experiencing difficulty come from homes headed by single mothers, all but one of the study participants were raised in homes in which the mother and father were present. Although the Unconventional Superintendent was not raised by his parents, but by his grandmother, it was obvious from the interview that she provided a level of structure and support that would be comparable to what many children experience in homes in which the mother and father are present. All of the study participants conveyed the significant impact the extended community and church family had on their academic and personal development. Ironically, the Trailblazing Superintendent asserts that integration had a negative impact on the capacity to provide support in the African American community. From his perspective, the opportunity to purchase homes in traditionally "White" communities, resulted in the most active and accomplished figures moving away. While he can recall scores of professional African American men in his community during his childhood, visits today reveal that there are virtually none. All of the study participants identified the support provided by the church as an integral part of their academic and personal development and each could readily identify individuals from their respective churches that provided them with guidance and encouragement. Unfortunately, this reality does not exist for many of the African American males experiencing difficulty. Significant percentages of these African American youth do not attend church consistently.

Surprisingly, only one of the study participants appeared to give merit to Ogbu's claim that students view academic success as a rejection of their "Blackness." Ogbu's

theory supports the perspective that African American students who speak proper English and excel in school are acting White. The Unconventional Superintendent, who is over 50 years of age, remembered being ridiculed as a youth because he exhibited those very same characteristics. He also recalled acting out in an attempt to dispel the characterization that he was "acting white." From his perspective, this mindset continues to be perpetuated within the African American community. This cultural perversion must be confronted by families, educational institutions, communities, and faith organizations as we address this dilemma. All facets of the community must work to eradicate this destructive attitude from psyche of our African American boys. Mentoring programs such as the Bow Tie Club aggressively work to change this mindset.

Although there are multiple cultural differences between my study participants and the African American males experiencing difficulty, I recognized several family and cultural dynamics that both groups had in common. Research indicates that African American males that come from homes without adequate financial resources experience the most consistent academic struggles. While my study participants generally did not experience academic struggles, most acknowledged that they would have been considered "poor" by today's standards. The "Traditional Superintendent" described many of the homes in his neighborhood as "shotgun" homes. As described earlier, this was a term used in his era to describe a home in which a person could look in the front door and see straight through the back door. The Unconventional Superintendent acknowledged that he was raised in the projects with a grandmother and four other relatives. Therefore, most understand what it is to be a child from poverty.

Regardless of the educational and economic success experienced by the study participants, each acknowledge that they have members of their extended family that continue to struggle with the effects of unemployment, underachievement, and poverty. These relationships connect these superintendents with the family and cultural dynamics that often lead to the struggles experienced by these African American boys. Although the struggles that they observe today may or may not parallel the struggles that they experienced during their childhood, these connections help provide an understanding of the dynamics surrounding underachievement.

Finally, these superintendents recognize the supports that enabled them to experience academic and professional accomplishment, as well as the existence of cultural dynamics that contribute to academic underperformance within many African American families. Their understanding of these dynamics fosters their commitment to mentoring efforts such as the Bow Tie Club, and one to one technology initiatives.

Conclusion

As an African American male superintendent completing his second year in this leadership role, I feel greatly enhanced by the opportunity to study four of the leading superintendents in the state of South Carolina. They provided insight into what is probably the most prevalent issue facing education leaders today. Although I felt I had a thorough understanding of the dynamics contributing to this issue, I now have an insight that did not exist prior to the study. My perspective that African American male superintendents share a connection with these students was definitely strengthened as a result of this study. The stories and perspectives shared by the study participants will not only contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding the African American male

achievement dilemma, but also the body of knowledge surrounding African American school leaders.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations based on the findings of this study.

1. Comprehensive mentoring initiatives such as the Bow Tie Club should be established in districts in which African American male students continue to experience academic and behavioral difficulties.
2. In an attempt to mitigate the effects of "summer loss," districts should explore the possibility of an extended school year for high poverty schools. Research confirms that while students from middle class homes rarely lose ground academically, students from poverty almost always regress during the summer.
3. African American male superintendents should establish a symposium in which they can share and explore their perspectives of the African American male achievement dilemma.

Implications for Future Research

Based on knowledge acquired during the course of this study, these are suggestions for further research.

1. It would be beneficial to conduct a study in which participants of the Bow Tie Club mentoring program are tracked through graduation.
2. Although the extended school year has just recently been implemented, a study monitoring the readiness of these students for middle school would inform district leaders of the value of such an initiative.

3. The investment of several million dollars to supply each student in the district with a technology device could potentially close the digital divide and narrow the achievement gap. Although this initiative is only in its second year, what will be the long term (5 years) effects on student achievement?

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

1. Please describe your family and educational experiences.
2. What role did African American males play in your ability to experience academic success?
3. Why do you think the academic performance of African American male students lag behind all other subgroups?
4. Social Reproduction and Critical Race Theorists blame structural forces and racism for the achievement dilemma experienced by African American males. Please explain why you agree or disagree with this perspective.
5. Oppositional Cultural Theorists assert that African American male students distrust the educational establishment, particularly teachers and administrators. Have you witnessed this dynamic? If so, how does this distrust contribute to the African American achievement dilemma?
6. In your role as Superintendent, what steps have you taken to address the underperformance of African American male students?
7. Please describe the success of these efforts.
8. Describe any training or professional development opportunities you have provided teachers and administrators on issues specific to African American male students.
9. Are you familiar with any colleagues (superintendents) that have successfully addressed the issue of African American male underachievement?

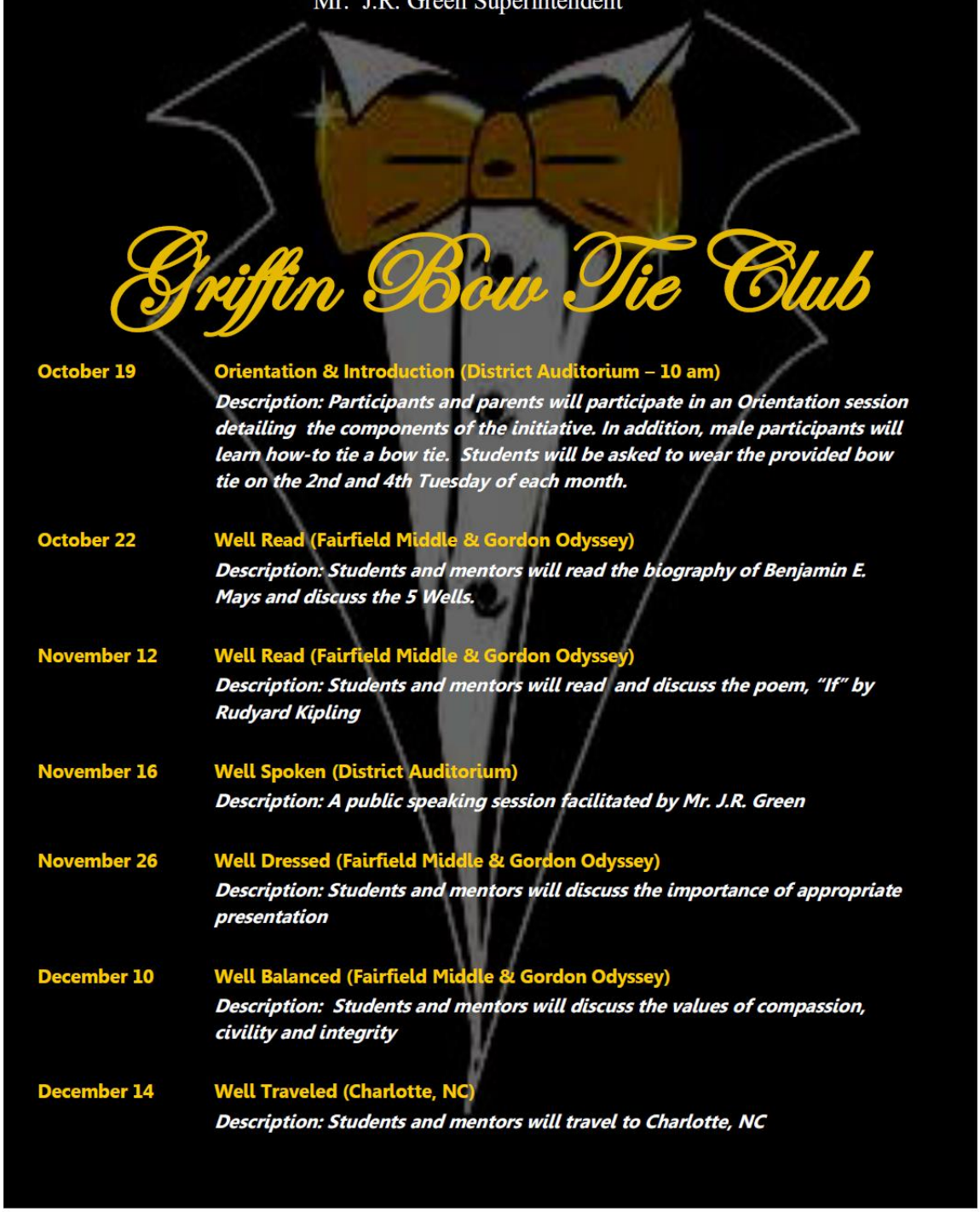
APPENDIX B

Sample Bow Tie Club Schedule



Fairfield County School District

Mr. J.R. Green Superintendent



Griffin Bow Tie Club

October 19 — **Orientation & Introduction (District Auditorium – 10 am)**

Description: Participants and parents will participate in an Orientation session detailing the components of the initiative. In addition, male participants will learn how-to tie a bow tie. Students will be asked to wear the provided bow tie on the 2nd and 4th Tuesday of each month.

October 22 — **Well Read (Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)**

Description: Students and mentors will read the biography of Benjamin E. Mays and discuss the 5 Wells.

November 12 — **Well Read (Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)**

Description: Students and mentors will read and discuss the poem, "If" by Rudyard Kipling

November 16 — **Well Spoken (District Auditorium)**

Description: A public speaking session facilitated by Mr. J.R. Green

November 26 — **Well Dressed (Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)**

Description: Students and mentors will discuss the importance of appropriate presentation

December 10 — **Well Balanced (Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)**

Description: Students and mentors will discuss the values of compassion, civility and integrity

December 14 — **Well Traveled (Charlotte, NC)**

Description: Students and mentors will travel to Charlotte, NC

Fairfield County School District

Mr. J.R. Green Superintendent



Griffin Bow Tie Club

January 14	**Well Read (Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)** ***Description: Students and mentors will read and discuss the book, "Think and Grow Rich"***
January 18	**Well Balanced (District Auditorium)** ***Description: Presentation on career opportunities***
January 28	**Well Read(Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)** ***Description: Students and mentors will read and discuss the book, "Think and Grow Rich"***
February 11	**Well Balanced (Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)** ***Description: Students and mentors will discuss the importance of giving back to one's community***
February 15	**Well Balanced (Community Service Project)** ***Description: Participants will participate in a community service project at Harvest Hope Food Bank or a local homeless shelter***
February 25	**Well Read (Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)** ***Description: Students and mentors will discuss various poems by Langston Hughes***
March 11	**Well Spoken (Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)** ***Description: Mentors will provide assistance as students prepare for the Oratorical Contest***
March 15	**Oratorical Contest (Fairfield Central High School Auditorium – 1 pm)** ***Description: Participants will engage in a speaking challenge that will showcase important leadership qualities and exhibit their ability to think and speak clearly***


Fairfield County School District
Mr. J.R. Green Superintendent
Griffin Bow Tie Club
April 8
Well Read (Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)
Description: Students and mentors will read the narrative of Frederick Douglas
April 22
Well Read (Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)
Description: Students and mentors will read the narrative of Frederick Douglas
April 26
Well Traveled (Charleston, SC)
Description: Students and mentors will travel to Charleston, SC
May 13
Well Balanced (Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)
Description: Students and mentors will discuss the meaning of manhood
May 17
Well Traveled (Greenville/Greenwood, SC)
Description: Students and mentors will travel to either Greenville or Greenwood, SC
May 27
Well Balanced (Fairfield Middle & Gordon Odyssey)
Description: Wrap up, year in review.