

AN ANALYSIS OF THREE WHITE MALE HIGH SCHOOL ASSISTANT  
PRINCIPAL PERCEPTIONS OF BLACK MALE STUDENTS IN A SUBURBAN  
DISTRICT

A Record of Study

by

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## ABSTRACT

A large majority of research portrays the achievement gap as an outcome and a primary focus of what is wrong in American schools when instead it is a symptom of a larger issue. Defining the problem in education in terms of achievement ignores a much more pervasive issue, which is an understanding of the causes behind these results. Studies of the achievement gap commonly result in looking at the individual, ignoring structural and systematic inequities and limitations, that promote deficit thinking. Early research into the achievement gap believed that family background was the strongest indicator of achievement. Educators widely accepted this theory and believed that schools could do little to assist Black students to be successful. But these beliefs are now understood to be heavily entrenched in deficit thinking, perpetuating structural inequalities, and the consequences have been educators who have largely bypassed the needs of Black male students for decades. Deficit thinking and institutional racism is an underlying factor in lagging achievement because the result is an education that lacks rigor and has lower expectations, which is detrimental to Black students. Research exists on teacher perception of students identifying deficit thinking, but there is no research on assistant principals, who are arguably one of the most influential persons for at-risk students, therefore, as in the case of this study, for Black males. Perceptions of Black males inside and outside of school may impact the decision-making process by which assistant principals perform their administrative functions. This study examines the role these perceptions play by White male assistant principals in the lives of Black males, and in so doing, this study examines institutional racism in schools, leadership, and

achievement. Results of this study show assistant principals never cited school leadership, teachers, or policies as having an impact on Black male students, thereby illustrating their lack of consciousness of institutional racism. By comparing the results of this study to historical and current research, the results show that White assistant principals act upon outdated and deficit understandings of Black males, and this which contributes to the structural inequalities that limit opportunities for students of color.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents, John and Mimi Ragsdale. Their encouragement and support made me believe in myself and led me to reach further than I ever dreamt I could. During my hardest times, they never wavered in their love or their belief in me. Without them, I would not be the person that I am now; nor could I have accomplished so much. They are everything to me and I love them more than these words could ever describe. I hope that this accomplishment makes them as proud of me as I am of them.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### **Background**

Much of the research on Black males in secondary school depicts students whose performance and skills lag years behind others, most often compared to White students (Haycock, 2001; Finkel, 2010; Flaxman, 2003). Studies have been conducted on what has been termed ‘the achievement gap’ (Haycock, 2001; Finkel, 2010; Flaxman, 2003) which is most frequently defined by standardized testing scores (Tifft, 1990). Analysis of state standardized test scores show that Black students score lower than White students in core tested areas and that gaps exist in most measurable indicators (Haycock, 2001; Burton & Jones, 1982; Black, 2006; Losen & Skiba, 2010). But performance on standardized tests ignores systematic and institutional elements that can no longer be excluded in a discussion on achievement. Although these tests provide a standard of measure, they do not provide an understanding as to why students are performing at the level they are and it is impossible for any standardized test to evaluate all aspects of student knowledge (Milner, 2012, p. 5). The results of “standardized examinations only seem to report one-dimension of a much more complex and nuanced reality of what students know” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.10 ). Defining the problem in education in terms of achievement ignores a much more pervasive issue, which is an understanding of the causes behind these results. Studies of the achievement gap commonly result in looking at the individual, ignoring structural and systematic inequities and limitations, that promote deficit thinking (Milner, 2012). The result is a misguided picture that perpetuates stereotypes and influences school leaders.

Studies on the achievement gap have been conducted and findings have also lead to questions probing school practices. Examination of school practices has shown inquiries into areas such as teacher beliefs or perceptions, policies like tracking, and instructional practices to name a few (Milner, 2007). “What has not been researched to any significant degree are other key players in administrative or executive positions in schools, such as deputy principals (referred to in some education systems as assistant principals or deputy heads)” (Cranston, Thomans & Reugebrink, 2007, p. 225). The literature on school leadership disproportionately centers on the role of the principal (Cranston, et al., 2007) and yet assistant principals may largely contribute to student performance and achievement, especially for Black males. This leads to questions such as what general perceptions do assistant principals have about Black male students in secondary school and how might these perceptions impact their achievement? This study reviews the literature that has evolved over time about Black male achievement and then evaluates White male assistant principal perceptions of Black males in high school. By doing so, we are able to better understand how evolved these school leaders have become and how their understanding of biases, stereotypes, institutional racism, and deficit thinking influence their own decision making. The evaluation of literature includes a significant portion of analysis of life outside of school for Black males because assistant principals in this study most often referred to outside influences as the barriers to achievement for Black males, consistent with outdated theories that schools could do little to improve success of Black students (Milner, 2007). Strong social biases have also created stereotypes that follow students inside of school, influencing the perceptions of school leaders (Steele, 1997). But these beliefs are now understood to be heavily

entrenched in deficit thinking, perpetuating structural inequalities, and the consequences have been educators who have largely bypassed the needs of Black male students for decades (Kunzia, 2009).

Early research that began with the Coleman Report in 1966 believed that family background was the strongest indicator of achievement and that school factors had far less impact (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.4). Educators widely accepted this theory and believed that schools could do little to assist Black students to be successful and rather, it was the responsibility of families to be accountable for student success (Milner, 2012). But as research has evolved, so has the recognition that these beliefs are heavily entrenched in deficit thinking which influence structural inequalities, and the consequences have been detrimental for to the achievement of Black male students. As research on students of color grows, better understanding into the achievement gap shows that it is a symptom of a larger issue and is not the core problem, as previous research revealed. Studies of the achievement gap commonly result in looking at the individual, ignoring structural and systematic inequities and limitations, that promote deficit thinking.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) defines the bigger picture in terms of the phrase "educational debt," which address factors inside and outside of school that affect student performance in various areas, creating this debt. Schools are narrowing their attention to hot button issues such as the achievement gap, which often concentrates on results of standardized testing of the individual but should be examining larger, more complex issues surrounding the individual. For example, schools should be focusing their attention on various issues such as the lack of participation in advanced classes, lack of

quality curriculum and instruction, low expectations, deficit thinking and inequitable distribution of financial resources, just to name a few. Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that addressing inequities in school will inadvertently result in addressing inequities outside of school as well. This is important to the process of diffusing stereotypes and discrimination within the fabric of society that carry into schools (Steele, 1997). The discussion of opportunity debts, deficit thinking, and inequities in school brings to light various elements that are often ignored when evaluating achievement gaps (Kunzia, 2009). Yet, a deeper exploration into how these elements impact school policies, driven by school leaders, may yield valuable insight into improving the high school experience for Black males. This study is an underdeveloped area in the field of research of assistant principals (Cranston, et al., 2007) and is an important discussion in the evaluation of the relationship they have on Black males as well as the impact this has on achievement gaps.

The literature review for this study begins with a historical review of Black male achievement in school. Such research commonly paints a picture of Black males in distress persisting over decades, if not centuries (Staples, 1987). Some researchers theorize current challenges have developed because of reasons that date back to slavery (Staples, 1987, p. 268) indicating that a history of prejudice and discrimination has had lasting effects. Other researchers have identified reasons that can be traced to the individuals themselves and to the culture created by Blacks (Staples, 1987). New research recognizes that blaming individuals' deficiencies, while ignoring structural limitations is deeply rooted in deficit thinking and does not recognize factors that have limited opportunities for Black individuals. For example, belief that "poor performance caused by genetics, culture and class, or familial socialization" (Kwek, 2009) is

considered deficit thinking. Although some believe that challenges generalized about Black males are due to individual choices and responsibility, other research suggests that the Black community is still recovering from a history where White men shaped their culture by means of prejudice and discrimination. The result has been a feeling that reflects distrust towards White men, who also historically did not value learning for Black people and both of these contribute to current unhealthy school climates (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Research about the systematic downfalls of discrimination, unconscious biases, and the ways deficit thinking impact Black males are slowly beginning to break through the world of theorists and researchers, but the outdated mindset that began in the 1960's is still rampant today, especially in schools. Early research from the 1960's argued that struggles faced by Black males were a product of the home, ignoring institutional possibilities. The Moynihan Report described a general deterioration of the fabric of the family life of Blacks and argued this to be the core cause of inequitable achievement in school. There are two primary parts to the Moynihan Report:

One was the presence of cultural norms (of dependency, family organization, and crime) in the black community that were the long-term legacy of slavery. The second was the high incidence of unemployment among black men that reduced their desirability and practicability in the marriage market. This second feature received relatively little attention in the public debate about female-headed households. The substance of Moynihan's report was influential in U.S. politics. Lyndon Johnson referred to it in his commencement address at Howard University in June 1965, focusing on the alleged dysfunctions of the black family

and ignoring the issue of male unemployment. (Moynihan Report, International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2008)

This is an illustration of how Black Americans are pigeonholed by deficit thought, even amongst our most highly respected and recognized leaders. Despite the Moynihan Report articulating the challenges by Black individuals being a product of slavery, concentration on “alleged dysfunctions of the black family” (Moynihan Report, International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2008) was a more central theme. Many leaders categorize issues along racial lines, perpetuating deficit thought and causing the audience to lose focus on the primary problem. Then the wrong focus becomes highly politicized and the core problem becomes muddled beyond recognition. This is an important point as it defines the problem within the fabric of society, which is also deeply rooted in schools.

The focus of this study evaluates a twofold a problem that Black males are facing impacting their overall achievement. First, challenges should not be defined in terms of race which inadvertently perpetuates racism and in turn limits opportunity both inside and outside of school. Secondly, little research exists where these challenges are described in terms of the product being the result of a bigger problem. Despite how they are continually framed, unemployment, lower wages, and one-parent households are not a Black problem. Likewise, in schools, attendance, graduation, and achievement are not Black problems. Rather, they are products of institutional failures that include school leadership. The primary problem for Black individuals is an “opportunity gap” (Milner, 2012, p. 695). Opportunity gaps are for example, in the form of financial resources where poorer urban schools receive less financial assistance than suburban schools.

Research has identified school resources, such as qualified teachers and textbooks, as having a distinct impact on student learning (Ladson-Billings, 2006) despite early findings in the literature and yet the availability of these vary depending on the financial state of the school system. For example, the “Chicago public schools spend \$8,482 annually per pupil, while nearby Highland Park spends \$17,291 per pupil. The Chicago public school systems have an 87% Black and Latina/o population, while Highland Park has a 90% White population” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.6). A second example of opportunity gaps lie inside of schools where, “teachers are absent from school more often in urban and high-poverty schools in comparison to other locations” (Milner, 2012, p. 708). The results are classrooms being led by substitute teachers that lack the instructional strategies and knowledge base that prevent them from being highly qualified. Therefore, students in high-poverty schools are receiving an inequitable opportunity to a quality education. “When we address the many other gaps that structurally and systematically exist in educational practices, achievement results can improve” (Irvine as cited in Milner, 2013, p. 4). Rothstein and Wilder (2005) concur arguing that addressing the achievement gap is not the most important inequality to attend to. “Rather, inequalities in healthy early childhood experiences, out-of-school experiences and economic security are also contributory and cumulative and make it near-impossible for us to rectify the achievement gap as *the* source and cause of social inequality” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.10).

Further studies into the achievement gap included the famous publication of the Coleman Report which concluded,

The composition of a school (who attends it), the students' sense of control of the environment, the teachers' verbal skills, and their students' family background all contributed to student achievement. Unfortunately, it was the last factor – family background – that became the primary point of interest for many schools and social policies. (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 4)

Similar to the findings from the Moynihan Report, a number of areas were later identified that contributed to the limitations within the Black community that concentrated both on individual decisions as a result of the construct of society. But the idea of individual accountability as the primary cause for struggle became enormously popular, ignoring the most important aspect, the element of structural limitations within society. When translated into the school setting, the discussion about family background was widely accepted, alleviating responsibility by schools. It was argued that “the Coleman Report discovered differences among schools and average resources were not nearly as great as expected, and the impact of school resources on student achievement was modest compared to the impact of students' family backgrounds” (Gamoran & Long, 2006, p.3). Researchers interpreted Coleman and his colleagues' findings in their *Equality and Educational Opportunity* which “demonstrated that the best predictor of a child's educational achievement is not the material conditions within schools but the family background of the child” (Moynihan Report, International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2008). Therefore, researchers like Jencks and Phillips (1998) argued that educational institutions and resources have been unable address educational inequalities when inequalities included parental income, occupational status, and education.



Since the Coleman Report, numerous studies on student achievement have been done (Burton & Jones, 1982; Ferguson, 2002; Finkel, 2010; Flaxman, 2003; Haycock, 2001). Research has progressed from isolating family background as the primary indicator for success to a much larger and complex issue. An entire field of research has grown that defines the current problem in education as gaps perpetuated by educators, school policy, as well as social, and structural issues. This research points to these struggles as a product of racism built deeply into the structures of institutions that are difficult to identify (Kunzia, 2009). The literature suggests that many of these problems are rooted in deficit thinking or institutional racism and are far less a product of personal decision than previously believed (Shevory, 2006). Moreover, it shifts accountability from the individual student to schools, teachers and assistant principals alike. We are no longer in an age where it is acceptable to believe that students' lives outside of school exclude them from the opportunities that school has to offer. Beliefs contrary to interpretations of the Coleman Report are much more widely accepted in theory (Milner, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006), but this study shows that practices still have vast areas for improvement due to the unconscious perceptions that people hold.

Racism, and the discriminatory actions that flow from it, are not so much the result of intentional or conscious desires as they are the consequences of deeply imbedded social contexts and stereotypes. These encourage or allow ubiquitous everyday discriminatory practices to disappear into invisible patterns of 'normal' or 'reasonable' conduct. Discrimination becomes the 'default' mode of operation by ordinary people and, perhaps more importantly from a legal perspective, by those with institutional power and authority, such as police officers, prosecutors,

judges, and an array of other public officials. As a result of this, the effects of discrimination remain largely hidden from those engaged in discriminatory conduct, and discrimination is very difficult to challenge in a legal system in which ‘intent’ is a primary factor for assigning legal responsibility or blame. (Shevory, 2006, para. 1)

Institutional racism is seen outside the context of school as well inside the context of school. Current research recognizes that the racism seen today is not overt as it once was but “institutional racism is frequently subtle, unintentional, and invisible, but always potent” (Kunzia, 2009, para. 17). According to Kunzia, “unintentional racism is a key contributor to the achievement gap, in which the test scores of some ethnic groups – usually Latino and African-American students – are consistently below those of their White and Asian peers” (2009, para. 18). As mentioned before, it is arguable whether standardized tests are an accurate measure of successful learning. But for sake of argument, if testing is a good measure of student achievement, Fuller and Clarke (1994) argued against interpretations of achievement of the Coleman Report by stating “even when family background is controlled, school factors such as infrastructure, class size, teachers; experience and qualifications, and the availability of instructional materials increase student performance” (Gamoran & Long, 2006, p. 11). This study shows that a number of factors in school impact student success and is not wholly defined by family background. Inequitable distribution of these resources is another primary example of institutional racism that effect students of color. According to a report entitled *The Funding Gap 2005*, a study of 27 of the 49 states was completed and more inequities were found in the districts with the highest numbers of children of color. “In 30 states,

high minority districts receive less money for each child than low minority districts” (Education Trust, 2005, p 2). Systematic inequities exist not only financial but also exist in policies such as tracking, low expectations by teachers (Milner, 2012, p. 706), lack of rigor and high expectations (Milner, 2010 as cited in Milner, 2012, p. 707) to name a few. These shortcomings are often discussed in the literature but fail to offer tangible solutions to be applied into action.

Structural limitations within schools limit opportunities that contribute to economic inequalities that exist for Black males outside of school, specifically in the job world. Opportunity gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2006) in school contribute to varying skill sets and adequate preparation for the job world (Johnson, Farrell, & Stoloff, 1998). More concerning through is that a Black males even with the same education and training still make less than White males (Oliver, 2006). According to William Oliver, the impact of these inequalities include “Black males earn[ing] 62 cents for every dollar earned compared to White males” (2006, p. 919). For many Black individuals, this financial discrepancy is the function of an institutional prejudice that can discredit the importance of education and the need to earn higher-level degrees. Moreover it devalues academic achievement in a time where that value is needed most. Lastly, it has evolved into a self-created culture of White privilege, which refers to the concrete benefits of access to resources, and social rewards, and the power to shape the norms and values of society that whites receive, unconsciously or consciously, by virtue of their skin color in a racist society (Adams, et al., 1997, p.97). Ultimately, racism is a substantial cultural norm that pervades the fabric of society. The result is schools perpetuating a cycle where Black students lack the opportunities that others (Finkel, 2010) are given and the impact is

deficient opportunities within society in terms of employment and earnings (Johnson, et al., 1998; Oliver, 2006), just to name a couple of examples. Covert and overt racism then generates distrust for schools and the job world. Consequently for some, the results of these surroundings have led to alternatives that preserve meaning and security, one example being “the streets.” The streets often perpetuate economic struggle and open the door to a number of other challenges, but this troubled journey arguably begins as an institutional problem at many levels, including within the confines of schools. Schools ill-equip students due to educators unconscious perceptions leading to their overt and covert actions that devalue Black males. “Low expectations and deficit mindsets can make it difficult for educators to develop learning opportunities that challenge students cognitively” (Milner, 2012, p. 706).

When we focus on achievement gaps, culturally diverse students can be positioned through conceptual deficits in the minds, practices and designs of analysts such as researchers, theorists, and practitioners; consequently, consumers of these analyses may adopt deficit perceptions and transfer them into their practices with students. In this way, educational researchers can be complicit, albeit unknowingly, in the construction, enactment, and implementation of research designs and, consequently, practices that view particular groups of students through deficit lenses. From an ecological perspective, many teachers design the learning milieu believing that their culturally diverse students are behind. (Ladson-Billings, 2006)

Educator perceptions based on motivations, knowingly or unknowingly, can have detrimental effects and thus it is not only important to analyze these perceptions in terms

of teachers but assistant principals as well. The problem that is currently being encountered is that the norm in schools has become “White students can be covertly and tacitly constructed as intellectually and academically superior to others” (Milner, 2013, p. 5).

Noguera (2003) describes the school environment, especially for those living in poverty, as inequitable, which unconsciously is a part of their belief system, reflecting in their actions and words. “Educational practices and opportunities are not equal or equitable. There is enormous variation in students’ social, economic, historic, political, and educational opportunities, which is in stark contrast to the ‘American Dream’ – one that adopts and supports meritocracy as its creed or philosophy” (Milner, 2012, p. 704). But even more concerning is not just the slanted, deficit thought by educators but “their conceptions of what class is and how it affects their students, their students’ parents, and their own families can be inaccurate and inadequate (Milner, 2012, p. 704). Therefore, their belief systems are riddled with perceptions about students that are grossly inaccurate. The impact of this is detrimental to student learning and the overall success of schools. In essence, if teachers believe their students will fail and become incarcerated, they likely will treat them in ways that guarantee that their students will meet low expectations (Noguera, 2003). The role of educators becomes extremely important in the self efficacy of students and the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In simple terms, an educator that believes a student will be successful, regardless of race, can be just that. Deficit thinking can change attitudes and therefore expectations of students that either rise to the occasion or fail as the role model expected.

As challenges within schools continue to grow, it is important to analyze the role of every educator and this study concentrates on the role of the assistant principals. The literature on Black male achievement has resulted in a broad discussion referencing historical factors (Staples, 1987), the home environment (Gamoran & Long, 2006), individual responsibility (Gamoran & Long, 2006), and institutional reasons (Milner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006) as possible barriers for success. This study analyzes whether assistant principals have perceptions that are accurate or based on stereotypes. This leads to questions such as how does school policy as well as culture reflect assistant principal perceptions and how does this impact the achievement of Black males? This study organizes a discussion of the life of Black males inside and outside of school in terms of economic (O'Hare, 1987; Oliver, 2006), social (Mizell, 1999), and academic (Tifft, 1990; Jordan & Anil, 2009) categories. Economic and social issues discussed in this study include wealth, poverty, employment, the structure of a nuclear family, mobility, crime, and "the streets" as an alternative to failed education opportunities (Oliver, 2006). Much of the continuing debate is whether the last five decades of these economic and social challenges are a product of poor individual choices or a broken system. This study evaluates whether assistant principals' understandings reflect literature that is rooted in deficit thinking or whether they have an understanding of institutional racism and how that shapes their role as a leader. Understanding what assistant principals perceive about Black males and comparing them to the literature may provide significant understanding and strides in how we approach academic achievement of Black males in high school.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Although many students, regardless of race, face challenges that impact their performance academically, much attention has been given to Black students. All races, especially children from impoverished backgrounds, face a number of challenges outside of school, defined in economic and social terms, that educators have argued affect students' academic performance. Research has gone so far to express educators' beliefs that the economic and social challenges outside of school make teaching these students nearly impossible, by no fault of the teacher. Instead, many Black males are blamed for their economic and social choices and their culture that educators define as deficient. These deficiencies and subsequent approaches has become a significant part of the experience for Black male students in school. Findings show that,

Widely documented and entrenched social, political, and economic barriers to the success of African American males in the larger society and findings suggest that understanding these barriers is a necessary starting point for any conversation about the achievement of African American male students. That is, the experiences of African American males in the broader society are integrally connected to issues of school and inequality in education. (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Thurman, & Jennings, 2010, p. 299)

But research shows that the beliefs of educators are heavily entrenched in deficit thinking and consequently educators largely bypass the needs of Black male students based on their perceptions. The result is an institutional racism that is subtle, yet still vastly yields unequal effects. The impact of institutional racism in schools is arguably the most defining for a Black male in terms of his academic success as well as his long-term

success outside of school. While some are able to overcome the psychological barriers, many do not. Lynn et al., describe a systematic “inequality in education,” which is connected to the outside experiences of Black males (2010, p. 299). For example, Black males are more likely than any other group to spend significant amounts of time in jail, or drop out of school (Lynn et al., 2010).

The conclusion then is that institutional racism in schools is a significant contributing factor to the economic state of Black males in society, who also face institutional racism outside of school and is part of an ongoing cycle (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Despite new understandings of the impact of institutional racism and perspectives embedded in deficit thinking, the depth of understanding is minimal, especially by assistant principals who dictate campus policies as part of the leadership team. The result is a lack of practices that fail to address this problem. The general struggles that people perceive Black males to have outside of school then can be at least partly attributed to the academic struggles they face inside of school due to institutional factors. For Black, male students, negative experiences such as those previously described lead to decision-making based on the need for survival. The world of education lacks opportunities for Black males, is riddled with discrimination by teachers, administrators, and policies, and is defined by White privilege. The educational system offers little or no assistance for students with these struggles, especially in suburban schools. “The streets” offers a support system of commonalities and a means for survival. But the rules of the street are far different than the policies that guide schools, which often conflict with one another. This street culture is strong, and may explain why Black male students have higher rates of disciplinary action. Many Black males bring in their own paradigms of perceptions,



beliefs, and values into schools where they are mandated to attend based on compulsory education. These paradigms rarely fit into the norms of school policy and appropriate behaviors defined as the norm. Therefore, the result is disciplinary action and explains the disproportionate rates of referral along racial lines. “A recent study of the New Orleans public schools, for example, showed that Black males accounted for 80% of the expulsions, 65% of the suspensions, and 58% of the nonpromotions, even though they make up just 43% of the students” (Tifft, 1990, p. 2). This outcome is a common finding amongst research regarding school discipline its consequences. Are these consequences further perpetuating the plight Black males are already facing? “Non-cognitive factors such as discipline (and its mirror, punishment in the form of discipline referrals) can affect school and labor market outcomes, human capital development, and thus the economic well-being of communities” (Jordan & Anil, 2009, p. 426).

Drawing upon this research, the current study explores how White male assistant principals perceive Black males in a high school setting and whether these perceptions may influence assistant principals’ attitudes and approaches. Are these perceptions consistent with beliefs that perpetuate institutional problems, or do they imply efforts to repair a broken system? Research exists on teacher perception of students identifying deficit thinking, but there is no research on assistant principals, who are arguably one of the most influential persons for at-risk students, therefore, as in the case of this study, for Black males. Perceptions of Black males inside and outside of school may impact the decision-making process by which assistant principals perform their administrative functions. This study examines the role these perceptions play by White male assistant

principals in the lives of Black males, and in so doing, this study examines institutional racism in schools, leadership, and achievement.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of White male assistant principals and examine whether their understandings reflect perceptions that may impact Black male students. More specifically, we are able to identify whether assistant principal perceptions reflect a strong grasp of the impact of institutional racism or whether they suffer from deficit thinking, influenced by social stereotypes that are largely perpetuated inside and outside of school. Research suggests Black males are increasingly challenged by achievement and face numerous obstacles outside of school but what research fails to explain are the reasons why this is occurring. Research is increasingly pointing to institutionalized racism that perpetuates a cultural norm that dilutes opportunities for Black males, creating long term consequences. This study looks at the relationship between the school and Black males, looking for a focal point for change. This study suggests that the focal point may begin with school leaders and more specifically, the assistant principal. Following in the footsteps of the prior research into teacher perceptions of Black males, this study will develop a new research corpus for the assistant principal who deals primarily with at-risk students. It is important to understand assistant principals' perceptions of Black males because, according to Taylor and Foster (1986), "dropping out of school often follows 'a long history of suspensions, expulsions, detentions, demerits, and other disciplinary actions of the part of the public schools'" (as cited in Jordan & Anil, 2009, p. 421), and it is often the assistant principal who makes

these decisions concerning disciplinary actions. Thus, it is clearly of interest to determine how the perceptions of assistant principals' impact and influence decision-making concerning Black males for whom these assistant principals are responsible. Lastly, this study will explore whether it is possible for school leaders to develop a cultural responsiveness based on their understanding of their own perceptions that better address the systematic inequities and the overall quality of life for Black males?

### **Significance of the Study**

Although there is an abundance of research on Black males in secondary schools, much of it is centered on their lack of academic achievement, often compared to White students, yet often fails to address the various barriers that prevent their success. Moreover, research commonly describes the various challenges that Black males face in society as a result of lagging academic achievement but again fails to acknowledge institutional factors that contribute to the ongoing cycle of failure, perpetuated by teachers, school policies, and school leaders. There is little to no accountability on schools to address the institutional racism that impacts student performance and it is becoming a very real part of the academic experience for Black students. The long term effects of this covert racism are beginning to be addressed in the research but have yet to make significant strides in school practices. Although there are significant amounts of research about teachers and their role in schools, there is little to no research on the role of the assistant principal and their perceptions about Black males. Is it possible that assistant principals suffer from deficit thinking and develop policies consistent with institutional racism that are inequitable and inimical to the success of some students?

The research that does exist on assistant principals is mostly about job definition, but even those studies are rare. There is far more research done on the role of the building principal and the position of school leader but the research takes no notice of assistant principals. This significance of this study is that it not only explores a largely unexplored administrative school role, but that it questions how the perceptions of those entrusted with this role can influence the school and life careers of Black male students for whom they are responsible.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are some selected, White male assistant principals' self-perceived perceptions toward Black male high school students?
2. What is the self-perceived nature of the interactions of some selected, White male assistant principals' have with Black male high school students?
3. Based on their self-perceptions, how do some selected White male assistant principals generally characterize Black male high school students?
4. Based on the researcher's observations, what is the nature of some selected, White male assistant principal interactions with Black male high school students?

### **Limitations**

This qualitative study will focus on three high school assistant principals in a suburban school in a single district. The limitation to this approach may impact external validity and cannot be a generalized representation of White male assistant principals because of the small sampling group. This study is also bound to White male assistant

principal perceptions and therefore excludes significant populations. This study cannot be a generalized representation of assistant principals because it does not measure the perceptions of other races or gender. Additionally, the perceptions of the chosen assistant principals could be limited by the fact that they work in the same school district and, therefore, have environments with similar characteristics because they fall under the same central leadership. Another limitation is mine as a researcher, understanding that my own knowledge and experiences create unconscious biases and filters that may alter my interpretations of results. This limitation leads to an important assumption that as a researcher, despite these biases, I am performing an analysis is reasonable by its nature both in its process and its conclusions.

### **Delimitations**

“Research is done for the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomena...there is an inherent assumption that educational research, by providing a better understanding of the educational process, will lead to the improvement of educational practice” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 1). During this research study, assumptions by the researcher are made to achieve this goal. First, there is the assumption that the responses given by assistant principals are an accurate representation of their perceptions of Black males. Moreover, a level of internal and external validity is assumed, meaning that there is a belief that results have been “interpreted accurately” and “results can be generalized to populations, situations, and conditions” (Wiersma, 2000, p.4). Lastly, this study assumes that the study of the perceptions of Black males by assistant principals will provide a unique perspective in education.

## **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is sectioned into five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction into problems faced by Black males in and out of school. This chapter describes background information, provides significance for this study, and looks at the assumptions as well as its limitations. The first chapter defines the purpose of the study by identifying research questions and an approach to the study of the problem.

The second chapter of this dissertation analyzes the research literature pertaining to this study. Although little research exists on assistant principals, there is abundant research on teacher perceptions of students and how these impact student performance, self-efficacy, enjoyment in school, and other variables. Assistant principals have been found to have an equally, if not a more, compelling impact on students.

Chapter Two also explores the life of Black males inside and outside of school and outside of school. This chapter also includes a section analyzing teacher perceptions of Black males as a segue into this study about assistant principals and their perceptions as perspective into achievement.

The third chapter outlines the qualitative methodological approach to this study including all aspects of the design and data analysis.

The fourth chapter of the study will present the outcomes of employing the research methods, including an in-depth portrayal of assistant principal perceptions. The fifth chapter analyzes and discusses the findings, and presents conclusions. Ultimately, these five chapters will provide insight into a new body of research on assistant principal perceptions and will meet the goals of research, as defined by Wiersma (2000).

## **Definition of Key Terms**

Deficit orientation/thinking - This term refers to the ubiquitous blame [of] the victim mentality, where educators view differences as defects, and value certain groups of students over others (Valencia, 2010, p. 140).

Disciplinary referral - Such an event occurs “when a student is sent to the administrative office (by a teacher, administrator, or other adults such as a bus driver) and the behavior is entered into the student’s data file (resulting in reprimand, detention, suspensions, etc.)” (Jordan & Anil, 2009, p. 421).

Discrimination - “Traditional racism is a shared, common negative attitude toward a particular ethnic group” (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004, p. 423).

Drop out - This is a student who voluntarily leaves school before graduation and does not enroll in another school within one year (TEA, 2008).

Institutional racism - This term refers to the consistent allocation of resources in a way that advantages one racial group at the expense of others (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985).

Mobility - This refers to residence relocation that result in a change of schools (Temple & Reynolds, 1999, p. 355).

Socioeconomic Status (SES) - This term means the grouping of people with similar occupational, educational, and economic characteristics (Santrock, 2004, pp. 583).

Self-efficacy - This is a belief that a person has about their capabilities to produce at designated levels of performance and to exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and

behave. Such beliefs produce these diverse effects through four major processes, which are cognitive, motivational, affective and selection (Bandura, 1994).

Social identity - This concept provides a link between the psychology of the individual – the representation of self – and the structure and process of social groups within which the self is embedded (Brewer, 2001).

Socialization - This term identifies the formal and informal interactive process in which the adults in a society, through the use of institutions that they control, deliberately seek to inculcate in young people the beliefs, values, and norms that will allow them to functionally adapt as members of society (Coser, Rhea, Steffan, & Nock, 1983, as cited in Oliver, 2006, p. 918).

Student group - This refers to groups of the student population identified in terms of specific demographic or background characteristics. Some of the major student groups used for reporting are those defined by students' gender, race or ethnicity, highest level of parental education, and type of school (Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009).



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Background**

Since the Coleman Report was released in 1966, a number of studies have been done on academic achievement (Burton & Jones, 1982; Ferguson, 2002; Finkel, 2010; Flaxman, 2003; Haycock, 2001). Such research shows one of the more consistent finding that in general, Black students score lower on standardized tests (Alson, 2003; Burton & Jones, 1982; Dillion, 2009; Flaxman, 2003) compared to other student populations. But the discrepancy in achievement between Black and White students has erroneously become synonymous with the achievement gap over time. Finding the cause of the achievement gap between Black and White students has evolved from a primary discussion by researchers from individual responsibility to recognition of covert and systematic inequities found within schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.4). For example, early research on the achievement gap pointed to family background as the strongest indicator of success in the Coleman Report of 1966. In this literature review, family background is examined in terms of wealth, poverty, parental employment, and structure of a nuclear family. It also examines family background within the context of society that includes issues such as mobility, crime, submersion in a culture of “the streets” and discrimination (Black, 2006; (Dush, 2009; Jones, 2004; Johnson et al.,1998) which are common topics of discussion in the literature about Black males. These were also commonly referenced by assistant principals as influential factors in the lives of Black males. Many educators, consciously and unconsciously, perceive outside influences such as these as having a negative impact on students’ skill sets before they enter the

classroom and thus the student is considered deficient compared to other students, which is known as deficit thinking (Milner, 2012). According to deficit thought, Black students that are impoverished or come from single-parent households, for example, are viewed as inherently inferior to other students that do not face similar circumstances. Despite findings that Hispanics face similar issues in their home background at rates consistent with Black individuals (U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2011) and when examining the achievement gap, Asian students consistently outperform all student populations (Milner, 2013, p.6), these facts are often ignored. Instead, time and again, achievement is discussed in terms of a Black-White issue.

Many educators perceive these circumstances to be so pervasive in the lives of Black males that there is little that can be done to counterbalance them and therefore hold the individual more responsible than discriminating structures or policies, reinforcing deficit thinking (Milner, 2012). Evolution in research that is slowly becoming more predominant, not only recognizes family background as a contributing factor, but has identified others to include but are not limited to “the teacher quality gap, the teacher training gap, the challenging curriculum gap, the school funding gap, the digital divide gap, the wealth and income gap, the health care gap, the nutrition gap, the school integration gap, and the quality education gap” (Milner, 2013, p.4). These have a distinct and harmful impact on student success, often ignored by discussions of the achievement gap and the narrow view of family background as the primary cause. Misguided literature has perpetuated deficit thinking (Milner, 2007) as the norm but few in leadership positions recognize this problem, which paralyzes change.

Counter research suggests that educators do have a far greater role in the success of students and may unconsciously be contributing to the problem (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Many educators perceive problems through an outdated frame, which defers responsibility on to students and families, ignoring their own role and dismissing all accountability (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Many educators suffer from similar outdated beliefs that are deficit in manner and the “dominant and oppressive perspective is that White people and their beliefs, experiences, and epistemologies are often viewed as ‘the norm’ by which others are compared, measured, assessed, and evaluated (Scheurich & Young, 1997) which contributes to deficit thinking and multiple opportunity gaps that contribute to an overall “education debt” as defined by Gloria Ladson-Billings. Based on recent research, deficit thinking may be an underlying factor in an education that lacks rigor, has lower expectations, contributes to more disciplinary issues and may have a significant impact on Black males outside of school. Does deficit thinking exist amongst teachers and administrators or within policies? Research exists on teacher perception of students identifying deficit thinking (Milner, 2007), but there is little research on assistant principals, who are one of the most influential persons for at-risk students, therefore, as in the case of this study, for Black males. No literature could be found on this specific topic and this discussion should open the door to future studies.

Perceptions of Black males that are generated by influences inside and outside of school may impact the decision-making process by which assistant principals perform their administrative functions. For example, an individual dressed in a certain manner may conjure stereotypes that influence thinking. This is a common human reaction but within the context of schools, are preconceived notions translated into decision making

by school leaders? What impact does it have on the achievement of students? These questions lead to this empirical study which investigates White male assistant principal perceptions of Black males inside and outside of school. It is within the context of schools as well as society itself that influence perceptions and thus the inclusion of both in this literature review (Steele, Choi, & Ambady, in press). This study examines the role these perceptions play in the lives of Black males, and in so doing, this study examines institutional racism in schools, leadership, with a discussion on achievement. Before exploring these questions, a review of literature on Black males in schools shows a disproportionate amount of research on the academic achievement gap that places the greatest responsibility on what Black males encounter outside of school as the primary reason for lack of success in school (Johnson, et al., 1998). On balance, there is a significant deficiency in the literature on the institutional barriers that prevent academic achievement for Black students (Milner, 2007).

## **Life of a Black Male Outside of School**

### *Introduction*

According to the Coleman Report in 1966, “although a number of factors were defined as being correlated with academic achievement, researchers found family background or the life outside of school for Black students, as the most influential factor in student achievement” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.4). Assistant principals also found family background and life outside of school the greatest influences on achievement for Black males. Before looking specifically at these perceived outside factors in the life of Black males outside of school, it is important to frame all races into general population

comparison to create a larger picture. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, (2011), in 2009, the breakdown between races in the United States population consists of 79.6% whites and 12.9 % Blacks (p. 10). Of these populations, 11.2% of whites and 24.7% of Blacks are considered below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011, p. 464). According to Bernstein (2012), who wrote a report for the U.S. Census Bureau, Projections in population show significant diversified growth over the next half century. The Hispanic population will more than double, from 53.3 million in 2012 to 128.8 million in 2060 Bernstein (2012). Thus, by the end of the period, nearly one in three U.S. residents will be Hispanic, up from about one in six today. The Black population is expected to increase from 41.2 million to 61.8 million over the same period Bernstein (2012). Its share of the total population is expected to rise slightly, from 13.1 percent in 2012 to 14.7 percent in 2060 Bernstein (2012). Low performing students groups are often dismissed as inner-city problems because of the high concentration of children of color. According to the College Board (1999), “we now recognize that there is an even greater gap in student achievement in schools in suburban middle-income communities than in the inner cities, particularly at the higher achievement levels” (as cited in Flaxman, 2003, p. 1). It is a misnomer that suburban schools are populated almost entirely by White students and that urban schools are populated almost entirely with minorities (Ferguson, 2002). More students of color attend schools in non-rural areas than what many perceive. For example, in 2000, “33 percent of African-American children, 45 percent of Hispanic children, 54 percent of Asian children, and 55 percent of white children lived in suburban areas, and they attended both poor, segregated schools and excellent racially integrated schools with many resources” (Ferguson, 2002, p. 1).

For many states, population shifts continue to increase diversification of student groups and challenges in achievement are visible in rural and suburban areas.

As school districts continue to disaggregate and make public their achievement data, a complex pictures of educational differences is emerging, wealthy well-resourced suburban communities have been ‘shocked’ to discover that even in their comfortable middle and upper-middle class communities, with a measure of economic equality and high achievement on average for their youth, goals of academic achievement have not been met. (James, Jurich, & Estes, 2002, p.3)

Research on Black males in secondary schools consistently draws similar conclusions, namely, that they continue to face difficulties that impact academic success. Most importantly though, the question that is often not adequately addressed is why does this outcome occur? Thus, as our population becomes larger and diversified, the problems that schools face will only continue to grow without adequately defining the problem and developing solutions with tangible outcomes. Although many of the problems currently plague urban schools, population growth alone, regardless of race, will impact suburban schools. This study looks at suburban schools in a district that is beginning to experience population shifts as previously described, making this study a strong representation of what is happening in American schools. It is important to ask, how will schools be successful in teaching students to learn and achievement for all students, regardless of race? What role does the assistant principal play in achieving this goal?

### *Employment*

While discussing barriers for success, teachers and assistant principals continue to cite issues outside of school that impact Black males. For example, many educators perceive that many Black students come from a home where at least one of the caregivers, if not both, is unemployed (Johnson, et al., 1998) and this has an effect on student achievement. The U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States (2011) shows the unemployment rate in 2009 for Whites was 8.5%, whereas the unemployment rate for Blacks was 14.8% (p. 378). Although the unemployment statistics for Blacks have improved over the last two decades, there is still a consistent gap between Blacks and Whites. Like achievement gaps, employment is looked at in terms of the product being the primary problem when in actuality the question that should be asked is why does this disproportion exist? Research on the disproportionate gap in unemployment between Blacks and Whites has yielded contrasting beliefs. Although statistically, there is a greater number of Black individuals unemployed per capita, more actual White children will face this problem in the home. Nonetheless, lack of employment is frequently perceived as a Black problem and is hardly associated with White students, a form of prejudice that consistently appears in the literature and throughout this study. This is not to say that the gap per capita is not a significant problem, but there is a strong argument in unemployment not being a characteristic of race, which people sometimes consciously or unconsciously perceive. Furthermore, such a belief can alter the actions, expectations, and words of an educator and unknowingly harms students. This too is demonstrated by assistant principals in this study. Yet, as a

society, we continue to frame issues inside and outside of school in terms of race, making it a political focal point and diluting the core problem, institutional limitations.

A number of explanations are offered in the literature to account for this gap, most placing blame on the individual while other explanations offer other social factors outside the control of individuals, such as discrimination. One belief, heavily entrenched in perceptions that lead to deficit thinking, places responsibility completely on the individual, their lacking motivations and abilities, without any other consideration (Johnson, et al., 1998). Some of the research goes so far as to insinuate that joblessness is a cultural value among Black individuals. “The joblessness problem reflects character deficiencies and deviant values of inner-city residents, especially Black male. They actually choose not to work regularly, and the unwillingness to work is embedded in the nature and culture of the inner city” (Johnson, et al., 1998, p. 23). This perspective is completely void of the structural limitations and the opportunity gaps that exists which impact employment for Black individuals. Much of the research also reveal a culture of living on “the streets,” which has shown to contribute to further issues such as alcoholism, drug use, promiscuous sex, and crime.

Johnson et al., (1998) also theorizes that moral poverty is the central issue behind the “racial disparities in joblessness and earnings, as well as the sharp increase in out-of-wedlock births, family disruption, long-term welfare dependency, and illegal activities revolving around gangs, drug dealing, and other criminal acts in the African American community” (p. 24). But again, is a culture of the streets a product of individual choice or a result of opportunity gap? The literature appears to define their results as the product being the primary issue when a much more pervasive one exists and that is why the



product exists. In this scenario, the question is not only about unemployment of Black individuals as what needs to be the focal point but why is there a discrepancy between employment rates of Black individuals and other populations. The literature largely ignores this, which results in an unbalanced and misguided view. Nonetheless, moral poverty is another reason discussed in the literature that relies on victim blaming for societal and cultural challenges that also does not take into consideration institutional barriers. Moral poverty is defined as,

The poverty of being without loving, capable, responsible adults who teach the young right from wrong. It is the poverty of being without parents, guardians, relatives, friends, teachers, coaches, clergy, and others who habituate...children to feel joy at others' joy; pain at others' pain; satisfaction when you do right; remorse when you do wrong. It is the poverty of growing up in the virtual absence of people who teach these lessons by their own everyday example, and who insist that you follow suit and behave accordingly. In the extreme, it is the poverty of growing up surrounded by deviant, delinquent, and criminal adults in a practically perfect criminogenic environment – that is, an environment that seems almost consciously designed to produce vicious, unrepentant predatory street criminals. (Johnson et al., 1998, p. 24)

Proponents of this theory believe that the lack of role models can lead to a generational cycle of Black men who develop without proper education in character and understanding of the norms outside of this culture. But again, is this the problem or the result of a larger one? Arguably, moral poverty is a result of institutional factors, where racism and prejudice is prevalent within society, by means of education and employment, for

example. Yet, the research continues to criticize the Black community for the consequences that result from these institutional challenges. “High rates of joblessness exist among young Black males, in large measure, because most do not possess the cultural capital or ‘soft’ skills – values, attitudes, appearance, and behavioral disposition – that are highly valued in the contemporary labor market” (Johnson et al., 1998, p. 24). But in evaluation, is the argument here that Black people cannot learn skills, maintain appropriate values, appearances or retain employment and be good role models? This again insinuates that these are issues unique to the Black community when in actuality, they are challenges faced by *individuals* of all races and have been pigeon holed into one population. Evaluating an entire population of people by characteristics of some is detrimental, creating psychological harm and can even be considered hostile to others. This perpetuates stereotypes, racism, prejudice, and deficit thinking which consciously and unconsciously impacts others (Steele, et al., in press).

Johnson et al., (1998) offers additional explanations for the reasons why many Blacks face economic problems such as unemployment. One theory, for examples argues that Black individuals face challenges due to changes in the labor market. There is “flexibility in fulfilling labor needs is made possible by the growing presence of women and immigrants in the U.S. labor market over the last three decades” (Johnson et al., 1998, p. 23). Thus, an increase in laborers flooded the labor market, driving available employment and wages down. The question here is why would this impact the Black population and not be true for other races? It would seem that this is an explanation for the growing unemployment rate for all people, not a problem unique to Black individuals. This implicitly illustrates the existence of discrimination within the job market, which

arguably is the greater issue within society. As Ladson-Billings (2006) discusses, when addresses inequalities as these, other social issues will be addressed and thus the things we are concentrating on will resolve themselves with renewed efforts addressing the correct problems.

Problems with unemployment, the issues defined by moral poverty, criminal activity, lack of education and skills in a flooded job market are all issues economic issues faced by individuals of all races, not just Black individuals. Generalizing these characteristics by race is a covert form of racism that has become more acceptable compared to the overt racism seen just fifty years ago. When broken down, these perceptions sound like this: because you are Black, you will not be employed; because you are Black, you cannot be educated or obtain skills; because you are Black, you want to be impoverished. The research described above in an economic context is subconsciously racist in nature when it excludes the reasons why many Black males face these struggles. Instead, it presumes that these challenges exist solely because they are Black rather than the numerous causes that newer research substantiates.

More current research reflects struggling employment of Black males, to other barriers including “the continuing problem of institutionalized racism in our society” (Jones, 2004, p. 5).

An article last September in The Wall Street Journal reported on racial discrimination in hiring in several cities. An experiment was conducted in which male college students posed as job applicants. The white students admitted to having a criminal record; the blacks no record. The result: white men with a criminal record had a better chance of being called back after an initial interview

than black men without a record. The article concluded that discrimination is a major factor in the economic lives of African Americans, especially young men — this from one of the most conservative news outlets in the country. (Jones, 2004, p. 5)

Additional researchers concur with the problem of institutionalized racism faced by Black men. According to Brief et al., (2000), in recent years, racist attitudes have evolved from being blatant and hostile in nature to being more subtle and ambivalent (as cited in Ziegert & Hanges, 2005, p. 553). “Indeed, whereas traditional self-report measures have indicated that there has been a decline in racist attitudes, discrimination continues in employment decisions” (Maass, Castelli, & Arcuri, 2000, as cited in Ziegert & Hanges, 2005, p. 553). A meta-analysis by Ford, Kraiger, and Schechtman (1986) as well as one by Roth, Huffcutt, and Bobko (2003) “found that Blacks received lower scores and evaluations on both objective and subjective measures” (as cited in Ziegert & Hanges, 2005, p. 554). In addition, Kraiger and Ford (1985) “found that both Black and White raters gave higher ratings to members of their own race. These results provide evidence that individuals apply differential standards when evaluating applicants” (as cited in Ziegert & Hanges, 2005, p. 554). Institutional racism, whether subtle or overt, cannot be ignored in a discussion with such blatant outcomes that clearly illustrate forms of accepted discrimination. Despite these results, victim blaming is still the most common reason for unemployment. Lack of employment can lead to a number of other obstacles for Black males. U.S. Senator Charles Schumer concurs stating “the unemployment rate doesn't give the complete picture. The high jobless rate leads to other problems, such as crime, alienation, intolerance and violence” (Iglinski, 2008, para. 3).

The result is a society that stereotypes the Black community in terms of these issues, ignoring the reasons why they are occurring. Black males are especially plagued by victim blaming and are consequently often perceived in a negative way and therefore treated accordingly. This form of stereotyping and discrimination follows Black males into school.

### *Equity of Salary and Low Wages*

“Manhood is often defined by how much a man works, his job title, and how well he and others perceive that he does his work” (Mizell, 1999, p. 471). Unfortunately, the discrepancy Black males face in equity of salary can belittle their sense of self worth and is a blatant representation of discrimination within society. According to Kanter (1977), “this inability to rise to executive levels of management appears to be a mobility barrier and is analogous to the ‘glass ceiling’ phenomenon described for women” (as cited in Waters, 1991, p. 1). This inequity can damage motivation and self-esteem. Furthermore, this prejudice creates a continuous source of distrust between Blacks and Whites, causing further disengagement from traditional routines, and creating reason to maintain reliance on their own identity, as defined by their culture. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, in 2008, regardless of educational level, White individuals had a mean income that ranged between 3.6 % to 12.5% more than Black individuals with the same degree (2011, p. 150). Equity of employment and salary is a significant institutional prejudice leading to issues such as poverty. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, in 2008, 34.4% of Black children under the age of 18 were defined as living in poverty compared to 15.3% of

White children (2011, p. 465). Again, it is important to not look at these statistics in a vacuum. The question that begs to be answered is why are over twice the number of Black children living in poverty than White children? More importantly, why are we not addressing the number of children in poverty overall as opposed to by race? The research commonly categorizes poverty in terms of race which may be our way of dividing a larger issue into smaller components. But the result has changed the discussion from just poverty into a question of race, which arguably is not the core problem. Previous literature shows that employment can already be a challenging issue for Black individuals due to the subtle and even overt prejudices that are weaved within society. It is equally as troubling that once employed, further discrimination is prevalent in terms of equity of salary. Again, blatant forms of discrimination are socially acceptable within society and this becomes the norm (Kanter 1977, as cited in Waters, 1991). Society becomes misguided by perceptions and practices that are reinforced by behaviors outside of school as well as inside of school. The results continue to harm Black male students and yet the discussion of achievement rarely centers around this perspective.

### *Mobility*

According to Charles Walls in a report for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, mobility is defined as students moving from one school to another for reasons other than promotion to a higher grade (Black, 2006, p. 47). Although the literature points to things such as employment and lack of equitable salaries for financial challenges within the Black community, it ignores the limitations that cause these. The inherent discrimination that has led to challenges in employment and wages create

significant economic problems for Black males, which can lead to issues with mobility. “Borrowing and lending, giving and receiving, is the instrument of gainful activities of the poor, in lieu of regular employment. . . . this tendency is based on the African American belief and tradition that charity begins in the family” (Scott & Black, 1989, p. 19). Many follow their family who are constantly mobilizing themselves to obtain resources for living, but the impact of these changes can be significant on the children in school. The research finds that mobility is either a cause or at least an indicator of academic uncertainty. A GAO report “reveals that students who have attended three or more schools since entering first grade are much more likely by third grade to have low reading test scores and are more likely to have repeated a grade” (Temple & Reynolds, 1999, p. 357).

Research shows that Black families have higher rates of mobility compared to others, especially White families but studies often fail to provide a cause or even a tangible solution. In her study, Susan Black found that “45% of African American fourth-graders changed schools compared to 27% of white fourth-graders; 43% of low-income fourth-graders changed schools, compared to 26% above the poverty limits” (2006, p. 47). Two other factors contributing to mobility include parents who drop out of high school and poverty which include students that receive federal assistance with the free and reduced lunch program (Wood, Halfon, & Scarlata, 1993, as cited in Temple & Reynolds, 1999, p. 365). The U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, in 1970, 31.4% of Blacks graduated high school” (2011, p. 149). A correlation can be deducted from this data that shows Black parents of this generation may have a high preponderance towards mobility because of low parental graduation rates, which

may impact a child's psychological state, self-efficacy, and overall success in school. Time and again, research reframes mobility with a common theme, poor Black students have a higher rate of mobility than other students but do not offer analysis of the core problem and that is why this is occurring. Instead, people and literature frame mobility as a cause for poor achievement when instead, there is an underlying cause behind mobility being ignored. The reasons for mobility are also impacted by The No Child Left Behind Legislation, which allows for school choice for students attending low performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Other reasons included escaping overcrowding, poor instruction, and "discipline policies also contribute to mobility, especially for minority students" (Black, 2006, p. 48). "A number of recent studies have found that students who experience a large number of school moves are much more likely than non-mobile students to perform poorly in school" (Temple & Reynolds, 1999, p. 356). Temple and Reynolds argue "school mobility is believed to be a risk factor for low-income children because it introduces discontinuity in learning environments that can adversely affect learning, especially if frequent or if it occurs during children's formative years" (1999, p. 357). Also, curriculum is not standardized between schools and factors such as climate also differ between campuses that impact learning (Temple & Reynolds, 1999, p. 357). Another problem is that "school mobility may disrupt children's relationship with peers and teachers, and reduce the stability and predictability of established patterns of activities so important for optimal adjustment" (Cole & Cole, 1993, as cited in Temple & Reynolds, 1999, p. 257). Research shows that mobility is a significant factor in determining whether a student will complete high school (Black,



2006, p. 49). But such findings relate to mobility for all students and are not unique to Black individuals, despite how research frames it.

Mobility is a complex issue affected by various factors and has no connection with race. Older research gave significant weight to a culture that perpetuated these struggles. New research, however, argues this is a continuous cycle of struggle that exists because of the lack of power of an individual to change the course of institutionalized racism in schools and within society (Milner, 2007). These prejudices within society contribute to economic challenges that impact families and ultimately children in school. The core question is not mobility, the achievement gap or academic success but rather, how do we stop this cycle that is a seemingly accepted form of overt racism?

### *Structure of a Nuclear Family*

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, in 2009, approximately 14.7% of White households are led by single White females whereas 44.4% of Black households are led by single Black females (2011, p. 56). Research shows a two-parent home is not a primary indicator for student achievement, despite perceptions making people believe otherwise. “A new study finds that children who are born and grow up in stable single-parent homes generally do as well as those in married households in terms of academic abilities and behavior problems” (Dush, 2009, p. 1). But traditional households including both parents is far less common than a family led by a single parent. This too is not a racial issue but is commonly drawn along racial

lines. Instead, the lack of role models in single-parent homes is a common experience had by many children.

According to research, the absence of male role models in single-parent households has hindered young Black males' opportunity to enter into adolescence in a healthy environment (Tifft, 1990). "Our school's demographics showed that 55 % of the Black boys were product of single-parent (typically female) homes. Other studies concur with results where "nine out of the 10 in the target group lives only with mothers" (Moore, 2007, p. 25). Studies of the effects of absentee fathers "have uniformly pointed to its negative consequences. . . . relationships have been found between fathers' absences and children's delinquent behavior, low intellectual functioning, and poor emotional health" (Earl & Lohmann, 1978, p. 413). According to the U.S. Census Bureau Statistical Abstract of the United States, in 2009, Black women had a lower divorce rate than White, non-Hispanic participants (p. 6) recognizing the validity that a number of White families live in single-parent homes and yet, Black families tend to be viewed in a generalized and negative way in comparison. Other studies concur with these findings stating, "female-headed families homes in the African American community are often associated with numerous negative outcomes, including lower school performance, delinquent behavior (especially among males), teenage parenthood and low self-concept" (Mizell, 1999, p. 470).

Research argues that single-parent homes are a Black problem but more than half of marriages end in divorce (U.S. Census Bureau Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2011). Consequently, single-parent homes would be considered a social issue that a significant number of children face regardless of race. But perceptions are held that

Black families are poor, unemployed, and live in poverty, do not have positive role models, and have children with delinquent behavior. These perceptions have psychological stressors for Black males who become threatened by stereotype threats, which is “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group” (Steele & Aronson, 2005). Educator perceptions can create these threats, portraying them consciously and unconsciously, making Black male students feel devalued. Despite these facts, much research continue to perpetuate the downfalls of single-family homes and the impact on most commonly, Black families. For example, according to Tifft, the lack of a traditional, nuclear family structure and simply the absence of a positive male role model can cripple the development of Black males (1990, p. 2), which can create and perpetuate the challenges in school. But Tifft’s analysis perpetuates deficit thinking because it defines this issue in terms of race, qualifying this as a Black problem. Tifft’s interpretation portrays the lack of a traditional household as an issue unique to Black families, which is not true. Lastly, the literature often does not distinguish between a single parent home and an absentee parent, which is two very different scenarios and are likely to have different effects on the family. The result is perceptions influenced by insufficient information.

Research also suggests the role of the parent and the home environment as being an important factor to student success. A study done by Hart and Risley (1995), finds that on average, “professional parents spoke more than 2,000 words per hour to their children, working-class parents spoke about 1,300 and welfare mothers spoke about 600” (as cited in Rothstein, 2004, p. 41). Thus, according to Rothstein’s study (2004), skill-building in the home is observed more in professional homes which better prepares

students in schools (p. 41). Although an important aspect of the home, professional parents are not synonymous by race or whether they are a single parent. Again, according to Dush, “stability is the driving factor for student achievement” (2009, p.1). The research tends to extrapolate this view when looking at statistics that show that 46.2 million people live in poverty, over half of them Black (Center for American Progress, 2012). Thus, conclusions are inaccurately assumed that many Black families do not have stability within the home.

Although this is a bleak look at impoverished families, another statistic frames this in a new perspective. It is widely accepted that there is a strong correlation between salary and the higher the degree obtained. According to the Center for American Progress (2012), 43% of Black adults did not obtain a high school degree consistent with Mizell (1999). With so many Black individuals impoverished and the correlation this has to high school degrees, how can schools look primarily at individual accountability and wholly ignore the structural and systematic challenges that Black individuals face? Arguments supporting individual responsibility then must sustain that 59% (Center for American Progress, 2012) of Black individuals that are considered impoverished actively want to be in this financial state, have made decisions that validate poor decision making that caused this financial state, and no other factors restrain impoverished Black people to break out of poverty. But given research about the institutional factors that play a role in the lives of Blacks, the sole belief of individual choice is outdated and it is important that schools not be excused from being responsible for student achievement because of what happens in the home. Schools need to further develop relationships with parents and

educate them on the importance of developing skills in the home. Furthermore, schools must work to break the cycle of uneducated parents.

The structure of Black families has changed and it is becoming more prevalent to have a single parent leading the household, but this is true for all races. Some attribute the structure of Black families to be based on a culture of choice. Newer research suggests differently. According to William Wilson (1987), there is a relationship between 'marriageability' and employment, stating:

Recent increases in black male joblessness in depressed urban neighborhoods have sharply reduced the supply of 'marriageable' males and, according to Wilson, caused rapid increases in the incidence of black female-headed families. Wilson's conclusion, restated in the context of Becker's theory of the family, is simply that increasing black male joblessness which manifests itself in the form of rising unemployment, withdrawal from the labor force and increasing rates of incarceration reduces the economic advantages of marriage and results in a higher incidence of female-headed families. (As cited in Seeborg & Jaeger, 1993, p. 118)

Like many of the struggles discussed, Wilson identifies joblessness and lack of a nuclear family structure to go hand and hand, supposing then, that institutional factors contribute to the number of single Black females leading the home. Despite the reasons for single-parent homes, the most important aspects to achievement are involvement, stability (Dash, 2009), and a belief system where learning is a priority. Poverty, mobility, unemployment, inequitable wages, etc., are problems faced in life every day by millions of people. Discussing these issues in terms of race and allowing schools to exclude their

role in the lives of students because of outside factors perpetuates institutional racism in schools and gaps in performance will continue without awareness and action.

### *Discrimination in Society*

When researching Black males in school, there is no shortage of research in the field of discrimination. Black males face both aggressive and passive means of discrimination. It can also be perceived, which has been found to be just as powerful as overt actions. “Perceived discrimination by peers and teachers was negatively related to academic motivation (e.g., importance of school, utility of value of school, beliefs about their own academic competence)” (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009, p. 63).

Discrimination is also often based in stereotypes built within the context of society, impacting student achievement. Stereotype threats can undermine academic success “by influencing performance on mental tasks and by prompting students to protect their self-esteem by disengaging from the threatened domain...to protect their self-esteem, minority adolescents may de-identify with academic achievement, and detaching their self-esteem from academic experiences. (Dotterer et al., 2009, p. 63). According to Whites and Cones (1999), discrimination has become a significant part of the construct of society where White males are in a position of power, wealth, and the greatest decision-making therefore giving them a greater voice (cited in Oliver, 2006, p. 921). “Theories of racial identity highlight the primary function of internalized racial identity is to protect individuals from the psychological harm that results from living in a racist society” (Dotterer et al., 2009, p. 64). Discrimination impacts the development of children and “feeling connected to one’s ethnic group can buffer the negative impact of perceived

racial discrimination on the development of African American youth” (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003, p. 1221).

Perceptions by educators, teachers and assistant principals, are engrained in their belief system reflecting some form of bias, stereotype, or discrimination by human nature (Steele, et al., in press). But biases, stereotypes, or even subtle misinterpretations cause deficit thinking and it is these subtle forms of institutionalized discrimination which decades of research have ignored. Current research recognizes the complexity of Black males in schools and sees the indicators of achievement we have been using as the result of a bigger problem (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The problem is not the economic problems listed but instead are the product of something much larger and much more complex. This study looks at the bigger picture and analyzes the complexities of perceptions by assistant principals and the impact it has on Black male achievement.

### *“The Streets”*

Poverty, lack of educational opportunities, lack of equitable wages, and unemployment influenced by failures in education has created a subsidiary culture for many Black males as an alternative to traditional lifestyles known in this study as *the streets*. “It is this population of marginalized lower and working-class Black males who are most prone to seek respect and social recognition by construction of their identities as men in the social world of ‘the streets’” (Oliver, 2006, p. 920). Also, continuous challenges with employment are a factor in engagement in street-related behaviors (Oliver, 2006, p. 919).

The streets used here to refer to the network of public and semipublic social settings (e.g., street corners, vacant lots, bars, clubs, after-hour joints, convenience stores, drug houses, pool rooms, parks, and public recreational places, etc.) in which primarily lower and working-class Black males tend to congregate...the streets is a socialization institution that is as important as the family, the church, and the educational system in terms of its influence on their psychosocial development and life course trajectories and transitions. (Oliver, 2006, p. 919)

The streets provide an alternative to gain tangible needs for survival and psychological support with opportunities to construct an identity in a prevailing White world. “Equally important is the social function of the streets as an institutional site in which various street-corner settings are available use as social stages on which valued masculine identities can be enacted in the presence of significant others, who serve to validate one’s manhood” (Oliver, 2006, p. 927) whereas schools are often valued as emasculate. The streets have become a significant part of growing up and are being passed from one generation to the next. For many impoverished or blue collar Black males, an important “stage in their rite of passage into manhood involved learning how to successfully manage the challenges of street life by constructing masculine identities that are respected and feared by other men in and outside the social world of ‘the streets’” (as cited in Oliver, 2006, pp. 921-922). Thus, as schools fail, Black students in developing their cognitive and social functions, some develop these by obtaining their identity in an alternative fashion. “Low-achieving African American students have a strong belonging to their racial group” (Thompson & Gregory, 2011, p. 15) and this belonging is what the culture of “the streets” feeds off of.



“The heart of the code is the emphasis on respect, which is described as the desire to be treated right or granted deference in all interpersonal relations” (Oliver, 2006, p. 928). The streets have become culture with a set of “norms and rules [that are] culturally transmitted across succeeding generations of Black males” (Oliver, 2006, p. 922). Black males do not get a sense of belonging, a masculine persona, or a level of respect in schools. Instead, they can make Black males feel inferior, unintelligent, and without any respect like a prisoner. But the literature commonly links life on the streets with violence.

Findings of recent ethnographic studies which indicate that in the increasingly hostile and dangerous neighborhoods of the inner city, a ‘code of the streets’ often emerges, particularly among young African American males, where the demand for respect through periodic violence is a form of human capital and gang membership is a form of social capital – a social support network and source of protection for young African American males. (Johnson et al., 1998, p. 29)

Oliver defines four consequences of street socialization which include: (1) disconnection from employment opportunities; (2) disruption of family life and abdication of fatherhood responsibilities; (3) interpersonal conflict and violence; and (4) high rates of incarceration (1998, p. 931-933). There is little argument that the streets have had a negative impact on Black males but this does not address the primary problem which is why individuals choose this pathway?

Some researchers argue that life on the streets is a conscious decision that Black males make because they do not want to go to school or do not want to get a job. “The joblessness problem reflects character deficiencies and deviant values of inner-city

residents, especially Black males” (Johnson et al., 1998, p. 230). These “values and norms place emphasis on toughness, sexual conquest, and hustling” (Oliver, 2006, p. 928) which trap individuals into a continuous culture away from a traditional life. “The pursuit of money, status, and respect in the streets is a major source of interpersonal conflict leading to violent confrontations involving marginalized Black men as perpetrators and victims” (Oliver, 1998; Wright & Decker, 1997, as cited in Oliver, 2006, p. 932). Victim blaming is a constant theme in the literature with little to no accountability on how Black males got to the position they are in.

### **Life of a Black Male Inside of School**

#### *Achievement*

Black students were interviewed in a study where time and again, they stated the importance of education. Paradoxically, Black students also stated limited effort and motivation in school. The conclusion was that “Black high school students supported the belief that hard work plays a major role in one’s success; however, they also believed that hard work does not necessarily result in success if one is Black because of such social injustices as prejudice and discrimination (Ford, Grantham, Tarek, & Whiting, 2008, p. 220). Black students who do not understand the benefits of education believe that it will not benefit them and therefore disconnect academically (Mattison & Aber, 2007, p. 3). It is the lack of understanding of potential returns on education that is fundamental to student engagement that must be addressed by schools. It is a core responsibility to show value when teaching and students’ recognition that they see no benefit is a blatant shortcoming of American schools. Paul Barton also identified factors in school that

impact achievement including rigor of curriculum, teacher experience and attendance, teacher preparation, class size, technology-assisted instruction, and, finally, school safety (2004, p. 10) which are additional responsibilities of schools to provide for an equitable education.

There are plentiful amounts of research that discuss the failures of Black males in school but little research explores why these failures occur. Examples of the literature state Black males fall behind White males on educational measures including, but not limited to, academic achievement (Haycock, 2001), skill ability (Haycock, 2001), graduation rates (Burton & Jones, 1982), attendance (Black, 2006, p. 40), and, inversely, the number of discipline referrals and dropouts (Losen & Skiba, 2010). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress from the National Center for Educational Statistics (cited in Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009, p.4), a 29-point score gap exists amongst 17-year old White and Black students nationwide reading score averages and a 26-point score exists in nationwide math score averages. John Ogbu's research (2003) shows that when Black males are compared to students by race and gender, they consistently score the lowest academically (as cited in Martin, Martin, Gibson, & Wilkins, 2007, p. 690). Peggy Carr, an associate commissioner for assessment at the Department of Education states, this gap "could be envisioned as the rough equivalent of between two and three school years' worth of learning" (cited in Dillon, 2009, p. 13). The NCES show similar gaps between White and Black students at the elementary and middle school level as well (Rampey et al., 2009, p. 4). More recent research in academic achievement gaps finds similar conclusions. The academic achievement gap is a pervasive issue that challenges all schools. Kober (2001) states, test scores alone do not

limit the measure of the academic achievement gap, but multiple measures that include attendance, graduation rates, dropout rates, and percentages of students enrolled in honor and advanced placement courses (p. 16 – 17).

But why are Black students continuously lagging in various areas of measure? There is a significant amount of research concerning why Black males are disengaged in school. According to Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff (2003, p. 1203), [Black male] “disidentification includes: (1) disaffection with school, including low educational expectations and poor academic motivation; (2) association with friends who support negative attitudes towards school; and (3) poor school performance and attainment” (Ogbu, 1978; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Mickelson, 1991; Taylor et al., 1994, as cited in Wong et al., 2003, p. 1203). Despite decades of beliefs that schools could do little to educate Black male students, each of the three reasons stated above show areas where schools can actively promote engagement.

Kay Lovelace Taylor (2002/2003), studied students’ opinions and asked them why they believed African American children do not score as high as other ethnic groups (p. 73). The following summarizes some Taylor’s (2002/2003) findings (p. 73):

- 31 percent of the responses indicated that students held themselves responsible for their lack of achievement. They cited peer pressure being more important than academic success and some were embarrassed to ask teachers for help in front of peers.
- 13 percent discussed the schools’ role. Student reported that they attended school not to receive an education but to meet their friends and to hang out.

Students did not realize how standardized test results affected how the rest of the

world viewed [them] and felt angry about this lack of awareness. They believed that such knowledge would have motivated them to try harder.

Black males who consistently struggle in school, often impacted by the limited opportunities, the unconscious beliefs held by educators, and the policies that reflect levels of racism, are more likely to drop out (Jordan & Anil, 2009). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States (2011), in 2009, the dropout ratio for Whites is 1:8 while the dropout ratio for Blacks was 1:6. The consequences of dropping out in high school are significant. “High school dropouts are roughly three times more likely to be chronically poor than are high school graduates (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996, cited in Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, & Williams, 2002, p. 810). “They are less likely to be permanently employed, they add to the welfare burden, and they are disproportionately at risk for drug abuse and incarceration” (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993; Davis et al., 2002, p. 810). Lynn Olson (2006) concurs by stating,

Students who don't finish high school are four times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed. They are far more likely to end up in prison or on welfare, and they die, on average, at a younger age. Beyond individual costs, dropouts take a huge toll on societal costs, in lost tax revenue, and increased expenditures for health care, corrections, food stamps, subsidized housing, and public assistance. (as cited in Jordan & Anil, 2009, p. 426)

Students in low-income homes were three times more likely to drop out than those from average-income homes and nine times more likely than students from high-income homes (Rumberger, 1983; Jordan & Anil, 2009, p. 426), arguing the dropout problem to be a product of poverty, not of race, which people often use synonymously.

Jordan and Anil's study (2009) found that "a lack of a high school diploma is found to have more severe consequences for Black than for White students." Between 1997 and 1999, African American dropouts aged 20-24 years were more than twice as likely to be unemployed as were White dropouts" (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, as cited in Davis et al., 2002, p. 810). This inequity begs to question what role discrimination plays? Why would the lack of a high school have greater consequences for a Black individual than White? It is a common theme and a symptom of the larger problem that Black individuals face in society: discrimination. This brings full circle the previous question about how can society breaks this cycle of racism?

Attrition is a cause for dropping out with a disproportionate rate of Black students being held back compared to White students. According to Anne Wheelock and Jing Miao (2005), "attrition between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades is between 18% and 20% for African Americans, compared with between 6% and 7% for Whites" (cited in Thompson & Gregory, 2011, p. 5). But why are rates of attrition so much higher for Black students compared to others? According to Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber (1995), Black males are often placed in special education classes or held back because they do not perform at the same level as other students but these responses rarely benefit the student nor does it catch the student back up (as cited in Davis & Jordan, 1994, p. 585-586). This inequity falls into the reasons defined by Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff (2003) for disengagement. Varying expectations lead to lower motivation, negative attitudes, and poor performance (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003, p. 1203). "Many Black males continue to lose ground academically and often give up altogether by dropping out of school" (Davis & Jordan, 1994, p. 586). As educators respond to why these problems exist, they are quick to point

to student motivation, effort, and outside factors that educators are unable to control. But examples of tracking as seen above clearly does not help attrition rates and likely to devalue a clearly watered down education.

### *Self-Concept, Efficacy and Motivation*

As important as the skills and rigor that school offers, students are in need of psychological fulfillment in terms of self-concept and self-efficacy to improve motivation and achievement. “Given the disproportionate number of psychosocial stressors encountered by African Americans, it has been argued that self-esteem for Black males is particularly crucial and predictive of life outcomes” (Mizell, 1999, p. 471). But the research that schools provide little support in this area where Black students largely feel pressures in areas of self-identity, motivation, and discrimination. Additionally, “African American adolescent male students have poor self-evaluation regarding their academic abilities” (Martin et al., 2007, p. 691). Martin et al., suggests that self-efficacy is an underlying issue contributing to the lack of success of Black males. According to Fred M. Newmann et al., (1992), “when students perceive themselves and other students as valuable members and the school environment is fair, they may be able to engage in academic tasks” (as cited in Mattison & Aber, 2007, p. 9). Studies have shown that although all students benefit from encouragement and motivation by their teacher, students of color, especially for Black and Hispanic students, tend to find it most beneficial (Alson, 2003, p. 5). Furthermore, it is important that students receive an education with a rigorous curriculum and high expectations for all must be a significant part of the culture of the school (Alson, 2003, p.7) but studies have shown that this is not the case in schools where higher rates of poverty exist. It can be concluded that poor

self-efficacy concerning academic abilities is based on the perception of an unfair environment, a feeling of not being valued in the environment, and an inequitable curriculum filled with low expectations. These are all examples of institutional racism, arguably the core issue in the discussion of academic achievement.

“Regarding African Americans, research has found that mastery is correlated with strong self-efficacy, positive ethnic identity, and the development of competence” (Mizell, 1999, p. 472). Again, the importance of motivational strategies, stressing the benefits of education, and supporting student self-efficacy are key practices for Black male students to be successful in school. “With regard to teacher/classroom interactions, research studies indicate that perceptions of strong teacher support and high expectations relate to higher self-efficacy, motivation efforts, and school performance among Black youth” (Honora, 2003; Marcus, Gross, & Seefeldt, 1991, as cited in Chavous et al., 2008, p. 639). With positive self-efficacy, students are able to meet academic goals such as graduation. “Graduation from high school could be predicted with considerable success from intentions to complete the school year and from perceived control over this behavior” (Davis et al., 2002, p. 816). Conversely, it is easy to believe that without positive self-efficacy, students are more likely to face greater challenges. But research has shown time and again that policies like tracking, low expectations by teachers and lack of rigor (Milner, 2012) are commonplace for Black students, correlating to higher numbers of Black students dropping out of school. The literature points to various problems that exist within the Black community, inside and outside of school, that impact self efficacy, academic achievement, and overall success. Schools and society perpetuate a cycle of institutional racism that devalues Black individuals. Schools inadequately



prepare Black students who move into a society filled with more discrimination, which leads to challenges that impact families, filtering to children, where the cycle begins again. For decades, schools have not been held accountable for their place in this cycle but there is a indirect correlation to this and the achievement of students of color.

### *Self-Identification*

An important finding by Kay Lovelace Taylor was the cultural/social reasons for the lagging achievement by Black students. According to her study, Black students believed that peer pressure and self identification within a group was of greater importance than academic success (Taylor, 2002/2003). Social identity, then, has a strong influence on student decision-making as well as achievement based on these decisions. Self-identification is an important psychological factor when discussing the achievement of Black males because of the negative perceptions and discrimination they face in school. These are considerations in their cognitive and social development that shape their decision-making and ultimately the perceptions that others have of them, which influence achievement.

Negative perceptions and discrimination are seen in terms of stereotypes. Claude Steele discusses stereotype and stereotype threats, which are defined as, “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype and that associated fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (1997, p. 614). Steele argues when Black students are faced with negative consequences, then they do not perform at competitive levels compared to other students and their success is hindered (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008, p. 223). Positive and empathetic attitudes towards

Black male students “empower” students. Negative attitudes can lead to school disidentification which is viewed as a coping strategy used to protect the self-concept in the face of threats to one’s racial identity represented by perceived stereotypes, negative academic expectations, discrimination, or beliefs about societal ethnic inequality (Aronson, 2002; Crocker & Major, 1989; Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001; Steele, 1997, as cited in Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008, p. 638).

The psychological aspect of the achievement gap is an important discussion. The development of social identity is a crucial aspect to develop positive self concept and strong sense of self-efficacy to battle a system that denies these. Social identity theory is defined as a psychology with a “differentiation of the social system, but it focuses on categorical distinctions rather than functions or roles as the basis of differentiation. Social identities in this framework represent a process of identification with, or assimilation to, others who share the common group membership” (Brewer, 2001, p. 117). In the social identity theory, a person has a “personal self” as well as other selves defined by their associations. Environmental factors trigger an individual to think, feel and act on the basis of his “level of self” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Additionally, an individual has multiple “social identities” derived from associations and/or membership in social groups (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). Social Identity Theory, best articulated by Tajfel and Turner (1979) summarizes the theory in three main points:

- People strive for the establishment or enhancement of positive self-esteem.
- A part of the person’s self-concept – his or her social identity – is based on the person’s group membership.

- To maintain a positive social identity, the person strives for positive differentiation between his or her in-group and relevant out-groups.

Students spend most of their days in school and thus a strong source for developing one's self-identity. Students look to peers, teachers, and activities they participate in for reinforcement of who they are. All of these factors define ones' social identity. Students find their identities shaped by factors outside of school such as background, family, religion, etc. Inside of school, they are often shaped by the activities they participate in and the people they associate themselves with. "Social identity is a concept with enduring (core) and (peripheral) components evolving in a reciprocating process between the individual and the group" (Korte, 2007, p. 169). Each of these is a categorical distinction defined by social identity theory. Some of these distinctions are exercised in an independent manner while other times, they are exercised together. There are competing expectations for these distinctions, which may further define their identity by the choices students make.

According to Tajfel and Turner, social identity theory asserts that group associations lead to an in-group which members promote at the expense of an out-group (1986). After individuals identify themselves with a group, individuals seek positive self-efficacy by differentiating themselves from out-groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The result of this group identification is a self-efficacy dependent on the group, and individual identity is lost. Individuals begin identifying themselves in terms of "we."

Through the lens of critical race theory, explanations in the difficulty of constructing self-identity because the structure of schools themselves demonstrate institutional racism that overtly and inadvertently allows discrimination. One example of

this type of institutional racism observed by Taylor and Clark, is the fact that Black and Hispanic students are frequent recruits for athletic teams but are rarely recruited for debate teams, scholastic societies, or school newspaper staffs (2009). Involvement in such academic activities might augment the attractiveness of students of color in the eyes of college admissions officers (Rothstein, 2004), enhancing their chances of moving into postsecondary institutions. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is an institutional issue and is engrained in the fabric and system of the American society (UCLA School of Public Affairs). “This is the analytical lens that CRT uses in examining existing power structures. CRT identifies that these power structures are based on white privilege and white supremacy, which perpetuates the marginalization of people of color” (UCLA School of Public Affairs). “Inclusive education never had the potential to be inclusive of all children, because it is built on the premises of the inferiority paradigm, which assumes that people of color are biologically and genetically inferior to Whites (Tate, 1997, as cited in Zion & Blanchett, 2011, p. 2186). The result of this has been a successful “implementation of inclusion but African American and other students of color are still disproportionately placed in special education, receive the most segregated special education placements, have the poorest post school outcomes, and continue to be segregated from their White and nondisabled peers” (Blanchett, 2010, as cited in Zion & Blanchett, 2011 p. 2187).

Mickelson stated “Black high school students supported the belief that hard work plays a major role in one’s success; however, they also believed that hard work does not necessarily result in success if one is Black because of such social injustices as prejudice and discrimination” (Ford et al., 2008, p. 220). In a system that is discriminating or

perceived as doing so, social identity becomes crucial to self-preservation. Pragmatically, this manifests itself in self segregation in schools. “Current research focuses almost entirely on the way segregation has resulted in black sub-culture and collective identity” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 230). But it is important to evaluate the impact of the creation of sub-cultures on individual identities. Although research has show systematic instances of discrimination against Black students, controversial conclusions of studies argue that Black students actually do not want to be part of the school culture created by Whites while other research blames this situation entirely on the prejudice and discrimination. Ogbu defines minorities in terms of voluntary or involuntary based on whether they moved to the United States by their own will or whether they were brought involuntarily (1987). Blacks, therefore, are not considered voluntary immigrants, and, therefore their sense of motivation and their desire to assimilate is different. In fact, Ogbu asserts that Blacks are actually resistant to assimilation, which is known as secondary resistance (1987). Self-segregation allows and reinforces a sub-culture that is not assimilated. Fordham studied resistance of Black students like Ogbu and argues that assimilation is perceived as “acting White” (1988). Ultimately, their studies concluded that Black students with high achievement are threatened with the loss of their social identity.

### *“Acting White”*

There is much debate surrounding the term “acting White,” and the research around it with contrasting views in the literature. One perspective views “acting White” as a significant cultural battle for Black students. For example, Ford, Grantham, and

Whiting (2008) studied resistance of Black students and argued that assimilation is perceived as “acting White” (p. 231). Ford et al., (2008) concluded “regardless of the issue being focused on (grades vs. friendships), the student who is accused of acting White is viewed as someone who has betrayed his or her racial group, has given up his or her racial or cultural ties, and has adopted the values, attitudes and behaviors of the oppressor or enemy” (p. 222). “African American students face pressure to devalue education for fear that adhering to the mainstream culture means being identified as ‘acting White’” (Voelkl, 1997, as cited in Thompson & Gregory, 2011, p. 7). According to J.D. Anderson (1975),

Black children who grow up in predominantly Black communities, then, are raised in the collective view of success, an ethos that is concerned with the Black community as a whole. But since an individualistic rather than a collective ethos is sanctioned in the school context, Black children enter school having to unlearn or, at least, to modify their own culturally sanctioned interactional and behavioral styles rewarded in the school context if they wish to achieve academic success.

(As cited in Fordham, 1988, p. 55)

Studies argue “‘disidentification’ from academics is a protective mechanism in response to the threat of performing poorly and validating racial stereotypes associated with intellectual abilities” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, as cited in Thompson & Gregory, 2011, p. 7). Students expressed their concerns that if they tried to improve their performance, they feared being labeled as “acting White” (p. 73). “One lesson boys learn from such men (from the streets) is that doing well in school is for sissies, or worse yet, for Blacks who are trying to ‘act White’” (Tift, 1990, p. 2). Black students, especially males, have a

greater preponderance for academic disengagement, especially in high school (Osborne, 1997, as cited in Thompson & Gregory, 2011, p. 8).

Signithia Fordham, following her work with Ogbu some twenty years ago, argues that “acting White” is not a decision made by Black students but rather “the problem of privileged or protested Whiteness and stigmatized or devalued Blackness being tied positively and negatively to school performance is a sociocultural phenomenon that must be seen in relation to institutional structures and cultural dynamics” (2008, p. 235). Fordham goes on to discuss how the belief that Black youth are “acting White” out of fear creates psychological harm for the Black community because of the inequitable belief that it conveys and by the dismissal of institutional prejudices.

They (researchers) did not acknowledge that it was based on the concept of race as a forced performance on the part of African American students or admit that the structural limitations based on race that are still an endemic feature of U.S. public and private life make Black youths’ oppositional culture a reasonable response to their bleak prospects. Instead, they proceed immediately to the misguided notion that the adoption of a stronger work ethic on the part of the Black population, especially Black children, would render these long-standing structural deterrents to social and economic inequality harmless. (Fordham, 2008, p. 229)

Fordham distinguishes between the “burden” of “acting White” and the “fear” of “acting White” which causes a psychological harm to the identity of Black students (Fordham, 2008, p. 233). As previously discussed, self-identification is a crucial aspect of academia, which leaves few options for Black students.

I am proposing here, "acting White" might accurately be seen as socially approved attempted identity theft in which, in exchange for what is identified as success, racially defined Black bodies are compelled to take on the identity of racially defined White bodies by mimicking the social, cultural, linguistic, and economic practices historically affiliated with the hegemonic rule of Euro-Americans. (Fordham, 2008, p. 237)

This burden is institutionally created and unassumingly seeks to dismantle the identity of Black students. The response by students is sometimes oppositional, which people have misinterpreted as lack of motivation, laziness, apathy, or lack of value in the importance of education.

Another argument against the burden of “acting White” is simply that “social scientists have produced little empirical evidence to substantiate the claim that an ‘oppositional peer culture’ or a ‘burden of acting White is pervasive in the black community, or that either explains the underachievement of black students or some part of the black-white achievement gap” (Tyson, William, & Castellino, 2005 p. 582). Instead, Tyson et al., argue that not only is there no evidence of “acting White” by Black students, it is entirely mis-categorized into race. In fact, Ferguson (2001) found that “black and white students with similar family background characteristics were not very different in terms of their satisfaction with school, interest in their studies, or opposition to achievement” (as cited in Tyson et al., 2005, p. 584). Freeman A. Hrabowski, President of the University of Maryland stated that educators and parents pushing children to higher achievement often find themselves swimming against a tide of popular culture and therefore, it is not an issue of race. Even middle-class students are



unfortunately influenced by the culture that says it is simply not cool for students to be smart (as cited in Dillon, 2009).

### *Discipline*

It is the responsibility of the assistant principal to evaluate disciplinary issues and assign consequences that often remove students out of instructional settings by means of in and out of school suspension or expulsion. Consequences are defined as either mandatory or discretionary depending on their severity. More severe actions will result in mandatory placements set by state and local policies. For example, all students in felony possession of marijuana receive the same mandatory placement. “The consequences of other types of severe behavior must be determined by the student’s principal” (Stetson & Collins, 2010, p. 41) and these are known as discretionary placements. Discipline is another area where Black males are vastly overrepresented as a population. “Consistently, researchers have found that minorities are disproportionately represented in the administration of school discipline” (Jordan & Anil, 2009, p. 420). They are more likely than White students to be given harsher disciplinary punishment including expulsion, or the inability to return to school (Johnson et al., 1998, p. 25). Discipline illustrates one more facet of education where the disproportion between races questions the unconscious and possibly conscious racism that exists stressing the value of this study into assistant principals. The impact of this problem is the “disproportionate discipline is just one that reduces educational opportunities, and thus human capital formation, and finally economic development” (Jordan & Anil, 2009, p. 421). Students that perceive to be treated inequitably become removed from classrooms and disengaged

giving the assistant principal a strong connection to student performance in school. The research contends that discipline has a lasting domino effect with long-lasting consequences, including economical repercussions. But the statistics on disproportionate numbers of Black students receiving harsher discipline compared to other student groups begs the question as to whether this too is a systemic issue?

Disciplinary measures used by schools may result in students being removed from campus, including out-of-school suspension and expulsion. Jordan and Anil's study (2009) presents findings that correlate absenteeism discipline referrals. Poor achievement may be attributed to absenteeism that is the result of school discipline, where increased absences are directly related to the number of days that a student is suspended (Jordan & Anil, 2009, p. 425). "When children are suspended for 35 and 45 days, you can't make up that year of school – ever" (Cook, as cited in Finkel, 2010, p. 32). Black males spend more time in disciplinary settings, which in turn, increases the amount of instructional time missed. Studies show that suspensions take students out of instructional settings and leave them entirely unsupervised which does not improve their academic success (Losen & Skiba, 2010, p. 11). According to Fight Crime: Invest in Kids (2009), "suspension and expulsion often provides troubled kids with exactly what they do not need; an extended, unsupervised hiatus from school that increases their risk of engaging in substance abuse and violent crime (as cited in Losen & Skiba, 2010, p. 11). "Disciplinary tactics that respond to typical adolescent behavior by removing students from school do not better prepare students for adulthood. Instead, they increase their risk of educational failure and dropout" (Losen & Skiba, 2010, p. 11). Discipline policies cause students "falling below grade-level testing targets, which is also prevalent

in dropout factories. These places that have very high suspension and expulsion rates and excessive reliance on law enforcement – those are the students who are creating the achievement gap” (Freeman, as cited in Finkel, 2010, p. 32).

“A review of discretionary and non-discretionary suspension data revealed that discretionary suspensions among Black and Hispanic students were disproportionate to the discretionary suspensions that White and Asian students received” (Stetson & Collins, 2010, p. 41). According to Losen and Skiba (2010), Blacks are now over three times more likely than Whites to be suspended” (p. 3). Brooks et al., (1999) concur by stating “African American students in particular are suspended on average two to three times more frequently than White students” (as cited in Mattison & Aber, 2007, p. 1). In a study by Jordan & Anil (2009), they found that:

White and other race (primarily Hispanic) students have significantly fewer disciplinary referrals than Black students, females less than males, gifted students less than all others, students absent only a few times less than others, and those on free and reduced lunches and the extremely absent more than others. These results confirm that proportionally African-Americans, boys, and economically disadvantaged students face more disciplinary referrals than other students.” (p. 424)

When students are taken out of instructional time, they fall further behind academically. Thus, if students of color are being punished at greater and harsher rates, correlations can be drawn between discipline and academic achievement. Research has shown that when Black males are compared to other students by categories such as gender and race, “they consistently rank lowest in academic achievement, have the worst attendance records, are

suspended and expelled most often, are most likely to drop out of school, and most often fail to graduate from high school or earn a GED” (as cited in Martin et al., 1997, p. 690). Additional research by the *Chicago Tribune*, analyzing data from the U.S. Department of Education as cited in research by Stetson and Collins (2010), reveals similar trends all over the country which include (p. 41):

- In New Jersey public schools, African American students are almost 60 times more likely as White students to be expelled for serious disciplinary infractions.
- Black students are suspended in numbers “greater than their proportion of the student population” in every state except Idaho.
- The percentage of suspensions of Black students is “more than double their percentage of the student body” in 21 states.
- Federal statistics on suspensions and expulsions lend credence to the claim that African-American students are punished disproportionately. Out of the 48.5 million total students in the 2006 DOE Office of Civil Rights report, 17 percent were African-American, but Blacks were more than double the percentage of those impacted by corporal punishment (36 percent), out-of-school suspension (37 percent) and expulsions (38 percent). (Finkel, 2010, p. 32)

According to Jordan and Anil (2009), “being poor and especially being Black and poor, is the most significant indicator of discipline referrals, even more so than extreme absences” (p. 428). Research as this reinforces the question of what role discrimination or negative perceptions play in the role of disseminating discipline. Losen and Skiba

(2010) argue “previous research has consistently found the racial/ethnic disproportionately in discipline persists even when poverty and other demographic factors are controlled” (p. 8). Therefore biases and discrimination play some role in discipline, although rarely discussed as a factor. Instead, research is more apt to claim ignorance or state cultural differences for disproportionate discipline referrals. Daniel Losen, author of *Discipline Policies, Successful Schools, and Racial Justice* questions the reasons for the disproportionate discipline of students of color stating, “research suggests that unconscious bias likely plays a part in the disparities. Why else would we see, for the same first-time offense, Blacks receiving harsher punishments more often than White?” (as cited in Shah, 2013, p. 2).

A discussion on biases, prejudice and perceptions rooted in deficit thinking and discrimination are important to understand the structural challenges of schools and how we treat students of color. Therefore, exploration of assistant principal perceptions becomes a valuable field of study. School policies on discipline used in public school in America may be a factor in lower achievement amongst students of color and requiring greater attention and reconsideration (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 60). The disproportionate data between students of color and discipline referrals questions whether the current approach to discipline has more negative consequences than their intended benefits. In terms of academic achievement, Raymond Calabrese (1991) argues,

Assistant principals address the changing social milieu, make adjustments, and work toward a discipline policy that incorporates flexibility, respect, sensitivity, and caring, and that provides learning experiences within established guidelines. The desire to connect discipline with learning makes the assistant principal an

instructional leader. Assistant principals recognize the direct relationship between student behavior and academic performance (p. 53).

It has been found that school engagement of Black males correlates to their socioeconomic status as well as the number of suspensions, according to a study by Davis & Jordan (1994, p. 581). “It is difficult to argue that disciplinary removals result in improvements to the school learning climate when schools with higher suspension and expulsion rates average lower test scores than do schools with lower suspension and expulsions rates” (Losen & Skiba, 2010, p. 10).

Another explanation for the disproportionate discipline is the discrimination and perceived discrimination directly experienced by Black males in schools. “When involuntary minorities, such as African Americans, are faced with discrimination, they develop an oppositional identity in which they devalue and disidentify with school in order to identify with their own ethnic group” (Wong et al., 2003, p. 1224). Therefore, acting out may be a response by Black males for the discrimination they have perceived or to open hostility towards them. “Once suspended, students are served notice that their behavior is inappropriate and has no place in school. However, many students cannot view sanctions against their behavior as being separate from sanctions against their individual self” (Davis & Jordan, 1994, p. 586).

Research is beginning to emerge on how disciplinary measures in schools are simply ineffective and may lead to larger problems. The American Psychological Association (2008) found “no data showing that out-of-school suspension or expulsion reduce[d] rates of disruption or improve school climate; indeed the available data suggests that if anything, disciplinary removal appears to have negative effects on student

outcomes and the learning environment (as cited in Losen & Skiba, 2010, p. 10).

According to Robert Balfanz (2003), “in the long term, school suspension has been found to be a moderate-to-strong predictor of school dropout” (as cited in Losen & Skiba, 2010, p. 10).

Educators and policy makers should rethink how current secondary school disciplinary policies such as suspension, extra help delivery mechanisms, and remedial courses affect African American males. It would be instructive to conduct further studies to determine conclusively if, as we suspect, the practices of suspension and remediation have negative consequences on the educational and behavioral outcomes for Black males. (Davis & Jordan, 2010, p. 586)

Disproportionate discipline in schools is a significant issue impacting Black males in terms of discrimination, the effectiveness of consequences, and the long-term impact these have on the students. It is another issue that perpetuates institutional racism and contributes to a cycle of inequality in schools.

## **Theories Impacting Achievement of Black Males**

### *Discrimination and Prejudice in Society*

One theory defining the Black community explained by Edward Frazier describes an evolutionary process over centuries. It is “the culmination of an evolutionary process, its structure strongly affected by the vestiges of slavery, racism, and economic exploitation. The method of enslavement and slavery virtually destroyed Blacks’ cultural moorings and prevented any perpetuation of African kinship and family relations” (Frazier as cited in Staples, 1987, p. 268). The cycle of discrimination and prejudice in

society continues to be a pervasive issue that impact Black Americans in schools. Stereotypes and prejudicial treatment based on the lightness of their skin are cited as examples of discrimination that Black individuals face as another reason that impact success in school. According to Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, a clinical psychologist at the University of California Berkley, “Black boys are viewed by their teachers as hyperactive and aggressive. . . . very early on, they get labeled” (as cited in Tifft, 1990, p. 2). These beliefs can lead teachers to rely on disciplinary action with greater prevalence than other student groups, developing thereby a climate of inequity, impacting student efficacy, and reinforcing the idea of “Them” versus the “White World.” As adults, “negative stereotypes of Black men [are] that they are lazy, inarticulate and dangerous are often applied categorically in the recruitment and hiring process (Johnson, Farrell, & Stoloff, 1998, p. 24). Johnson et al., (1998) continues describing other stereotypes held by some employers that include, “dishonest, lazy, inarticulate, uneducable, untrainable, and dangerous – are themselves a function of the failure of recent social policy” (p. 25). According to Gibbs (1988), “in the crudest sense and with the exception of a few who are widely admired, young Black males are largely perceived and stereotyped by one or more of the five D’s: dumb, deprived, dangerous, deviant, and disturbed” (as cited in Jordan & Cooper, 2003, p. 201). These perceptions impact expectations and behaviors towards others. Negative stereotypes lead people to treat Black individuals in a similar, negative way, perpetuating deficit thinking.

Even in terms of the criminal justice system, stereotypes affected how Blacks are treated. According to author of *Search and Destroy: African-American Males in the Criminal Justice System*, Jerome Mill says,



I learned very early on that when we got a Black youth, virtually everything – from arrest summaries, to family history, to rap sheets, to psychiatric exams, to ‘waiver’ hearings as to whether or not he would be tried as an adult, to final sentencing -- was skewed. If a middle-class white youth was sent to us as ‘dangerous,’ he had to have done something very serious indeed. By contrast, the Black teenager was more likely to be dealt with as a stereotype from the moment the handcuffs were first put on – easily and quickly relegated to the ‘more dangerous’ end of the ‘violent-nonviolent’ spectrum, albeit accompanied by an official record meant to validate each of a biased series of decisions (as cited in Johnson et al., 1998, p. 27).

Johnson et al., (1998) provides a number of statistics that illustrate skin tone also plays a role in discriminatory practices. According to Johnson et al., (1998),

In a Los Angeles survey, only 10.3 percent of light-skinned African American men with 13 or more years of schooling were unemployed, compared with 19.4 percent of their dark-skinned counterparts with similar education. Indeed, the unemployment figure for light-skinned Black males compared favorably with the 9.5 percent rate of unemployment for white males with comparable schooling. But a criminal record is especially problematic for dark-skinned Black males whose 54 percent jobless rate was higher than the rates of their light-skinned counterparts, whose jobless rate was 41.7 percent and for their white male counterparts, whose jobless rate was 25 percent. (p. 33-35)

Individual experiences and general statistics demonstrate inequalities across racial lines. Such inequalities reflect stereotypes and discrimination against Black men. For example,

research on crime points out the disproportionate rate of arrest and convictions of Blacks over Whites. Miller describes this as a national issue with statistics from all over the country including,

In Baltimore, 11,107 of the 12,965 persons arrested for “drug abuse violations” in 1991 were African American. In Columbus, Ohio, where African American males made up less than 11 percent of the population, they comprised over 90 percent of the drug arrests and were being arrested at 18 times the rate of whites. In Jacksonville, Florida, 87 percent of those arrested on drug charges were African American males, even though they comprised only 12 percent of that county’s population. In Minneapolis (where a state court held that punishments mandated by the legislature for possession or sale of crack cocaine were racist in their effect) though Black men made up only 7 percent of the population, they were being arrested at a ratio of approximately 20:1 to white males. (as cited in Johnson et al., 1998, p. 28)

Not only are Black men subject to arrest and conviction at higher rates than white men, but treatment by the justice system also appears to vary as well. According to Johnson et al., (1998), “African Americans were less likely to be assigned to treatment programs than whites. In California, for example, whereas 70 percent of inmates sentenced for drug offenses were Black, two-thirds of the drug-treatment slots went to whites” (p. 29). This research begs the question as to whether such examples are a result of conscious discrimination or preconceived biases.

History, discrimination, negative stereotypes, prejudices against skin tone, inequalities in the job market as well as in schools define a reality for Blacks where

“institutional racism is attributed to white power, privilege (Cochran-Smith, 2000, as cited in Taylor & Clark, 2009, p. 115), and wealth and status (Noguera, 2001, as cited in Taylor & Clark, 2009, p. 11). Struggles by individuals are intertwined with the inequities of the entire system, economic, social, as well as academic, and may be predictors of academic success. But these inequities are rarely blamed for lagging achievement of Black students and instead, blame is often placed on the individuals themselves.

### *Expectations by Schools and Teachers*

Although the gaps in achievement of Black males are documented, there is still much debate as to the reasons why these gaps occur. Haycock (2001) argues that despite the many factors that contribute to low achievement, low expectations are at the top of the list (p.8). In her observations of a low-poverty school, Haycock (2001) described her feelings as being shocked of the low expectations. She observed, “how few assignments they get in a given school week or month” and “the low level of the few assignments that they do get. In high-poverty urban schools, for example, we see a lot of coloring assignments, rather than writing or mathematical assignments” (Haycock, 2001, p.8). Students’ perceptions of negative teacher attitudes also contribute to a lack of motivation. According to Pollard (1993), “Black adolescent students are repeatedly denied access to adequate education, are subjected to low teacher expectations, and often placed in special education classes and excluded from school (as cited in Martin et al., 2007, p. 691). “Educational institutions have historically evolved a series of complex features that deny Black men equal access to opportunity. Special education, tracking and ability grouping, standardized testing are examples of structural educational barriers” (Jordan & Cooper,

2003, p. 200). “With respect to tracking, data indicates that Black youth are underrepresented in the gifted and talented or college-bound tracks and overrepresented in the vocational, general education and special education or non-college bound tracks” (Johnson et al., 1998, p. 25).

Racial stratification exists and operates in a way that Black students are perceived and treated by the perceptions and responses to schooling in the context of racial subordination. Racial stratification in education operates through educational policies (e.g., “abilities” tracking, assignment to special education, Euro-centric curricula) and practices (e.g., teacher expectations, communication patterns) which deny Blacks equal access to education and deny Blacks equal rewards for their educational accomplishments as compared to Whites (Ogbu, 1993, as cited in Mattison & Aber, 2010, p. 3).

“Research has suggested that low expectations by teachers are a form of discrimination that African American and Latino students face on a regular basis (Felice, 1981; Grant, 1984; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lipman, 1998; Yoshino, 1961, as cited in Rosenbloom & May, 2004, p. 424). Lagging academic achievement for many students of color is caused partly by a “‘perceptual bias’ or teachers’ belief in lower degrees of academic performance by poor and minority students, and/or the self-fulfilling prophecy in which teachers have low expectations for minority and poor students produces unsuccessful academic performance and behaviors” (Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, & Shuan, 1990; Rist, 1970, as cited in Rosenbloom & May, 2004, p. 424). According to Taylor, (2002/2003), 24 percent referred to teacher behaviors as reasons for poor achievement. Students complained teachers often did not explain the work and ran through material without

seeming to care whether students understood (p. 73). Other students felt they were doing the same work in high school that they had done in elementary; this level of work reinforced that teachers did not care about preparing them for the future.

“There is an increased probability for negative academic and socioemotional outcomes when adolescents feel that their teachers do not respect or care about them as individuals” (Eccles, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Wentzel, 1997, as cited in Wong et al., 2003, p. 1201). “When families, schools, peers, and other socializing agents communicate messages of devaluation that undermined individuals’ feelings of relatedness to that context, there is an increased likelihood of negative developmental outcomes” (Wong et al., 2003, p. 1201).

A study of Black and Latino students showed beliefs that their teachers had low academic expectations and stereotypes about ‘bad kids’ or kids who ‘start trouble.’ They felt no matter what their actual behavior was in the classroom, they were typically stereotyped by their teachers as bad kids. The teachers were generally, in the eyes of the Latino and Black students, uncaring and ineffective. Students felt that a caring teacher should help students when they did not understand the material, control the students in the classroom, and maintain high expectations by encouraging students to study and achieve academically. Yet teachers were perceived by Black and Latino students as emotionally distant and not committed to education. (Rosenbloom & May, 2004, p. 436)

Despite researchers pinpointing the home life including parental involvement, socioeconomic status and such as the leading causes of Black male struggles, the problems described by Rosenbloom and May (2004) define issues that lie within the

system of schools themselves. Following in the footsteps of teacher perceptions and understanding the impact that they have on students comes this study that concentrates on assistant principals and perceptions. Contrary to the Coleman Report, it is all of the above findings that illustrate a system that reinforces the achievement gap between Black and White male students with institutionalized discrimination and assistant principals contributing to the problem.

### *Discrimination in Schools*

Along with teacher expectations, according to a study by Rosenbloom and May (2004), “African American (and Latino) students experienced discrimination from adults in positions of authority including teachers, police officers, and shopkeepers” (p. 443). Students perceive discrimination in the classroom because “African American adolescents are likely to have White teachers” (Ford & Harris, 1996 as cited in Chavous et al., 2008, p. 638). Therefore Black students often cite “racially biased treatment within the classroom...perceiving that they received poor grades or evaluations from teachers and other adults at school or harsher discipline due to race (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Romero & Roberts, 1998 as cited in Chavous et al., 2008, p. 638). “African American youths also report experiencing discrimination in peer settings at school, for example, by being picked on or socially excluded due to race” (Fisher et al., 2000; Greene et al., 2006, as cited in Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003).

Stereotypes are one form of discrimination that students are subjected to by other students, teachers, and administrators. “Stereotype threat occurs when individuals’ awareness of society’s negative stereotypes about their social group leads them to be

anxious about engaging in behaviors that confirm those stereotypes, particularly those pertaining to intellectual abilities” (Wong et al., 2003). Furthermore, studies have shown that Black males, faced with discrimination, “respond to this awareness by disengaging from mainstream institutions, such as school” (Ogbu, 1978, as cited in Wong et al., 2003, p. 1203). “Thus, at school, boys may adapt to racially devaluing experiences by disengaging with their educational context and minimizing the personal relevance of that domain (Graham, Taylor, Hudley, 1998; Osborne, 1999, as cited in Chavous et al., 2008, p. 639).

The literature discusses not only discrimination but perceived discrimination which is an individual’s interpretation and belief that they have been discriminated against, which proves to be equally as powerful. “Perceived discrimination by peers and perceived discrimination by teachers were positively related to anger, depressive symptoms, perceptions of friends’ negatives characteristics, and problem behavior” (Wong et al., 2003, p. 1212). Wong et al., (2003) found substantial evidence to show that African American adolescents’ experiences of discrimination by peers and by teachers are potential risks. These experiences were potential threats to adolescents; to their academic motivation, positive mental health, and self-esteem. In addition, perceived discrimination increased the probability of engaging in problem behaviors and becoming involved with friends who had fewer positive qualities and more negative qualities (p. 1221).

Dovidio, Kawakami, and Gaertner (2002) reinforce the idea of why discrimination is perceived stating “the nature of discrimination has shifted from overt actions (e.g., the use of racial slurs) to more covert forms (e.g., racial bias in discipline

practices), the associated risks of unfair treatment remain (as cited in Thompson & Gregory, 2011, p. 5). Despite whether the discrimination is perceived, systematic, covert or overt, Black students are identifying instances of discrimination. One outcome is personal disengagement in school. Also, “adolescents who are alienated from school because of threats of ethnic discrimination may become negatively oriented towards school as well as feel substantial socioemotional stress” (Wong et al., 2003, p. 1223). A study found that “an increase in perceived discrimination over time was linked to more depressive symptoms and conduct problems” (Thompson & Gregory, 2011, p. 6). Discrimination is another area where Black males struggle with a systematic issue, where schools are a forum for oppression. These are just two examples of racism, institutional and overt, that many Black male students face in school. Although institutional racism is prevalent in schools, it is not always seen.

Examples of institutional racism in public schools include consistently assigning students of color to schools in dilapidated conditions (Books, 1999); assigning teachers with low expectations for student achievement (Anderson, 2001); permitting teaching that offers few opportunities to use complex thinking skills (Hayward, 1999); emphasizing content with little or no exposure to topics and skills that are not tested (McNeil, cited in Anderson, 2001); ignoring truncated opportunities to learn (Tate, 1995); and allowing curricular tracking, limited curricular choices, unchallenging curricula, curricula that omit or downplay contributions of people of color, and/or curricula that depict members of subordinate cultures in derogatory ways. (Dunn, 1999, as cited in Taylor & Clark, 2009, p. 115)



Research on institutional racism illustrates discrimination and prejudice built into the fabric of education within various levels. These include overt and covert practices but equally impact students of color. Institutional racism is a deep seated issue that is often ignored when discussing academic achievement and yet may be one of the most important discussions to have.

### *Deficit Thinking*

Research indicates a host of different variables that contribute to the challenges of Black males that range from the student himself (Staples, 1987), to lack of family support (Mizell, 1999, p. 471), to school policies and school faculty that institutionalize failure (Wood, 2011) to name a few. Richard Valencia (2010) argues that these challenges create biases and refers to deficit orientation/thinking defined as “the ubiquitous blame [of] the victim mentality, where educators view differences as defects, and value certain groups of students over others” (p. 140). Unfortunately, these differences are highlighted by mediums in ways that create negative messages and stereotypes. These messages from the media such as television, news, music and the Internet “suggest that Black males are academically inferior and incapable of excelling in school. These messages can be reinforced, knowingly, and unknowingly, by staff, faculty, and peers and exacerbated in campus environments that are unwelcoming” (Wood, 2011, p. 24). “Policies like exclusionary discipline, and high-stakes testing and tracking, have created a hostile and alienating environment, particularly for students of color” (Finkel, 2010, p. 25-26). Studies of teacher perceptions of Black male students show significant signs of deficit thinking.

Entrenched in some teachers' thinking (often subconsciously) are stereotypes and misconceptions about Black males that prevent teachers from providing the best learning opportunities for students. In short, if teachers believe Black males are destined for failure and apathy, their pedagogies will be saturated with low expectations; teachers will be unwilling to prepare for their courses and unwilling to provide Black male students in urban schools with the best. In essence, teachers often think about Black male students through deficit lenses. (Milner, 2007, p. 244)

It is important that educators recognize and understand their own deficit thinking because these beliefs are “inaccurate, incorrect, and harmful perceptions of Black students” (Milner, 2007, p. 244).

Deficit thoughts and beliefs may cause teachers to lower their expectations for Black male students because teachers have preconceived notions about the students' potential and ability. The beliefs and thoughts might emerge from conversations teachers have had about Black male students in the teachers' lounge, the historical perceptions that the country and the world have held about Black male students, or even teachers' analysis of standardized/high stake test data. Whatever the source, some teachers have unsubstantiated, unquestioned, and inaccurate thoughts and beliefs about Black male students; put simply, these thoughts can be harmful and quite detrimental to the success of Black male students and their teachers.” (Milner, 2007, p. 245)

The impact of deficit thinking on teachers question whether assistant principals preconceived similar notions also created by a deficit lens. Richard Milner (2007)

argues, “until those of us in education change our negative thinking about Black males, we will likely find ourselves continuing on a road of failure where Black males in urban schools are concerned” (p. 244). “We’re hitting up against hard, systemic racism...when schools appear to be Black, districts stop investing” (Holzman, as cited in Finkel, 2010, p. 29). Holzman refers to Chicago Public Schools, “which spends \$10,000 per student, and the wealthy and mostly white New Trier district in Chicago’s northern suburbs, which spends \$20,000 [per student]. Are we saying that white kids are worth twice as much as Black kids?” (Finkel, 2010, p. 29).

“The educational system has not served Black males well. Many Black families reside in elementary and secondary districts where there are few academic offerings, less-qualified teachers, out-of-date materials, and lower quality curricula” (Wood, 2011, p. 24). “‘Test, Punish, and Push Out’ makes a stark accusation: the practice of pushing struggling students out of school to boost test scores has become quite common” (Finkel, 2010, p. 26). “The No Child Left Behind law has given districts and states powerful incentives to move lower-achieving students out of their general populations to special education placements, alternative schools, or elsewhere – perhaps dovetailing with an urgency to create zero-tolerance discipline policies (Finkel, 2010, p. 26). Discipline policies are developed at each level – federal, state, and locally by district officials as well as campus administrators. As these policies reflect deficit thinking, it is important to understand whether these biases might also be a reflection of preconceived notions by administrators. This is especially important as emerging data shows that “less punitive discipline can help catalyze academic growth in part because students are not out of school serving suspensions and they are not potentially getting messages that school is

not the place for them” (Finkel, 2010, p. 28). According to Jonathan Brice, Executive Director of Student Support in Baltimore,

In Baltimore City Public Schools, a reworking and rethinking of the district’s get-tough disciplinary policies focusing more on prevention and intervention techniques rather than punitive measures have led to a drop in out-of-schools suspensions from 16,752 to 9,705 in the last three years...dropout rates fell 34 percent between 2006-2007 and 2008-2009, district figures show, while standardized test scores rose across all grade levels. As our suspension numbers have gone down, we’ve seen achievement go up, and our attendance has improved as well.” (as cited in Finkel, 2010, p. 28)

This case study illustrates that a shift from deficit thinking to one with a focus on “young people coming into an environment where they’re able to learn....you’ve got to set the conditions that will allow that” (Finkel, 2010, p. 28) can improve performance. “Those achievement gaps will persist as long as there is an ‘opportunity gap’ that prevents students in high-poverty areas from receiving an equal education” (Finkel, 2010, p. 29).

### **Framework for This Study**

“African American males in urban schools are often perceived as troubled students whose futures are in limbo” (Milner, 2007, p. 240). These perceptions impact behaviors by educators. Literature on educator attitudes towards students tends to concentrate on teacher perceptions rather than the perceptions of school leaders such as principals and assistant principals. One piece of research by Gewertz (2007) refers to a study of “4,700 teachers and 267 principals and assistant principals in 12 school districts” that found

“nearly all the administrators agreed that ‘students at this school are capable of high achievement on standardized exams,’ but only three-quarters of the teachers concurred” (p. 5). A discussion about the disparity in attitudes questions whether school leaders are more likely to have a politically slanted response, or as Brian K. Perkins, principal researcher of the study, asks, “What do teachers know to give them a perspective [which] administrators don’t have?” (as cited in Gewertz, 2007, p. 5). According to Antonia Cortese, the executive vice president of the American Federation of Teachers, “it’s not a question of expectations. It’s a question of the reality of the way things are. Teachers have a realistic picture of what it would take to get [students] over the hurdles” (as cited in Gewertz, 2007, p. 5). Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, & Jennings discuss teacher beliefs of Black students and found that research “revealed that teachers’ expectations for success were higher for White students than for African American students (Ferguson, 2003, as cited in Lynn et al., 2010, p. 296). Furthermore, “teachers have more negative comments about Black male students’ behavior than they did about any other group and that a teacher’s perception of that behavior heavily influenced how they rated these students academically (Lynn et al., 2010, p. 297). Skiba, Michael, Narado, and Peterson (2002) conducted research that illustrated how teacher perceptions reflect in action.

Losen and Skiba (2010) studied,

Racial and gender disparities in school punishments in an urban setting, and found that White students were referred to the office significantly more frequently for offences that appear more capable of objective documentation (e.g., smoking, vandalism, leaving without permission and obscene language. African-American students, however, were referred more often for disrespect, excessive noise,

threat, and loitering – behaviors that would seem to require more subjective judgment on the part of the referring agent. (p. 10-11)

Also, “teachers’ initial impressions about Black male students’ academic potential was negative and remained stable over time despite the students’ performance” (Irvine, 1985 as cited in Lynn et al., 2010, p. 297). “White in-service teachers believe that African American students are innately less intelligent than their White students” (Tettegah, 1996 as cited in Lynn et al., 2003, p. 297). According to the study done by Lynn et al., (2010),

80% of the teachers we interviewed at the school felt that African American students could be held primarily responsible for their own failure to meet academic standards...80% of teachers argued that African American students’ failure to achieve was primarily shaped by their lack of motivation to learn, their failure to attend classes, their lack of interest in learning, their lack of preparation for school, their inability to focus, their participation in street culture, and failure to behave appropriately in class. (p. 307-308)

Other reasons for lack of success based on these teacher perceptions include lack of time management skills, not knowing how to study, lack of preparation by not completing homework, students refuse to work, lack of parental involvement, lack of structure in the home, broken families, lack of value in education and pride in learning (Lynn et al., 2010, p. 308-309, 311).

This research provides a limited snapshot, but it does bring to light the different attitudes of educators. McAllister and Irvine (2002) explain the significance of attitude “in their important study of 34 practicing teachers; beliefs about empathy and working with culturally diverse students, found that the teachers’ practices were enhanced when

they had empathetic dispositions” (as cited in Finkel, 2007, p. 242). McAllister and Irvine (2002) continue by stating, “empathetic teachers take on the perspective of another culture. The questions that this literature brings forth include how future inquiries into school leaders’ beliefs will vary compared to attitudes held by teachers and whether their perspectives shape decision-making (as cited in Finkel, 2007).

### **Role of the Assistant Principal**

Typically, teachers have been seen as the primary instructional leader and have been held responsible for narrowing the academic achievement gap. As the role of the principal and assistant principal evolves because of failing schools, instructional leadership by administrators is becoming a necessity as a top-down approach to improve the school experience. Approaches to developing a uniform curriculum, aligning them with standardized testing, and implementing techniques on campuses must largely be directed by administrators, acting as instructional leaders. “The assistant principalship has changed from passive to active, from single to multi-dimensional, from assistant to co-principal, from apprentice to craftsperson” (Calabrese, 1991, p. 56). Assistant principals are becoming more involved in instructional practices and learning methods to improve classroom learning. Assistant principals are becoming an instrumental part of shaping what teaching and learning looks like and are far more hands on than ever before. With the changes in the role of the assistant principal, it questions what impact they are then having on achievement?

Although the role of the assistant principal is changing according to instructional needs, pragmatically, the role of the assistant principal is often still defined in terms of

their responsibilities with discipline. “Discipline was rated as the most common duty performed” by the assistant principal (Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002, p. 138). Assistant principals are in a role that is transitioning from a managerial role to more of an instructional role but this transition is largely dependent on what value the district and campus have in the change. Unfortunately, many assistant principals still maintain a role that is dominated by discipline and there little time is available for instructional opportunities. Nonetheless, whether the assistant principal is heavily involved in instructional practices in the classroom or their time is spent with students concerning discipline, the assistant principal has great influence on students. Assistant principals spend countless amounts of time with students discussing discipline issues, which provide opportunity to counsel and decide consequences that can impact student time in the classroom. Some researchers suggest that assistant principals are even more influential than the principal (Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002, p. 136) because of their every day dealings with students. “The assistant principal, for many students, has become the one constant in their lives” (Calabrese, 1991, p. 56).

Although instruction is a growing piece in the job of the assistant principal, their role as disciplinarian cannot be ignored and there is concerning inequalities in the literature about discipline and race. “A large body of evidence shows that Black students are subject to a disproportionate amount of discipline in school settings, and a smaller and less consistent literature suggest disproportionate sanctioning of Latino and American Indian students in schools” (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010, p. 59). Moreover, “low-income students with histories of low achievement, who reside in high-crime/high-poverty neighborhoods, may be at greater risk for engaging in behavior



resulting in office disciplinary referrals and school suspension (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 60). Consequently, based on this research, assistant principals spend the majority of their time working with low income, Black and Hispanic students on a day-to-day basis. But “assistant principals as leaders have made discipline an educational issue. They are able to use instances of misbehavior as an opportunity to mold young people into responsible citizens (Calabrese, 1991, p. 53) thus reinforcing the importance of their role in the lives of Black males, contributing to the significance of this study.

As previously stated, little research has been done worldwide that explores the role of the assistant principal (Cranston, et al., 2007, p. 227). “By contrast, considerable research has been conducted into the principalship over the past decades. Not only is the general area of the deputy principalship under-researched, but what literature is available is typically not recent nor focused on secondary school principals” (Cranston, et al., 2007, p. 227). Consequently, a literature review on the assistant principal is even more challenging and stresses the importance of this study to advance understanding in a continually challenging system. “Indeed, most research into the field has done little to progress an alternative future-focused, strategic and collaborative leadership view of the role needed to meet the increasing complexity of schools in the twenty-first century” (Caldwell and Spinks 1999, Beare 2001, as cited in Cranston, et al., 2007, p. 228). Therefore, assistant principals play a key role in students’ lives, especially students of color. Since the relationship between the assistant principal and the student is an underdeveloped area of research, it gives strong validity for this study and the need for future studies.

### **Assistant Principal Perceptions and Beliefs**

There is no research available about the assistant principals' perceptions and of students and the impact on decision-making. As Daniel Losen discusses, bias may be a significant contributor to the disproportionate number of harsher consequences for Black students as opposed to White students (as cited by Shah, 2013, p.1). One possible belief, according to Christine Bowditch (2003), is that out-of-school suspension or expulsions “may in some cases be used as a tool to ‘cleanse’ the school of students who are perceived by school administrators to be troublemakers” (as cited in Losen & Skiba, 2010, p.10). The effectiveness of these practices appears to have a number of negative consequences. According to a national report titled, *Opportunities Suspended*, developed by the Advancement Project/Civil Rights Project (2000), “at least some of the variability in schools’ rates of out-of-school suspension and expulsion appear to be attributable to differences in principal attitudes towards the disciplinary process” (as cited in Losen & Skiba, 2010, p. 10).

In a comprehensive study of the relationship between principal attitudes and disciplinary outcomes (Skiba et al., 2003) surveyed 325 principals regarding their attitudes toward zero tolerance, suspension, and expulsion, and violence-prevention strategies. They found principal attitudes and school disciplinary outcomes to be correlated: rates of out-of-school suspension were lower, and the use of preventative measures more frequent, at schools whose principals believed that suspension and expulsion were unnecessary given a positive school climate (Losen & Skiba, 2010, p. 10).

The importance of this study can be extrapolated to validate the importance of the research of this dissertation in two ways. First, it shows a how an administrator's perceptions can shape decision-making. Consequently, although this study concentrated on the perceptions of principals, determining whether assistant principal bias impacts decision-making for Black males has significant value considering the challenges that Black males face inside and outside of school. Secondly the research by Skiba et al., (2003) looks at administrators promoting positive practices, rather than punitive ones, to better enrich the school climate. Consequently, as assistant principals contribute to the climate, the study infers value of being cultural responsive leader.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

Chapter three of this dissertation discusses the qualitative approach to the study of White male assistant principal perceptions of Black male students in high school. This chapter discusses the processes that were employed to acquire data, and it discusses the approaches to uphold the quality of reliable qualitative research. This chapter will discuss the research design including data collection, content, and how it is analyzed. It defines how to meet the purpose of “understanding social phenomena...to determine relationships, effects, and causes” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 13). This chapter concludes with a discussion on the trustworthiness of this study to ensure its significance.

#### **Methodology**

This dissertation studies White male assistant principals’ perceptions of Black males in high schools. A qualitative approach was chosen for this study to allow for ethnographic research, which “relies heavily on observation, description, and qualitative judgments or interpretations of whatever phenomena are being studied. It takes place in the natural setting and focuses on processes in an attempt to obtain a holistic picture (Wiersma, 2000, p. 17). In terms of a study and discussion on personal beliefs, the ability to use descriptive words based on interviews and observations will better capture the beliefs of the participants than will reliance solely on a scaled Likert-scaled questionnaire that would require questions allowing for a limited response. Furthermore, qualitative research provides an opportunity for triangulations, a “part of data collection that cuts

across two or more techniques or sources” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 251). Triangulation provides for validity within the study. “It is the search for convergence of the information on a common finding or concept. To a large extent, the triangulation process assesses the sufficiency of the data” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 17). A qualitative approach provides contextual responses that do not limit the study but provides opportunities for open-ended responses that may reveal new patterns of beliefs. “The use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objectivity can never be captured” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). Some researchers like “Richardson and St. Pierre dispute the usefulness of the concept of triangulation, asserting that the central image for qualitative inquiry should be the crystal, not the triangle” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argue this by referring to the multi-dimensional nature of crystals themselves and “viewed as a crystalline form, as a montage, or as a creative performance around a central theme, triangulation as a form of, or alternative to, validity thus can be extended. Triangulation is the simultaneous display of multiple, refracted realities” (p. 6).

### **Emergent Design**

This qualitative study will utilize an ethnographic approach and “refers both to a research process and the product of that process” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 17). An ethnographic research study is one that is done within the context of the study itself. Therefore, this study of assistant principal perceptions will collect data that includes interviews and observations of the administrator in their environment as they interact with Black, male students. These interviews and observations provide an opportunity to

collect data within the environment including but not limited to classrooms, hallways, lunch room, and the office. Ethnographic research is “the process of providing holistic and scientific descriptions of educational systems, processes, and phenomena within their specific contexts (Wiersma, 2000, p. 237). This approach is a process of observation of experiences within the selected setting. “The phenomenological approach emphasizes that the meaning of reality is, in essence, in the ‘eyes and minds of the beholders,’ the way the individuals being studied perceive their experiences” (Wiersma, 2000 p. 237).

The phenomenological nature of ethnographic research has certain implications for how research is conducted, and these can be listed as: (1) As much as possible, a priori assumptions about the phenomenon under study are avoided; (2) Reality is viewed holistically and complex phenomena are not reduced to a few variables; (3) Data collection procedures and instruments, although having some structure, should have minimum influence on the phenomena under study; (4) There is an openness to alternative explanations of the phenomenon, which may lead to alternative and changing concepts of reality; (5) Theory, as applicable, should emerge from the data as grounded theory rather than preconceived theories (Wiersma, 2000, p. 238-239).

### **Truth**

The goal of this qualitative study is to seek an understanding of the relationship between White male assistant principals and Black students. The qualitative approach “is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of interpretive,

material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.3).

Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices, hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3-4)

It is important to understand that qualitative research does not have “a distinct set of methods or practices that are entirely its own” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 7) and by nature opens itself to an evolutionary process in search for truths. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005),

Contemporary fieldwork has three major attributes: (1) the increasing willingness of ethnographers to affirm or develop a more than peripheral membership role in communities they study; (2) the recognition of the possibility that it may be neither feasible nor possible to harmonize observer and insider perspectives to achieve an objective consensus about ‘ethnographic truth’; (3) the transformation of the erstwhile subjects of research into collaborative partners in research. (p. 468)

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) continue by discussing the objectivity verses the subjectivity that occurs in qualitative research. Qualitative research is inherently subjective as researchers analyze data through their own filters, lenses, and unconscious biases.

Observation-based research nowadays must certainly consider the attributes and activities of ethnographers themselves; it is therefore considerably more subjective than those of the classic tradition would have countenanced. But it cannot become so utterly subjective that it loses the rigor of carefully conducted, clearly recorded, and intelligently interpreted observations; ethnography is more than casually observed opinion” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 468).

It is important as a researcher to develop and follow consistent procedures, to be accurate in interpretations, and to develop conclusions that follow grounded, intelligent thought processes. Although there is not a specific scientific protocol compared to qualitative research, there is a scientific approach that must be utilized.

### **Researcher as the Primary Instrument**

During this qualitative study, I will be the primary instrument of observation, interpretation, and analysis. Through the form of interviews and observations within the setting, I will examine the relationship between White male assistant principals and Black students. I will act as a reflexive ethnographer, who “is morally and politically self-aware, self-consciously present in his or her writing, often speaking with the first-person voice. Reflexive ethnographers experiment with different forms -- what Richardson (2000) calls analytic practices” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. xii). “Reflexive ethnographers use their own experiences in a culture ‘reflexively to bend back on self and look more deeply at self-other interactions’” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. 1). Finally, “reflexive ethnographers anchor their



experimental (and traditional) writing in an ongoing moral dialogue with the members of a local community” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. 1).

As a researcher, data analysis and findings strive for levels of trustworthiness to maintain its validity. As a researcher though, it is impossible to exclude my own positionality entirely, which is a limitation to the study. This study looks into the perceptions of White, male assistant principals. Being female and of Asian descent, my framework and experiences vastly differ from those participating in my study. Ultimately, it is impossible to frame my study through the eyes of a White male. Gender and race add to my lens and filters my experiences, as well as my own interpretations of observations and language.

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

This qualitative study will use data collection methods including interviews and observations of assistant principals. This will provide an opportunity for assistant principals to express their views and also be observed within the context of the study. It will also be divided into three stages including an initial, follow-up, and final interview. Observations can be triangulated with the views expressed in interviews to formulate patterns to identify emerging patterns of data. Each assistant principal chosen will participate in an initial interview that will last approximately one to one and a half hours. Questions will be consistent amongst all of the participants. After the initial interview, I will be the sole observer of the assistant principal at his school for half of the school day. Detailed notes of the observation will be taken. Observations will concentrate on the environment in which the assistant principal works in as well as the interactions he has

with students, specifically Black, males. A second interview will be conducted to ask questions based on observations made in the previous interview and based on notes from shadowing. Once the data from the interviews and observations are triangulated amongst the assistant principals, a final interview will be held. The initial interview will have set questions grounded in theory and related literature. Subsequent questionnaire protocol development will be based on analysis of each prior stage and will be submitted to IRB intermittently. Comparisons will be made between the two assistant principals to see if any specific patterns exist in their behaviors towards students. All interviews will be recorded with an audiotape for further review.

## **Participants**

### *District*

To protect the privacy of the district, a pseudonym will be used throughout this dissertation and statistics have been rounded slightly but do not change the intent of the data. Newpark ISD is composed of twenty-six elementary schools, eight middle schools, and four traditional high schools. The district covers forty-four square miles across a city in the southeast portion of Texas, and serves a community of nearly than 200,000 people and six incorporated villages (Newpark District Profile, 2010, p. 1). In 2009-2010, the Texas Education Agency rated just under 80% of Newpark ISD schools as Exemplary or Recognized, the top two ratings awarded by the agency (Newpark ISD District Profile, 2010, p. 3). The district is composed of approximately 33,000 students and 57% are considered economically disadvantaged, 33% are considered Limited English Proficient (LEP) and 52% are considered at-risk. Newpark ISD has an ethnic breakdown of 43%

White, 40% Hispanic, 7% Asian, 5% Black and 2% American Indian (2010-2011 AEIS Reports, District, p. 6). Newpark ISD has just under 3,000 teachers, approximately 130 campus administrators, and 35 Central Office administrators (2010-2011 AEIS Reports, District, p. 6). The ethnic breakdown for teachers is 66% White, 25% Hispanic, 5.0% Black, and 2% Asian (2010-2011 AEIS Reports, District, p. 7). AEIS disaggregates demographic information for teachers but does not do so for administrators. All secondary schools have one building principal, an assistant principal and counselor for each grade level and each of the high schools also has an Administrative Principal. The district is considered a suburban district located within the primary city limits and just miles from what is considered inner city. The district had significant population shifts in the last ten years and has divided populations. Schools in the district have student populations with great wealth but also have students who have lived in poverty their entire lives.

### *Campuses*

Newpark ISD is uniquely divided in half with one side having a majority of White students and the other half have a majority of students of color. To protect the privacy of the schools, a pseudonym will be used for each throughout this dissertation and statistics have been rounded slightly but do not change the intent of the data. On the south side, Central High School and Fall Oaks High School have White students as their majority population whereas on the north side, Wintergate High School and Kennedy Heights High School are composed almost entirely of students of color. Wintergate High School did not have a White male assistant principal on staff so this school has been excluded

from the study and is no longer discussed. As mentioned before, there are high schools in Newpark ISD that have traditional public school settings while the other campuses have non-traditional settings. The non-traditional campuses were eliminated for this study because the experiences of the assistant principals would vary greatly from the non-traditional campuses. Thus, this study will target assistant principals at three of the traditional high schools in Newpark ISD.

### **Central High School**

Central High School is considered the most affluent school in the district and even ranks amongst some of the most affluent in the state of Texas. To protect the identity of the school statistics have been rounded slightly but do not change the intent of the data. The median income of Central High School's attendance area is just over \$80,000, which ranks in the top ten percentile nationwide (Zipwho.com, 2012). 12% of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged, 4% are classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP), and 22% of the students are considered at-risk (2010-2011 AEIS Reports, Campus, p. 4). The majority of students that attend Central High School are White. More specifically, the ethnic breakdown consists of 66% White, 17% Hispanic, 14% Asian, and 2% Black (2010-2011 AEIS Reports, Campus, p. 6).

Central High School has been given an accountability rating of Recognized by the Texas Education Agency (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 1). This rating is based on a number of factors with achievement on the state standardized test being at the forefront. There are ten tests across three grade levels, which are used to determine accountability. Last year, AEIS data shows White students performing at 95% and above

at each grade level for each subject area tested, all ten tests. Data from Central High School shows that such a small number of Black students attend this school, that they often do not count as a sub-population. When they do, Black students consistently scored lower than White students at their school illustrating an achievement gap (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 1). Moreover, they have a significantly higher dropout rate, 3% compared to 0.3% of White students; have a lower four-year completion rate 89% compared to 97% of White students; have lower enrollment in AP courses, 15% compared to 49% of White students; and have a college-readiness gap of approximately 30% in both English Language Arts and Mathematics (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 3). Although these statistics show gaps that are consistent with state and nationwide trends, at Central High School the low numbers in the Black student population skews percentages significantly. For example, although the dropout rate is almost three times as high for Black students as it is for White students at Central High School, it still comes down to one single person that makes the gap so large. Central High School is considered the best performing school in the district and a competitive school in the state of Texas.

### **Fall Oaks High School**

Fall Oaks High School is considered to be the primary rival to Central High School in this district. To protect the identity of the school statistics have been rounded slightly but do not change the intent of the data. A decade ago, both schools had similar demographics, income disparities, and performance levels, but Fall Oaks has been subject to changing demographics and now has the greatest population of Black students amongst

the high schools in the district. The median income of Fall Oak High School's attendance area is approximately \$70,000, which ranks in the top ten percentile nationwide (Zipwho.com, 2012). 27% of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged, 4% are classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) and 29% of the students are considered at-risk (2010-2011 AEIS Reports, Campus, p. 4). The current ethnic breakdown consists of 53% White, 24% Hispanic, 11% Black, and 9% Asian (2010-2011 AEIS Reports, Campus, p. 4).

Fall Oaks High School has been given an accountability rating of Academically Acceptable by the Texas Education Agency (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 1). Again, there are ten tests across three grade levels which are used to determine accountability. On six of them, 99% of White students passed them and, on all ten tests, no less than 93% of White students passed. (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 1). On the same tests, passing rates for Black students ranged from the 53% all the way up to 99% (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 1). Overall, 90% or higher of Black students passed four of the tests and, on three tests, the passing rate for Black students was under 70% (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 1). Black students scored lower in every test except one, where they scored equally. The data, like Central High School, shows an achievement gap between Black and White students although Fall Oaks has a much larger gap, the largest amongst the three high schools in this study. Other indicators show significant gaps between Black and White students. They have a significantly higher dropout rate of 3% versus 0.5% of White students; have a lower four-year completion rate of 65% versus 98% of White students; have lower enrollment in AP courses of 9% versus 47% of White students; have a lower average SAT score of just over 800 versus

nearly 1150; a lower ACT score of 18 versus 26 and have a college-readiness gap of approximately 40% in both English Language Arts and Mathematics (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 3). Despite these statistics, Fall Oaks High School is still recognized on state and national “best school” rankings and is a highly sought after school.

### **Kennedy Heights High School**

Kennedy Heights High School is the only high school has a majority population of students of color. To protect the identity of the school statistics have been rounded slightly but do not change the intent of the data. The median income of Kennedy Heights High School’s attendance area is approximately \$34,000, ranking in the bottom third nationwide (Zipwho.com, 2012). Of the student population, 71% is considered economically disadvantaged, 16% are classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) and 57% of the students are considered at-risk (2010-2011 AEIS Reports, Campus, p. 4). The current ethnic breakdown consists of 76% Hispanic, 12% White, 7% Black, and 3% Asian (2010-2011 AEIS Reports, Campus, p. 4).

Kennedy Heights High School has been given an accountability rating of Academically Acceptable by the Texas Education Agency (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 1). Again, there are ten tests across three grade levels, which are used to determine accountability. Of those, eight of them were passed by White students at a rate of 96% or higher (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 1). Two of the tests had a passing rate in the 80’s by White students (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 1). Black students, on the other hand, scored lower in every test except for one, which they scored the same. Black students’ scores ranged from 58% all the way up to 99% (AEIS

Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 1). The data, like Central High School and Fall Oaks High School, shows an achievement gap between Black and White students at Kennedy Heights. Other indicators show significant differences between Black and White students. Black students have a slightly higher dropout rate, 0.5% compared to 0.4% of White students; have a lower four-year completion rate 90% compared to 95% of White students; have lower enrollment in AP courses, 13% compared to 32% of White students; have a lower average SAT score just under 900 compared to 1050; a lower ACT score of 16.5 compared to 22.5 and have a college-readiness gap of approximately 20% in both English Language Arts and Mathematics (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 3).

#### *Assistant Principals*

The names of the participants in this study have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. The focus of this topic has the potential to create tension amongst administrators, central office as well as parents, teachers, students and the general community. A discussion of race relations is always a sensitive subject and therefore protection of identity is being held as a high priority.

Participants were then narrowed down by the criteria of sex and ethnicity as defined by the research topic itself. This yielded three assistant principals, one from each three different schools that participated. This research topic was intentionally narrowed to study only White male assistant principals. The reason behind this is statistically, more White males become building principals than any other race and male than female. “The education literature has paid substantial attention to the gender composition of principals because of concerns that the proportion of female principals is low relative to that of



female teachers” (Hammer & Rohr, 1994; Bell & Chase, 1993, Biklen & Brannigan, 1980; Joy, 1988; Riehl & Byrd, 1997, as cited in Santibanez, Chung, & Rosee, 2003, p. 19). “In 1999-2000, women made up 55 percent of public elementary school principals but just 21 percent of public high school principals” (Santibanez et al., p. 19, 2003). “Given women have been making up an increasingly greater portion of the teaching force, researchers have been emphasizing that the average male teacher is much more likely than the average female teacher to become a principal (Riehl & Byrd, 1997, as cited in Santibanez et al., 2003, p. 19). Additionally, the study found that only a “small proportion of principals was members of an ethnic/racial minority, particularly compared to the proportion of minorities in the student population. Nearly 18 percent of public school principals were members of a racial/ethnic minority, compared with 11 percent of private school principals” (Santibanez et al., 2003). Campus principals, once assistant principals, are the ultimate agents of change, and since White males dominate this field, it became an important aspect to study. In Newark ISD, each of the high school principals is a White male. The following is a profile of each of the assistant principals that were interviewed for this study in the spring of 2012.

The first white male assistant principal that participated in this study is Mr. Patrick. He has worked in Newark ISD for ten years and worked in another district for three years prior to Newark. In total, he has been in education for thirteen years. Mr. Patrick taught social studies, primarily U.S. History and Government, at Kennedy Heights High School, and then became an assistant principal at a middle school in Newark ISD for six years. Mr. Patrick was then placed back at Kennedy Heights High School as an assistant principal and has just completed his first year as a high school

assistant principal. Mr. Patrick is forty years old, has just finished as the eleventh grade principal and will begin the fall as the twelfth grade principal. Mr. Patrick obtained his Masters degree and principal certificate at a university in the same city which Newpark ISD is located.

Mr. Ryan is the second White male assistant principal that participated in this study. He had worked in Newpark ISD for twelve years and worked in another district, out of state, for two years prior to that. In total, he has been in education for fourteen years. He began teaching English in another district out of state for two years. He came to Newpark ISD and taught English and coached at Fall Oaks High School for four years before becoming an assistant principal at Central High School. He has been an assistant principal at Central High School for eight years now. Mr. Ryan is forty years old and just finished as the senior principal and will begin the fall as the freshmen principal. Mr. Ryan obtained his Masters degree and principal certificate at the same university Mr. Patrick did.

Mr. John is the last white male assistant principal to participate in this study. He has worked in Newpark ISD for ten years and also worked in other districts for eleven years previously. In total, he has been in education for sixteen years. Mr. John worked as a science teacher and coach at Fall Oaks High School, and then moved to another district as assistant principal. During those eleven years, he worked as an assistant principal at a middle school, a high school, and a private school. He then returned to Newpark ISD and Fall Oaks High School as an assistant principal. Mr. John received his Masters degree and teaching certificate from a sister school of one of the major universities in Texas.

## **Data Analysis**

“Analysis in ethnographic research consists of synthesizing the information from the observation, interviews, and other data sources. Typically, no hypotheses are tested using statistical procedures as is often the case with experimental and survey data” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 252). Open-ended responses will be reviewed using a coding scheme for data analysis. Categories of responses will be determined based on individual responses to narrow the findings. Responses will be categorized and will also be analyzed according their profile information. Responses will be compared to trends emerging in research about the academic achievement gap and will be used to draw conclusions about the relationship between administrator perceptions. Information can be classified in the following ways: (1) Dichotomous categories indicating whether information obtained was directed by the observer’s activities or was volunteered spontaneously by those being studied; (2) number or responses to direct queries; (3) dichotomous categories indicating whether information was obtained in the presence of the observer alone or when other individuals were present; and (4) proportions of information that consist of activities observed versus statements made (Wiersma, 2000, p. 253). Additional to categorizing data, qualitative research in this study will code these categories to develop patterns. Bogdan and Biklen (1998, p. 183, as cited in Wiersma, 2000, p. 254) suggests “limiting the number of codes from thirty to fifty. It is important that the codes cover all the data, yet provide a meaningful separation of the information.” And following the nature of qualitative research, codes “may be modified as the analysis proceeds,” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 254).

## **Trustworthiness**

“The ethnographers Spindler and Spindler (1987) emphasize that the most important requirement for an ethnographic approach is to explain behavior from the ‘native’s point of view’ and be systematic in recording this information using note taking, tape recorders and cameras” (p. 20, as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 217). To do this, it is the responsibility of the researcher to be present and engaged “in constant interaction between observation and interviews” (Creswell, 2007, p. 217). The design of this study requires three stages to allow for this construction of reality by building upon responses and observations. This substantiates the true nature of a qualitative study, evolving in its processes based on exploration. Creswell (2007) refers to Spindler and Spindler (1987), who define a “good ethnography” by nine criteria to be followed to ensure the trustworthiness of this study (p. 217). These criteria are as followed (Spinder & Spinder, 1987, p. 18, as cited in Crewell, 2007, p. 217-218):

- Observations are contextualized.
- Hypotheses emerge in situ as the study goes on.
- Observation is prolonged.
- Through interviews, observations, and other eliciting procedures, the native view of reality is obtained.
- Ethnographers elicit knowledge from informant-participants in a systematic fashion.
- Instruments, codes, schedules, questionnaires, agenda for interviews, and so forth are generated in situ as a result of inquiry.

- A transcultural, comparative perspective is frequently an unstated assumption.
- The ethnographer makes explicit what is implicit and tacit to informants.
- The ethnographic interviewer must not predetermine responses by the kinds of questions asked.

By following these criteria, I am meeting the moral obligation of a researcher and better able to construct an understanding of the participants, as close to the truth as possible.

To establish the ‘trustworthiness’ of a study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) used unique terms such as ‘credibility,’ ‘authenticity,’ ‘transferability,’ ‘dependability,’ and ‘confirmability,’ as ‘the naturalist’s equivalents’ for ‘internal validation,’ ‘external validation,’ ‘reliability,’ and ‘objectivity’ (p. 300). To operationalize these new terms, they propose techniques such as prolonged engagement in the field and the triangulation of data sources, methods, and investigators to establish credibility. (cited in Crewell, 2007, p. 202)

Additionally, “Eisner (1991) recommended that to demonstrate credibility, the weight of evidence should become persuasive” (as cited in Crewell, 2007, p. 204). As this study is built around the concepts of trustworthiness defined by Spindler and Spindler (1987) as well as by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the findings and conclusions should represent a seamless process and train of thought. It should be grounded in common sense and patterns clearly seen. It is these requirements of a qualitative study that maintains the trustworthiness of the study.

## Summary

This qualitative research study begins with a question about the relationship between White male principals with their Black students. In line with the nature of a qualitative study, the journey this question takes us falls solely on the exploration of the participants' experiences and beliefs. This study has no specific end or goal but to seek new understandings and perspective in a field that has little research. Then, "what has been said and done does not have educational, psychological, sociological, or other meaning until such meaning is ascribed by the researcher," (Wiersma, 2000, p. 256).

Current research shows various challenges faced by Black students inside and outside of school that shape their futures. These challenges have global implications as this population grows. Research shows that assistant principals have a significant impact on the lives of Black students who have high rates of disciplinary problems. Thus, it is important to develop a body of research studying the beliefs assistant principals have concerning Black students and how this impacts the student. This is a new field of study as no research has been found on this topic. Rather, much research has been found on teacher perceptions of Black students and, therefore, it seems a natural progression to look at other school officials and the impact they have on students. This becomes an even more important field of research when findings may provide significant contributions to improve the lives of Black students in school.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions that White male assistant principals have about Black male students in high school. This chapter explores the findings based on one-on-one interviews with three different participants, at three high schools in one suburban district. An initial interview was conducted with each assistant principal and then a half-day shadow where I followed the assistant principal as they performed their duties and I was able to observe the culture and the climate of the campus was completed. A final interview was conducted using the data gathered from the initial interview and the observation on their campus. Upon completion of this research, three themes emerged about the types of perceptions that a person has including 1) contingent perceptions, 2) unquestioned perceptions, and 3) unconscious perceptions. A series of subtopics found within these themes will also be discussed throughout the findings of this qualitative study.

#### **Contingent Perceptions**

The purpose of this study has been to identify perceptions that White male assistant principals have of Black male students in high school. The results of this study were the detection of three types of perceptions that assistant principals had, all of which impact students. These perceptions shape what they understand, shape what they believe, and create unconscious biases. This study examines these perceptions and looks how these frame assistant principal approaches toward students of color.

The first type of perception that was seen in this study was contingent perceptions. A contingent perception is what someone thinks to be true, but recognizes that it not yet certain. During each interview, there were times when participants openly admitted that they were unsure of the answer and therefore, they were making their own assertions. Contingent perceptions would be equivalent to an awareness of an issue. The contingent perceptions in this study included why Black males struggle in school, they disproportionately participated in advanced courses, why they were disproportionately disciplined, and why they “acted White.”

### **Examples of Contingent Perceptions in this Study**

#### *Potential Reasons Black Males Struggle*

Assistant principals were asked during an interview if they felt that Black males struggled more in school and who was responsible for overcoming these struggles. Each of the participants stated that they were unsure if Black males struggled *more* than other students but all three stressed the importance of their home environment and role models as key to being successful in school.

Mr. Ryan from Central High School stated, “some do [struggle], just like other kids, some Black males struggle. I don’t know, it might be a combination of environmental factors and educational background and I’ve also seen several be successful and not struggle.” Mr. Ryan did not perceive Black males to have significant struggles at Central High School, but perceived they struggled in similar ways other students might struggle. Referring back to the data of Central High School, Mr. Ryan’s response had a better context. At Central High School last year, the student population



was at 2,374 with 65.7%, or 1,559, of those students being White while Black students composed of 1.5% or 36 students of the total population (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011, p.4). Thirty-five Black students blend into the large crowd at this school and thus Mr. Ryan's contingent perceptions of limited struggles are based on self-admitted, limited experiences. But he does assert that environmental factors and educational background are indicators of success. Mr. Ryan infers that students with a home life that values education are more likely to succeed than those who do not. Mr. Ryan points to "their parents hav[ing] to be the driving force in overcoming struggles and the school staff has to work with the parents and the kids" to address struggles that might exist.

Mr. John, in response to being asked whether Black males struggle more in school and who is responsible for overcoming these struggles, said

For our African American males, I think if they do struggle, if you looked into why do they struggle, typically from all my experiences, if you look at the home life of where they come from typically students struggle in school because they struggle at home. And whether it is a one-parent family, a low SES, and a lot of times, they have so much responsibility in the home, they end up taking care of brothers and sisters, having to work an extra job, that many times they have so much more responsibility than many of our other kids that come from a two-parent family, whether White or Black or Hispanic, that those kids, I think, if you look at the family structure, they are the ones that typically struggle in school.

Mr. John verbalized contingent perceptions by qualifying "if they do struggle" rather than recognizing that they do in fact struggle. Furthermore, his response is contingent by presuming a connection, which may not be true, between school struggles and home

struggles, which he defined as a one-parent home and/or low socioeconomic status. Although low socioeconomic levels and poverty have been shown to be connected to student success, the belief that a one-parent led home impacts a student in a negative way is a contingent perception. Mr. John's response is also considered a reflection of deficit thinking.

Asked the same question, Mr. Patrick responded,

I don't know if it's necessarily a struggle. I would say that as we spoke before, the majority of our students are not in higher level classes. And students who are in those higher level classes, real or perceived, don't get the type of grades that some other students get.

Mr. Patrick perceives that Black male students on his campus do not "necessarily struggle" more than other students. Instead, Mr. Patrick gives an example where Black males are not excelling and that is enrollment in advanced classes. Mr. Patrick states a contingent perception in this response, openly admitting that his understanding may be real or perceived. But Mr. Patrick's reasoning for low enrollment of Black male students in advanced classes is due to low performance in these courses.

The participants were not only inconsistent with their response showing Black males struggle in school, but they also were inconsistent on who they perceived to be primarily responsible for overcoming these struggles. One of the participants placed the greatest emphasis on the parents being the most responsible for student achievement. Another placed the greatest emphasis on the school being the most responsible. The last principal stated both the school and the parents must collaborate to support student success.

*Disproportionate Participation in Advanced Courses*

Contingent perceptions were observed during interviews with assistant principals discussing why they believed there are a disproportionate number of Black male students that participate in advanced courses compared to other students. Central High School has 14.7% Black students participating in advanced placement courses while Kennedy High School has 12.9%, and Fall Oaks High School has 9.3% (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 5).

When assistant principals were asked how they explained the reasons for this gap, two participants began their responses with an expression of uncertainty, making their perceptions contingent. But two of the assistant principals both pointed to their home life as the primary cause. According to Mr. Patrick,

That's a tough one. I think it starts with their home life and their parental involvement when they're very young. When they get to us in high school, their academic track is, I don't want to say set, but it's close to set as can be. And you're right we do not have very many black students in our advanced placement courses.

Agreeing with some of what Mr. Patrick stated, Mr. John said,

I wish I had the answer to that...I think that your SES has a lot to do with it. Is there a high proportionate number of African American males that come from a lower SES background? Probably so. So is [sic] again if you link their SES, with parental involvement to their academic standing, I would say then, there lays your answer. So it's very rare when you find an African American male that comes from a low SES that has one-parent involvement that is in all advanced classes. I

think that would be true across the board regardless of race, whether they are Hispanic or white, the odds are against you if you are coming from a low SES background/one-parent family. Really, it depends on the parent and their educational background and what they value. Not to say they aren't hardworking but do they value their child's education and do they emphasize that at home. I wish I had the answer to that but I don't think there is a one solution answer to that question.

Mr. John's response to the reasons for disproportionate enrollment in advanced classes reflects a deep level of deficit thinking. His perceptions include the belief that most struggling students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, one-parent homes with questionable values about education. This response is grounded in deficit thinking and reflects a level of White privilege, which is consistent with contingent perceptions because it is not certain nor is it consistent with empirical data.

Mr. Patrick's response to the problem with disproportionate enrollment in advanced classes was far different than the other two participants. He stated,

I don't know if there is a relationship between extracurricular and the no pass, no play aspect of what we do. The idea that extracurricular is so important to them that sometimes when they take the higher-level courses, there might be a fear that they might not be able to participate in what they do.

Mr. Patrick's perception of low enrollment of Black males in advanced classes is the fear of failing the course, which would prevent students from participating in whatever extracurricular activity they are involved in. This response is considered a contingent

perception because although this explanation is possible, it is not certain, which Mr. Patrick recognized.

### *Disproportionate Discipline*

Research shows that students of color are given greater and harsher punishments disproportionately compared to White students. Assistant principals were asked to discuss this in terms of their own campus, whether it is something that they have seen. Mr. Ryan said,

I don't know. I don't have experience with that. I almost tend to go easier on, give more chances to minorities because I know they have it harder. And frankly, I don't want to look like, I don't want that to be the reputation of Central High School or me that we are going to stick it to the minorities. I give them more chances.

First, Mr. Ryan describes another instance of deficit thinking assuming that minorities "have it harder." Secondly, he recognizes that his perceptions of students of color alter how he handles discipline by explaining how he is easier of those students. Lastly, Mr. Ryan describes a level about fear of being perceived a certain way based on his actions and due to his level of authority.

Mr. Patrick discusses the issue of disproportionate discipline and why it may exist stating "you know perhaps that could be true because they are so willing to accept the consequences. It's never a negotiation, it's never an argument." This is considered a contingent perception because although this explanation is possible, it is self-admittedly not certain. Mr. Patrick continues his discussion of discipline by saying "I do run and

have run it in the past, some data of my own personal discipline and consequence scale and without any scientific data, it seems to be proportionate.”

Mr. Patrick’s statement is a generalization of past review of data, but cannot be assuredly accurate. Mr. John’s response to disproportionate discipline is as follows:

If we just mentioned that more African American males are in average or lower classes, or in special education classes, then typically your behavior, your poorer choices, are coming from students in those classes. So if you have a higher percentage of African American males in those classes, then typically those are the ones that are going to be making poorer choices. So if there is a higher percentage of African American males receiving stronger punishments, then obviously you can track it back to, is it their SES, is it a one-parent situation, are rules enforced at home, and so that would all line up together so I could see it being proportional. I can see if the percentage is disproportionate, they’re making poor choices, they are expecting more favoritism, or they are expecting exceptions to the rules. And if they are expecting that, they are going to receive the consequences they deserve. And really, as an administrator, that gives out discipline obviously to everybody, the number one thing is to be consistent across the board. I need to treat a black student, male or female, the same as a Hispanic or Anglo. I think the one thing that always kicks in is persistent, repeated violations deserve harsher punishments. And the best example I can give is a traffic ticket. If I get one traffic ticket, I get one consequence. If I get ten traffic tickets they suspend my license. So that’s the best scenario I can give.

Mr. John reveals a variety of perceptions in his response to the reasons for disproportionate discipline that range from unquestioned perceptions to outright stereotypes.

Despite being unable to detect reasons for disproportionate discipline and their reasons being contingent, each of the assistant principals seemed to approach student discipline in similar ways. Mr. John stated,

History is the number one. When you go to the doctor they always ask, how long have you had your cough? How long have you had that pain? And so history is probably the number one thing. And then you look at persistent. How persistent has the student been in my office before? That kind of goes with history. So history and are they persistent and consistency. What have I done to Johnny or Betty Sue who was in my office yesterday for the same thing? If it is the same thing, how many times have I dealt with that? So you want to really be as consistent as possible.

Thus, Mr. John looks primarily at history of the student and looks at how many disciplinary issues the student has been involved in. He points to being consistent as an important part of the disciplinarian role of the assistant principal. Mr. Ryan's approach is similar and states,

What they have done and what the code of conduct says I have to do with it. But obviously, that was a short answer. You take into consideration a lot of things. You look at the whole situation, you got to look at the kid as a whole, you got to look at the circumstance surrounding it, you have to look at the history, you take all of that into consideration before giving consequences.

Like Mr. John, Mr. Ryan takes into account district and campus code of conduct guidelines as well as the context of the situations and the history of the student. Both Mr. John and Mr. Ryan approached this question from a theoretical standpoint whereas Mr. Patrick provided a step-by-step approach. He begins by explaining,

I take a lot of things into account. Number one, first and foremost, is the relationship I have with the student. I figure by the time they get to me, the relationship in whichever classroom it is or with whatever teacher it was, it is kind of broken at that point. So my first instinct is to kind of let it sit for a little bit. I always have the students write out their version of what happened and I kind of let them tell their side of the story.

It is a common practice by assistant principals to have students to write their version of the story on paper. This documentation assists in decision-making to assure that the story does not vary with time. Mr. Patrick says that while the student is working on writing their statement, he pulls up information on the student like grades, attendance, discipline and overall history of the student. Again, Mr. Patrick points out the importance of history like the other two assistant principals in this study when discussing the process of disciplining students for behavioral infractions. Mr. Patrick further describes his process for after the student finishes their statement.

So then we come in and essentially we kind of sit down and I let them again, I read their statement to them, hey this is what you wrote, do you agree with what I have here, is there anything else you would like to add? Do you need me to call the teacher right now to find out what's going on? By that time, I've already emailed the teacher and usually I get a pretty good understanding where they



came from and why, what the student did and I have always found that there is a little bit of truth in everything. And we kinda have to get to here, to the middle, to find out what we are going to do about it. If a student has been in the office for the first time and it's an infraction that seems out of character, I really kind of go into counseling mode at that point and really try to get out, hey why are we having a bad day? What's going on? You've got to let me know. If you don't let me know, I can't help. I try to do that in the most non-threatening way possible. This process that Mr. Patrick describes is also fairly common amongst assistant principal approaches to disciplinary infractions. His response was far more detailed than the others, but during observations of the assistant principals, each of them exercised these procedures in similar ways. Mr. Patrick ended by saying,

After the initial blunder, once everyone is kind of decompressed, I find then the real conversations can be had and usually, I would say there is a good resolution to 95% of the cases. Other 5% obstructers, refuse to take that tack and at that point it becomes a standard here's what it says in the code of conduct, here is what you are getting, there are no more negotiations, you've had your chance and sometimes you have to do that too.

Mr. Patrick, like Mr. Ryan, also brought up the code of conduct which is outlined by the district and is a guideline of infractions and appropriate disciplinary consequences.

Given that all of the participants approach discipline in similar ways, then it makes the question of disproportionate consequences for students of color even more perplexing.

### *“Acting White”*

Lastly, contingent perceptions were observed during interviews with assistant principals while discussing their perceptions of the phenomenon of “acting White.” Two of the assistant principals recognized the term and defined it based on Ogbu’s definition, whereas the third assistant principal did not seem to fully understand it, based on the story he told. When asked about what the term “acting White” means, Mr. Patrick told a story about how a Black male student perceived White students, most of them being a series of stereotypes. According to Mr. Patrick’s story, the student stated,

White people, they don’t run well, they aren’t very athletic, they are really into books, and school, and they don’t like to kind of laugh, joke or play around. We don’t see a lot of the White kids in our classes. So we just imagine that in those higher level classes, they go home and they study all night and that’s what they do and their parents make them sit down. We take our classes and we go home. We really don’t bring our books home. Our parents really don’t ask us how our day went.

Mr. Patrick did not make any additional comments about this issue; nor did he answer the second part of the question, which was whether he found “acting White” to exist on his campus.

Mr. Ryan and Mr. John defined “acting White” similarly. When asked what “acting White” meant and whether it existed, Mr. Ryan stated, “I don’t know. I think ‘acting White’ means [Black males] are trying to conform to what White society wants and yes, I do think that exists.” Mr. John agreed saying,

I think African American males get on each other. If somebody is acting White, they speak well, they dress well, they don't do all the social expectations of other African American males; you are not cool unless using their lingo or listening to their music. So I think a lot of times they give each other a hard time if you are acting normal...if you aren't following their social norms or their social standards by African American males. I think it happens here sometimes. I think they give each other a hard time. You know, kids are ruthless; junior high and high school, period. So if there is a way to take a jab at somebody, I think they do, [whether] male or female, Black or White, I think they are just ruthless about it.

Although Mr. John points out that all teenagers are quick to give one another a hard time and that it is not unique to Black students, his definition of "acting White" is brimming with deficit thinking. Mr. John supposes that 'acting normal' is not equivalent to 'the social standards of African American males,' but rather infers that 'acting normal' is equated to "acting White." Both Mr. Ryan and Mr. John's views are consistent with a large piece of literature on "acting White," that many are now arguing is offensive and detrimental to the self-efficacy of Black students.

In each of these areas, reasons why Black males struggle, disproportionate participation in advanced courses, disproportionate discipline, and "acting White," assistant principals expressed perceptions that they recognized may not be certain. These are considered contingent perceptions.

## **Unquestioned Perceptions**

An unquestioned perception is what someone believes to know is true. During the interviews, participants were often quick to answer questions and felt full-heartedly that their answer was in fact the reason for the issue discussed. There was little to no hesitation, nor any admission that their answer may not be fact. Instead, their perception of the situation was in fact their reality. Unquestioned perceptions would be equivalent to ones' belief on an issue. The unquestioned perceptions in this study included the role of the assistant principal in the lives of Black male students, the attitudes and struggles of Black male students, parent involvement and the home life of Black males, social pressures, self-segregation, and academic success.

### **Examples of Unquestioned Perceptions in this Study**

#### *Role of Assistant Principals*

The assistant principals participating in this study all strongly agreed they had a large presence and influence on the lives of Black males in their school. When asked what role he played in the lives of Black males, Mr. Patrick stated,

I feel like I play a huge role, and I'm not trying to say that narcissistically. I just get the feeling that...I used to be a coach, and most of the kids know that I was a coach at some point. Actually most of them don't call me Mister. Believe it or not, most of them actually call me coach. And that's a term of respect because I know how they feel about their coaches and I know how they feel about performing in sports. One thing I try to do is go to as many games as possible. I find them always asking, 'hey coach, are you going to be around tonight? Hey

are you going to see my play? Hey coach, are you going to come watch me talk? Come watch my speech?’ And if I can find time, I always try to find time, and what I find about that is it really allows them to tell me things.

According to Mr. Patrick, as an assistant principal, it is important to be involved in the lives of Black males by taking an interest in them and what they do. Mr. Patrick feels strongly that extracurricular activities are the key to the success of Black males and feels that this is a way to be involved in their lives, thereby building personal relationships with them. Mr. John concurred with Mr. Patrick concerning his role in the lives of Black males stating,

I think it’s huge. I think I want to treat everyone the same. And so I want to be someone they can look up to, someone they can relate to and somebody they can come to and feel like they can say whatever they want in my office. I try to keep an open door policy. I come from a one-parent family; I share that with my kids. It was very difficult. My mom didn’t work, so she was left to raise three little boys on her own so I started working in the 7th grade throwing newspapers when I got home off the yellow bus from junior high, and I’ve been working ever since. So I think a hard work ethic, I try to share that with the kids that you can do anything you want, anything you want if you work hard enough for it. So I try to share that with all the kids.

Again, Mr. John infers that Black males generally come from one-parent families. But Mr. John feels as though his own upbringing in a single-parent household helps him identify with his students. Like Mr. Patrick, Mr. John emphasizes the importance of

building relationships with Black males by being someone they can look up to and talk with. Mr. Ryan emphasizes this point even more stating.

I think as the assistant principal, you play the role of mentor, leader, teacher, coach, and counselor. I try to play as many roles as I can possibly play. I know that some of our, not all, but some of our Black males don't have a father figure. I don't try to be a father figure but I try to be a male influence. But I do that with all of my kids. I try to be everything.

Mr. Ryan infers that Black males generally come from one-parent families, often led by the mother. In terms of the role that assistant principals play in the lives of Black males, Mr. Ryan reiterates similar unquestioned perceptions of the other participants.

Each of the assistant principals in this study had strong unquestioned perceptions about their role in the lives of Black males. They perceived that they had a large role in their lives and stressed the importance of being a good role model for them. Each also explained how they build relationships with Black males in order to be a strong presence in their lives.

### *Attitudes and Struggles*

Participants in this study were asked how they would describe general attitudes that Black males have about school. Mr. John and Mr. Ryan shared similar unquestioned perceptions. According to Mr. John,

I think like any other students, I think that you have some that love education and I think you have some that disregard the opportunities to get a great education so I think it is a mix, it depends on what school you are at, do they value that and see

it in a positive light, education. Or is that a secondary role in the school, in the climate that school or educational setting produces. I really think that it is based on the individual and I don't think you can stereotype a certain sect of students, whether it is based on gender, religion, or race. I have seen both.

Mr. Ryan had almost the exact same response stating,

I think in the eight years I've been here, it can vary fairly widely. I've seen, for example this year, a Black male that was one of the most highly motivated students I've known. He was in athletics, he excelled in the classroom, and he excelled socially. I've also seen some of our Black males who are very withdrawn and don't do that. They don't excel in anything. Here, we have such a small population that, I think that I've observed overall, generally pretty good.

Mr. John and Mr. Ryan both had a balanced view of the attitudes Black males held about school. Both described experiences with students that had positive attitudes as well as experiences with those that had negative attitudes. These responses are considered unquestioned perceptions.

Participants were not only asked about general attitudes of Black males but also about specific challenges they have in school. Mr. Patrick perceived that Black males did not necessarily struggle more than other students but thought they were challenged by factors outside of school. "My issue with the struggle is more of a product of when school is over for us here." According to Mr. Patrick, the biggest area that Black males struggle with is post-secondary achievement and expresses his concern with lack of parental support for post-secondary achievement. He claims that Black males do not know the process to apply for college including how to write college essays, request

teacher recommendations, or study and register for their SAT/ACT's. "We are a week and a half from being ad hoc seniors in high school and we just haven't had a great majority start the process and again, as a person that is ultimately going to be judged by how many students we put into that program or the programs we are going to have in the five-year plan, I begin to kind of stress about that as if they were my own."

When asked whether Black males struggle more in school, Mr. John stated, I think so. And the one key reason why is role models. I think it's huge if we have an African American male as a role model here, which we do have some teachers on staff that are great role models, but I really think they need someone to look up to of their own race. I think they are very proud of their race and that's a great thing so the one thing I can't do, I can share everything that I've been through but I can't change my skin color and that means so much to them. Mr. John felt that Black males struggle more because of the undeniable need for role models. He also points out the problem of a lack staff that lacks diversification.

Based on their response, it is an unquestioned perception that Black males struggle in schools. Assistant principals perceive this strongly, but based on their responses, defining these struggles proved far more difficult.

### *Parental Involvement and Home Life*

All three assistant principals perceived parental involvement to be positively related to student success. According to Mr. Ryan, "parental involvement is critical and will impact students positively if they are involved and very negatively if they are not." Mr. John agreed stating "Those that have their parents involved do really well." Mr.



Patrick and Mr. John both discuss the variation of parent involvement that they have experienced and that campuses are widely familiar with. According to Mr. Patrick,

That runs hot and cold. I mean, when it's there, it borderlines aggressive. I mean the way they speak to their child and how they communicate and how they want you to communicate from my African American parents is that they basically kind of give you cart blanche, it's basically if you call me, something is wrong here, and you deal with it. You take care of it and let me know cause I'll back it up. But then again, I'd say on the other end when there is no involvement at all, there is just no involvement. It is just, you know, you do what you got to do in school and I'll try to talk to them if I can but you take care of it. You are the principal, you take care of it. So again, for lack of a better phrase, it's really hot or really cold. There is very little in between.

In Mr. Patrick's experiences, parent involvement is an important element of student success, but he finds that parents are either overly involved or not involved enough. Mr. Patrick also stated that parental involvement in students' post-secondary success was another problem with his students. He said, "I do find that for a certain majority who have parents that kind of say, 'you are the principal, do what you need to do,' there is not a lot of support in that area."

Mr. John shared similar experiences and discussed that parents of Black males often do not get involved until extreme disciplinary measures are taken such as referring students to the alternative campus. But generally, Mr. John felt that parental involvement varied widely. According to Mr. John,

Again you have that spectrum of perfection, one really where the parents are not isolated, they are absent. I think that's across the board. I think when parents are involved, the student do[es] so much better, especially when you have two parents in the family. If we are talking about African American across the board, whether its female or male, if those parents are involved then those kids are going to do well. If they are not and if they come from a lower SES background, then a one-parent situation, then obviously those are the ones that typically end up being at-risk.

Mr. John concurs with Mr. Patrick about the importance of parental involvement and the range to which many parents are and are not involved, but he also strongly perceives that a one-parent household will produce children that struggle in school. He also brings up socioeconomic reasons again to explain the complexity of struggling students. All of the assistant principals had strong unquestioned perceptions that parent involvement was vital to student success.

When asked about their perceptions of the home lives of Black males, the assistant principals on the south side of the district answered similarly, recognizing the diversified study body. According to Mr. Ryan, "we have at Central High School, two groups of kids; they are either incredibly wealthy or incredibly poor." Mr. John said

We have some that live in at least \$300,000 homes, that are privileged, who have everything in the world from technology, transportation, to vacation spots all across the world and get to travel. Then you have some that live in subsidized housing that their parents don't pay a dime for where they live and they are lucky to have the clothes on their backs and have very little inside their house, no

transportation, there is no contact with the school regarding grades or behavior and so I think that's what's unique about Fall Oaks.

These two schools were more similar demographically a decade ago but Fall Oaks High School has seen a greater influx of students of color during this time. This changed the stratification of socioeconomic status as well. Like Central High School, Fall Oaks used to have a small middle class population whereas most students were either wealthy or poor. Now, according to Mr. John, Fall Oaks High Schools "truly [has] a high class, a middle class, and certainly [has] a lower class population" with the change of demographics.

Mr. Patrick's response did not address the question directly in terms of what he perceived the home life of Black males to be but only discussed that he believed the majority of the Black students at his school lived in the same areas because so many rode the same bus. But Mr. John and Mr. Ryan have balanced views of their Black students' home lives, recognizing that these families vary from wealthy to poor, which is an unquestioned perception.

### *Social Pressures and Self-Segregation*

When asked what social pressures Black males face in school, all of the assistant principals strongly agreed they existed. Mr. Ryan said, "in my school, the social pressures is that it's very hard for them to fit in...it's almost impossible for them." Mr. Ryan's campus has the fewest number of Black students amongst all of the high schools, so few that they are physically hard to see amongst the general population. During the observation of the campus, at most six Black males were observed in the hallways and at

lunch over a four-hour time period. Mr. Ryan feels that the sheer numbers alone are socially challenging to Black males.

When asked about social pressures that Black males face, Mr. Patrick listed a number of them, stating

As far as social pressures go, I kind of see a negative, how do I say it, sometimes being smart is not looked upon as being great. Students that are in higher level classes and do well, I've noticed are kind of isolated in their interactions and their friendships. Very much individuals and while those individuals don't seem to catch flack from what I would call the majority group, it is very clear that those who are in those higher level classes or make higher grades are very much alone. According to Mr. Patrick, there is a lot of stigma associated with high achievement for Black male students. Although Mr. Patrick does not associate "acting White," he discusses the alienation and isolation of Black male students with high achievement.

Mr. John also agreed that Black males face strong social pressures in school stating

I think typically what you see from the media and the mainstream that they have to live up to some kind of image. What is that image? Well typically that image is, you have to be cool, you have to be tough, you have to be to good at sports, you have to be a rapper, or you have to be, you put them in some kind of sect where typically African American males have been successful and now they have to live up to that type of image and so I think that those social pressures put a lot of pressure on our kids today for African American males.

Mr. John points out a larger layer of social pressure that comes from society but infiltrates the culture of students in school. His perception is that the media and mainstream society place great value where Black males have been successful, sports and music being two of the largest sects. These values are then translated as an image, and that image is the primary track for success for Black males.

When asked about social pressures that Black males face, all three assistant principals felt strongly that these pressures ran deep in their school experience and, therefore, is an unquestioned perception. The social pressures listed by each participant were not similar but were all grounded in current literature.

One social pressure that assistant principals were specifically asked about was self-segregation by race. Assistant principals were asked if they had viewed this phenomenon and why they thought it occurred. Although there was some variation in their responses, the crux of each perception was that people gravitate towards commonalities making this an unquestioned perception. When asked about self-segregation by race or ethnicity, Mr. Ryan responded,

I see that the Black kids in our school stick together. Not necessarily always but 99% of the time, when we are at a passing period or at lunch, the Black students or the Hispanic students will self-segregate. I think it's just, I don't know, human nature. I think if I was a white student in a predominantly in a black school, I think I would seek out the other ten white students because we have things in common or more things in common.

Although the question asked about self-segregation in terms of race or ethnicity, Mr. Patrick argued that how students become involved in extracurricular activities can be a divisive method that leads to systematic self-segregation. According to Mr. Patrick,

Again, for me, the two major ideas here are one, socioeconomic status and then two, is the type of program that you eventually buy into when you are out of high school. As a 9th grader, you have lots of choices to make and for those who choose to join an extracurricular activity, their experiences are so different than from someone that doesn't find that something. And for those that don't find that something, how should I say it? They tend to find each other. And that becomes a self-segregating group.

Mr. John provided a detailed response on self-segregation at his school, which has very important implications. According to Mr. John,

I think that they hang out together, if you walk through the lunch room, it's funny because the cafeteria is called the White House and then you look out into the courtyard and most of them are African American or Hispanic. So people of like nature hang out with each other and I think that's pretty common. But they hang out and so you look at, does segregation still happen? Then you walk into our cafeteria and you're like, oh my gosh, it really does. Here's all your African Americans over here and all your Hispanics of here and here are all of your Whites over here, for the majority. But I think they get along with each other pretty well. With sports, the clubs and the classes, I think there is a good mix in those. But even in our classes, if you look at our regular classes, most of them are minority. So is there a segregation issue? If you go to our Pre-AP classes, most

of them are White. So is there an issue? Is it alive? Well I hate to say yes but just walk through some of our classes and our cafeteria and it may just be that way.

Mr. John talks about a commonly recognized system of self-segregation created by the students on his campus. During the observation at Fall Oaks High School, students were divided into various areas during lunch. There is a small room, the cafeteria, and a larger open area in a different room known as the snack bar. Then there are two courtyards on either side of the cafeteria and the snack bar. Mr. John pointed out that the cafeteria is known as the “White House” and has been for as long as most can remember. The “White House” received its name because only White students sat in the cafeteria whereas students of color were seen sitting in the other areas. In the last few years, this phenomenon has become less absolute and there is now a table or two in the cafeteria filled with students of color. Nonetheless, the cafeteria was observed to be at least 90-95% White students whereas the other areas held the inverse proportion. This is a recognized system of self-segregation, referred to as the “White House” by students whom designated this name and it has become openly understood and accepted systematically. Mr. John, however, points out that this is not a major issue of concern because he feels that the students generally get along with one another. Mr. John also states that when examining the classrooms of advanced classes versus academic courses, segregation is clearly observed.

The assistant principals had strong beliefs on the idea of self-segregation on their campuses, making their responses an unquestioned perception. Observations of all three campuses showed visible self-segregation by race and often by gender as well.

### *Academic Success*

Assistant principals were asked what would best help Black males to be more academically successful. They maintained the unquestioned perception that if Black males would get more involved in academic and extracurricular programs, and if strong mentors were available to them, they would find greater achievement.

In response to what schools can do to improve Black male achievement, Mr. Ryan stated, “If we could get every single, not just the ones, if we could get them involved in our culture, our programs in school... if we can involve everyone then they would be more successful.” Mr. Ryan discussed a number of academic organizations and extracurricular activities that if students were a part of, they would feel more connected to the school, which he argues is the key to success.

In response to this same question about Black male achievement in school, Mr. Patrick stated

I really think that will start in the 9th grade year. And our goal and what will be my goal when I pick up a 9th grade class is to find mentors, solid mentors from the business community, from the academic community that are African American males. And that’s one thing we don’t see in our mentor program right now. I don’t really see a great number of African American males come back and really take some kids on and guide them through the process. And I think they need to see that and I know we have them in the community and I’ve spoken to many of them in the community. Because they are so hard working, sometimes they don’t have enough time to give back, but I think we really need to develop that very early.



In addition to role models, Mr. Patrick points out a solution to the institutional segregation that occurs by the way the district offers advanced courses. After much discussion about students of color not being in advanced courses, Mr. Patrick perceives the reason is fear of failing, and, therefore, not being able to participate in extracurricular activities, which is known as the No Pass No Play rule, governed by the University Interscholastic League. Consequently, he perceives that schools should respond by trying “to really portray our higher academic classes in a non-threatening manner.”

All three assistant principals held the unquestioned perception that, for both students and the schools, there were improvements to make that could improve the achievement of Black males.

### **Unconscious Perceptions**

An unconscious perception is what the participant unknowingly believes to be true. Participants were asked during the interview directly about being colorblind and their views on unconscious biases. Furthermore, interviews reflected verbal and nonverbal perceptions that the participant was unaware of which fell under this theme. The unconscious perceptions in this study included beliefs on characterizing Black males, a discussion of unconscious biases and being colorblind, the unconscious perceptions found in their contingent and unquestioned perceptions, and the code of silence.

## Examples of Unconscious Perceptions in this Study

### *Characterizing Black Males*

Assistant principals were asked to describe Black males in five words or phrases. The goal of this was to see whether they frame Black males in a positive or negative light. This frame is in fact an unconscious perception. The names of the assistant principals are not used in this table to ensure that their identify is not connected to the findings which show one assistant principal with a very negative frame, one assistant principal with a very positive frame, and a third assistant principal with a more balanced frame. Table 1 shows the words and phrases that were used.

**Table 1**

#### *Characteristics of Black Males Described by Assistant Principals*

	Positive Characteristics	Negative Characteristics
Assistant Principal I	Likeable	Attention-getting Stuck in a cycle Frustrated themselves Withdrawn
Assistant Principal II	Respectful Conscientious Kind Fun	Loud
Assistant Principal III	Diligent Outgoing	Effusive Vexing Outspoken

Each assistant principal responded in a different way, one being overly positive, one being overly negative, and the last, balanced. This was by far the most challenging question for each of the assistant principals as they took a very long time to answer and

they chose their words carefully. One assistant principal even asked if we could move on to the next question and return to that one. Interestingly, the assistant principals and the frame in which their word choices fell into reflected the student populations on their campus. The campus with majority White students had an assistant principal with the most negative descriptors for Black male students. The campus with the most students of color had an assistant principal that used the most positive descriptors. Lastly, the campus that had a balance of white and students of color also had a balance of positive and negative descriptors. It appears then that there could be a linkage between the frequency of exposure to Black males students and perceptions of the subject assistant principals. The greater the exposure, the more positive are the perceptions.

Unconscious perceptions are prevalent in every day conversations and are revealed throughout the interviews. Some of these perceptions can be positive but have mostly been examples of negative unconscious perceptions. For example, a response by a participant that described the home life of Black males did so in a strongly unconsciously biased way stating, “I think for the most part, African American kids I’ve encountered are fairly poor but I have not ever had to call CPS or have any other major issues like abuse or neglect, or anything like that, just poverty.” The assumption made here is low socioeconomic status is related to abuse in some way. These unconscious perceptions are what lead to institutional challenges that impact students of color. Policies, curriculum, and expectations are just a few examples of what can be affected by unconscious biases.

### *Unconscious Biases and Being Colorblind*

Participants were asked whether they believed that people had unconscious biases. Although all three were slightly hesitant as they began their responses, all of them ended up strongly agreeing that people had unconscious biases. Mr. Ryan pointed out an example of an unconscious bias that many assistant principals, including himself, struggle with. He stated,

I think there can be an unconscious bias. I think you may see somebody coming in to register who is a black male who has dreadlocks and who has saggy pants and you think, oh great, is this guy going to cause trouble? Is he going to cause trouble? Whereas if you see a White kid dressed in a collared shirt, look at that, he's probably in pre-AP.

Mr. Ryan says these are things that run through your mind reflexively and without any credence. Mr. Patrick takes this one step further and says "there may be a time when my unconscious bias comes into play. Does that manifest itself vocally? No. But in my mind, yes."

Mr. John insists that although unconscious biases like these exist, they can fade over time with age and experience. According to Mr. John,

I would like to think that I'm unbiased and I'm really neutral and I look at the action that the student does. And really, I still probably still have some type of prejudice inside me. I don't know how you get that out. Whether it's rich or poor, White or Black, or religious or gender. And so, you do the best you can and I think you can. I think if you've been around long enough and you've lived in both cultures and experienced how it is to be really rich or really poor. I'd like to

think you are able to do that. When you are young, it's hard. The younger you are the harder it is to separate it because your experiences are limited.

According to the participants, unconscious biases undeniably exist and each is based upon personal experiences. These unconscious biases are the frames in which individuals perceive situations. Based upon their answers, it is natural to think that a certain maturity and introspection is required to not act upon them. Our experiences create unconscious perceptions.

Assistant principals were asked about their unconscious biases in terms of their perceptions of whether it is possible to be colorblind. All three agreed that it is an unattainable task to be colorblind. According to Mr. Ryan, "I think that for many people it is impossible to be colorblind. I just think that everyone brings their own prejudices and experiences with them. When I say prejudices, I don't mean it in a negative way." Mr. Ryan refers to our own lenses shaped by experiences, which leads us to be incapable of being colorblind. Our inability to be colorblind brings with it unconscious perceptions.

#### *Unconscious, Contingent, and Unquestioned Perceptions*

Assistant principals were asked questions and their responses fell into the category of contingent or unquestioned perceptions, but still had elements of unconscious perceptions. For example, assistant principals were asked what they believed was the most common discipline infraction for Black males on their campus. Two of the assistant principals stated "tardies, without a doubt." Mr. Patrick stated, "I have no if's and's or but's about that. And it's usually tardies because of social interaction. It's not malicious

compliance.” Mr. John stated “tardies” with just as much enthusiasm. These responses would have fallen under unquestioned perceptions because although the assistant principals felt confident in their answers, it was not necessarily a positive truth. But what are more important in these responses are the unconscious biases that are implied. By stating that being tardy is not being malicious but social, there is an implication that the social aspect of school takes priority over the system of rules or even education itself. Being slow to class could also imply that Black males are lazy or do not see value in being in class. This is further confirmed when one assistant principal discussed the biggest complaint they hear about Black males. Mr. Ryan said “the biggest complaint is that they are lazy and won’t do their work.” Campus data on tardies was not available to this study so these perceptions could neither be confirmed nor denied. Nonetheless, research indicated that the most common disciplinary infraction that sends Black males to alternative campus in Newpark ISD for Black males over the last few years has been persistent misbehavior and fighting.

Assistant principals were asked about how the breakdown of student race in a school impacts a Black male. For example, how does a mostly White school impact a Black male differently than a school composed of students mostly of color? Mr. Ryan talked about a Black male student in a predominantly White school and said,

Initially they are withdrawn and freaked out but then at some point, they seem to conform to externally what’s expected of them in terms of behavior. On the other side of that, I think that, not that I’ve experienced this first hand so I don’t know if I should answer it but on the other side of that, I think that if they go to a school

that is predominantly Black, they might try to establish themselves as the alpha dog.

Mr. Ryan describes how being a Black male in a mostly White school “freaks” them out but then they conform to what is expected of them in terms of behavior. The implication here being an unconscious bias is that Black males are expected to behave like White students. Mr. Ryan ends his statement with a contingent perception of what it would be like for a Black male attending a school composed of students mostly of color. Again, he illustrates unconscious perceptions believing that Black males compete for status by means of struggling power roles that differ from any other race. Mr. John offered a different perspective on this question, stating,

I think that everybody needs a place to belong. And I think your culture is important. Some people feel very strongly about their heritage where others could care less. And so, I think that you need to offer those opportunities. And I think we do a great job having clubs and organizations that support that. For somebody to belong, to feel accepted for whom they are. But some places have more populations of certain ethnicities and culture.

Mr. John’s response is a little more difficult to discern. Mr. John begins by acknowledging the need for students to have a connectedness to the school. Mr. John also perceived that heritage is one way which students qualify how they connect to the school. His response to developing connectedness for certain races is by means of clubs and organizations. Thus, the unconscious perception that Mr. John has, often expressed by Mr. Patrick, is the value of extracurricular activities to keep students of color connected to school. This is alone one such example where the assistant principal

answered in terms of the general population of students rather than honing in on the question about Black males which is later discussed in the code of silence.

Throughout the interviews about Black males, three different responses were constant: problems in their home life contributing to lack of success, their low socioeconomic status, and the importance of extra-curricular activities for them. This study has found that at least one of these unconscious perceptions were overtly expressed or unconsciously implied in almost every response given by assistant principals that participated. Assistant principals consistently perceived a home life that was plagued with problems including a single parent, poverty, hunger, having to take care of siblings, lack of value in education, uneducated parents, and people who are looking for exceptions to rules. As previously discussed, Black families were perceived as being poor because they walked to the same apartments, rode the same buses, or simply because assistant principals perceived them to be. Lastly, the importance of extracurricular activities for Black males came up time and again. Assistant principals felt that extracurricular activities motivated Black male students to stay engaged in school and gave them an avenue to be successful. One assistant principal went so far as saying that the No Pass No Play rule was detrimental to Black males who could no longer be on the team when they failed a class; this is how important extracurricular activities are. These are important unconscious themes to recognize when addressing how to improve the achievement of Black male students.



### *Code of Silence*

The code of silence is discussed in John Ogbu's book, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb*. In a discussion about race relations in Shaker Heights, Ogbu stated, "[Blacks] believed that the self-image of harmonious race relations had persisted because there existed a sort of code of silence: People were not expected to publically discuss, and usually did not discuss racial problems in the community" (2003, p. 60). Similarly, this code of silence revealed itself in a number of ways in the interviews with the White male assistant principals for this study. First, there was the feeling of tension and uneasiness in the room during the initial interviews. The level of discomfort could sometimes be measured by how they answered questions. Each was very hesitant in what they said and chose their words carefully, in a way that appeared contrived at times. While discussing the issue of unconscious biases, one assistant principal made the following statement while also shedding light on why participant responses sounded manufactured at times. He said,

I think you are always watching, always hedging your vocabulary, trying to make sure you don't say something that can be misconstrued or taken out of context or taken in a way that just wasn't meant. I think after you build certain relationships with certain students, sometimes those conversations can go a little bit further. But being in the position that we are in, you always have to watch what you are saying and I always find myself assessing who is in the crowd before I address certain persons in the crowd.

Most of the questions were framed in terms of Black males, but generally, they felt the need to say that their answer was applicable to all students and was not specific to Black

students. Time and again, assistant principals did not want to quantify their answers in terms of Black students. For example, when Mr. John spoke about how the breakdown of race in a school impacts the Black male, he never discusses Black males directly but discusses students who value heritage and the fact that some schools have larger populations of ethnicities and culture. Mr. Patrick did the same thing with this question. To be clear, the question asked was, “how does the breakdown of race in a school impact Black male students?” For example, how would a school composed of mostly White students impact a Black male differently than a school composed mostly of students of color? Mr. Patrick responded,

I don't know if it's necessarily color. What I have found to really be the issue is socioeconomics. And just at our school, every race of student, they just interact so well with each other, I don't see it that way. But I do see some ostracizing when it comes to particular clothes people are wearing or particular shoes people are wearing or what kind of headphones you have or the newest phone that you have and I hear those conversations a lot. So for me, it's not so much race or what I've seen as particular with regard to association by race but I think for us, it's more socioeconomic. I've literally seen and heard a lot of segregation with regard to that.

Time and again, participants did not want to “make it about race.” This question was an inquiry on how Black males relate to other students and how peers impact their success in school yet neither Mr. John nor Mr. Patrick answered the question directly. This illustrates strong apprehensions about being a part of a study which requires discussion of a sensitive topic. An open discussion specific to Black males was clearly uncomfortable.

After one of the initial interviews, one participant even said, “don’t make me come out sounding like a racist.” Lastly, some of the participants’ contradicted their own answers throughout the interview. Participants were not given the interview questions ahead of time so their responses are off the cuff and raw, which may explain the contradictions in thought. For example, when asked whether Black males struggle more than other students, one assistant principal claimed they did not struggle more than any other student. Later, the same assistant principal responded to what he hears as a major complaint about Black males on his campus. He said,

The biggest complaint that I hear has to do with only competing at a lower level academically. I hear so often, he’s got so much talent and he’s so smart, if I could just get him thinking in this AP world if I could get him in the dual credit program, or if I could just get him started on the way, he would take off. And, I think that’s real. I think that’s very real. On our campus, we really need to push that, not only in the scheduling but in the conversations we have, the people who are in charge, we need to really make that happen.

Several other times, this assistant principal discussed how Black males are not participating in advanced classes and he perceived it was out of fear of failing and not being able to participate in extracurricular activities. Thus, there are inconsistencies in his responses that Black males do not struggle but then consistently lists low participation in advanced classes as a problem for Black males at his school. This questions whether the assistant principals’ responses were a reflection of an expected belief system or their own true perceptions. Nonetheless, the existence of a code of silence amongst educators

about Black males is apparent, which may be curbing important conversations required to make strides in achievement.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **The Relationship of this Research to the Literature**

The purpose of this study is to analyze White male assistant principal perceptions of Black males in high school. According to this study, assistant principals perceive to have substantial influence in the lives of Black male students. Little research exists regarding assistant principals, let alone how their perceptions influence the lives of students, specifically Black males (Cranston, et al., 2007). Therefore, this study is an introductory piece into an underdeveloped field of study, the assistant principal. This study evaluates the relationship White male assistant principals have with Black male students, their perceptions of the students, and the impact it has on achievement. The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the relationship between the findings of this study and the literature surrounding this topic since none directly exists. In doing so, this chapter will assess the life of a Black male outside of school in an economic and social context. Exploring the life of Black males outside of school is especially important in this study because the participants cited these factors far more than elements in school as having the greatest impact on achievement. Additionally, this chapter will analyze the life of Black males inside of school in an academic, social, and disciplinary context. An evaluation of White male assistant principal perceptions of the Black male experience and its relationship with deficit thinking and institutional racism is also included. Following this analysis, general implications as well as implications for policy, practice, and future research are drawn. Lastly, an evaluation of my own experiences and what I have learned throughout this study will end this chapter.

### *Life of a Black Male Outside of School*

Participants were asked to state their perceptions of the lives of Black males outside of schools. Questions and responses fell into two primary categories including an economic context and a social context. All of the responses were perceptions that fell into three categories including contingent perceptions, unquestioned perceptions, and unconscious perceptions.

#### **Economic Context**

A number of perceptions were expressed by participants in terms of the economic context that surround Black males. First, when asked about the struggle of Black males, most of the participants said that performance in school was often a reflection of the home life, consistent with early interpretations of the Coleman Report. None of the assistant principals in this study indicated any systematic challenges that might have shaped the economic context of Black families. One assistant principal perceived the responsibilities of Black students to be far greater than White students because of supposed extra jobs or the need to care for siblings. This response is based on the perception that Black families struggle financially and children have to contribute monetarily to the household or have to stand in for absentee parents. This perception regarding monetary contribution is based on a stereotype that is not consistent with the literature. According to the National Center of Education Statistics, in 2009, the percentage of 16 and 17 year old students that were employed according to race are as follows: 19.8% of White students, 9.3% of Hispanic students, 8.8% of Black students, and 5.6% of Asian students. Thus, employment for Black students is mostly consistent

with other races and thus should not be considered a primary indicator or cause for struggle for Black students.

The same assistant principal continued by expressing that these responsibilities exist because Black students often come from a one-parent household. Although Black families lead per capita in the number of single parent led households, there are still more White households led by a single parent (U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2011, p. 56) and yet this is a problem defined by Black families. The assistant principal often added the caveat that his perceptions were true for many races but he did not in this response. The literature about the home life of students and their performance in school varies. The perception that the home life of Black students is the primary predictor of the success is strongly grounded in an old set of beliefs cited in literature, as, for example, in the Coleman and Moynihan Report in the mid 1960s. Subsequent research concludes that the challenges of Black males are more complex and goes far beyond the home environment. None of the assistant principals perceived that schools were not to blame for Black males' struggles. Assistant principals did not suggest low expectations, lack of quality instruction, or policies that might impact student achievement as possible reasons for Black males' lack of success. Instead, principals pointed to the student and their home life as the most important factors. Despite this, two of the assistant principals believed that schools did have an obligation to help Black males succeed. One of the assistant principals expressed a perception that many Black males come from families with a low socioeconomic status. Although this might be consistent with the research, educators must consider what is being insinuated by stating these beliefs.

Statistically, many Black families live in poverty, but so do many White, Hispanic, and Asian families. But over time, many have identified being Black as being synonymous with being poor, which is counterfactual. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States (2011), there are more than twice the number percentage-wise of White, female-led homes than there are Black, female-led homes (p. 56), the median income for Black families is almost identical to Hispanic families (p. 457), and the persons below poverty, percentage-wise are also identical for Black and Hispanics (p. 464). This is not to argue against the existence of large gaps, especially per capita, but rather to point out that the association of poorness with being Black is an institutional statement made by race that perpetuates stereotypes. Race is not an indicator of income status, because people of every race are somehow challenged financially. Yet, a discussion with assistant principals about Black students yields similar conclusions: Blacks are poor. This excludes a large population of Black students that simply are not impoverished, as the assistant principals perceive. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, in 2008, 40% of Black households made \$50,000 or more compared to 40.1% of Hispanic households, 62.5% of White households, and 66% of Asian households (p. 455). Although there is a significant gap between the races, by assuming that being Black is synonymous with being poor, 40% of the Black population is being viewed entirely inaccurately. Furthermore, one must question how Black households became synonymous with being poor when statistics show that the percentages of families making \$50,000 or more are consistent with the Hispanic population. Given that Asian households are financially consistent with White households, is race the primary indicator of financial success, or is it being a



*certain race?* “Race continues to be inextricably linked to socio-economic status and education level, with certain racial and ethnic groups, such as Caucasian and Asian-Americans reaping more societal advantages on average than others, including African-Americans and Latinos” (Steele, Choi, & Ambady, p. 1). More importantly, are there certain institutional structures in place that impact Black and Hispanic households more than White and Asian households? Signithia Fordham (2008) and other researchers would argue that organizational barriers definitely do exist, preventing success inside and outside of school for Black students.

Despite the association of Black students with impoverishment, all of the assistant principals had a strong grasp of socioeconomic levels of the students that attend their school. Two of the three assistant principals discussed the stratification of income of the families in their attendance zone, which is a significant context while discussing achievement. As one assistant principal did point out, the challenges in school have less to do about race and more about socioeconomic status. Although the literature would largely agree with this statement, this perception excludes the possibility of institutional racism, which is becoming a more prevalent topic when discussing the achievement of students of color.

Assistant principals did not recognize the various economic challenges that Black males faced outside of school including employment, equity in salary, or mobility. Instead, responses were limited to poverty and one-parent led families as the primary problems that Black males face outside of school. The lack of acknowledgement of these economic topics may be considered a reflection of White privilege. The assistant principals in this study may be less likely to recognize inequitable wages, higher

unemployment rates or the need for mobility as factors impacting student achievement because of their own experiences as a White male. It is these exact economic problems that make Black males feel that education does not prepare them for a successful future. Education and success are not as synonymous for Black students as they may be for other races. This lack of value placed on education is an underlying cause for disengagement by Black males and a crucial point in the discussion of academic achievement of Black males. The lack of awareness on the part of assistant principals on these issues is of concern when discussing how to improve the experience of Black males in school.

### **Social Context**

One assistant principal who perceived that many of the Black males that struggle, like other students that struggle, come from a one-parent household, and he discussed the structure of a nuclear family. Perceptions that Black students come from a one-parent led household are as consistent as they are inconsistent. Statistics show that a single parent leads approximately half of Black families, meaning that a two-parent home is prevalent in the other half of Black households. Single parent homes are higher for Black families than any other race with Hispanics following at approximately 34%, Whites with 25%, and Asians at 19% (U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2011, p. 56). The question is whether, per the perceptions of the assistant principal, academic achievement can be tied to a one-parent led household? Nothing in the literature points to a positive relationship between them, but it would be an area worth exploring in future research in view of the extent of the possible problem. But the relationship between academic success and the impact of a single-parent home is a contingent perception held

by an assistant principal in this study, based on his own upbringing in a single-family household. But his own success, a college-educated man with an advanced graduate degree, coming from a single-parent home, appears to contradict his belief that single-parent homes negatively impact student achievement and in this discussion, for Black males. The contradiction questions whether the participant held unconscious prejudices about Black single-parent families. The goal in the analysis of this study was to identify exactly these perceptions, the subtle beliefs that assistant principals have that are not overt, but subtly built into the structure of schools, actions, policies, and even conversations we have with one another.

A significant amount of time was spent on research about the culture of “the streets.” Although the assistant principals recognized various parts of Black culture and indicated the strength of peer relationships, “the streets” was not an area they recognized. Assistant principals were asked about whether they identified gang activities in their schools and all three felt that it hardly existed. Observations of Central High School showed no gang affiliations in terms of colors, signs, etc. All Black students observed dressed similarly to other students in their collared shirts, khaki pants, form fitted jeans and t-shirts, etc. At both Kennedy Heights and Fall Oaks High Schools, however, observations showed students that wore styles, colors, jewelry, clothes, etc. that represented a culture of the streets. Students were observed walking in groups at Fall Oaks High School wearing all blue and a student at Kennedy Heights was wearing all Black with a large necklace around his neck with a symbol and a white towel in his pocket. The way Black students dressed at Central High School was far different than the students at Fall Oaks and Kennedy Heights. Nonetheless, the assistant principals did not

differentiate these styles in any way. They did not they refer to these differences in terms of the culture of the streets.

### *Life of a Black Male Inside of School*

#### **Academic Context**

Assistant principals were asked whether they thought Black males struggled in school more than other students. Although research suggests that Black male students have substantial academic struggles, all three assistant principals believed that Black males did not face struggles substantially *more* on their campus than other students. Their perceptions were highly inconsistent with the literature which points to challenges that include grades, test scores, drop-out rates, completion rates, and attendance, to name a few. The following is a more specific snapshot of the struggles each of the campuses in Newpark ISD face compared to the response by their respective assistant principal.

Mr. Patrick perceived that Black males do not have significant struggles on his campus. But data shows that Mr. Patrick's campus struggle with achievement consistent with literature. According to the AEIS Campus Reports in 2010-2011, there were gaps in achievement on standardized tests; Black students on this campus had the highest dropout rate, lowest attendance rate, had the second lowest enrollment in advanced courses (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 6). Additionally, Black students had the lowest average SAT and ACT scores (AEIS Reports, Campus, 2010-2011 p. 6). Given this information, Mr. Patrick's perception that Black males do not struggle is inconsistent with the data. Mr. Patrick's perception that Black males are not taking advanced classes is consistent with the data but the belief that Black male students in advanced courses do not get the

“type of grades other students get” is a self-admitted contingent perception. The campus data show low enrollment of Black students in advanced classes but there is no indication that the cause of this is Black students’ failing out of advanced courses.

When asked directly about low enrollment of Black males in advanced courses, the other two assistant principals pointed to their home lives, low socioeconomic status, and to households led by one parent as the primary causes. Again, these responses are a reflection of early thinking that placed the primary responsibility of academic achievement in the home and consistent with the belief that schools have far less power to influence change. “The data (from the Shaker Heights study) showed that Black students believed they were intellectually inferior to Whites and harbored feelings of self-doubt, hence, they often eliminated themselves from higher level courses” (Carter, 2004, pp. 5-6). John Ogbu found that “teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about Black students contributed to these feelings of inferiority. Even though teachers did not openly say that Black students did not work hard, they implied it in their actions” (Carter, 2004, p. 6). This qualitative study shows that assistant principals, like teachers, express their deficit perceptions through attitudes, beliefs, and in their actions. If students are impacted by teachers’ inadvertent biases, then it is a reasonable conclusion that assistant principals also contribute to the covert messages received by Black males.

One assistant principal also discussed how the value that parents place on education in the Black home impacts the students’ success. Stating that participation in advanced classes and academic achievement depends on whether “they value their child’s education” and whether “they emphasize it in the home” assumes that students that are underachieving have a home life that does not value education. This perception is wholly

inconsistent with the literature, which states that Black families do value education as do Black students. In fact, the only resistance in Black culture does not come from being educated but from the institution of education, a White institution of power. From a historical context, slaves were persecuted for their desire to learn, for example, to read and write. “When any group of people has been denied the right to read and write, as was historically the case with African Americans when their ancestors came to this country, instinctively, they will come to attach a high premium on those skills” (Anderson, 1998 as cited in Freeman, 2004, p. 12). Blacks recognize a dominant White culture in the structure of education that discriminates. Therefore the resistance by Black culture has nothing to do with learning but is in more of a social context of resisting an oppressive culture. “The problem of privileged or protested Whiteness and stigmatized or devalued Blackness being tied positively and negatively to school performance is a sociocultural phenomenon that must be seen in relation to institutional structures and cultural dynamics” (Fordham, 2008, p. 235). Yet, it “is the widespread practice of blaming African Americans themselves, rather than racism or structured inequities for the underperformance of Black students (Horvat & O'Connor, (2006), as cited in Fordham, 2008, p. 235).

Since assistant principals did not recognize substantial struggles that Black males face in school, it is no surprise then that none of them recognized any institutional factors that may contribute to academic achievement gaps. Furthermore, assistant principals did not recognize any discrimination or prejudices that students of color perceive in school. Although the literature states that discrimination in schools in the forms of low expectations by teachers, tracking, and placement in lower and special education classes

is prevalent, assistant principals in this study did not recognize these as forms of discrimination faced by Black male students.

As the home life of Black male students was discussed time and time again, assistant principals perceived that parent involvement is necessary for student success. All three believed in a positive relationship between parental involvement and achievement where the greater involvement, the more likely the student was to succeed. On the other hand, a student that had little to no parent involvement was more likely to struggle in school. Assistant principals also pointed to the fact that parents were either not involved at all or even involved so much that it felt overbearing with very little variation in between. Research on the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement of students indicate a positive correlation. “Parent involvement in a child's early education is consistently found to be positively associated with a child's academic performance” (Hara & Burke, 1998; Hill & Craft, 2003; Marcon, 1999; Stevenson & Baker, 1987, as cited in Topor, Keane, Shelton, & Calkins, 2010, p. 183). Tapor et al., explains this further by stating “specifically, children whose parents are more involved in their education have higher levels of academic performance than children whose parents are involved to a lesser degree” (2010, p. 183).

In this study, assistant principals also discussed role models as an important aspect inside and outside of school as a contributing factor to student achievement. Assistant principals perceived a lack of successful role models in the lives of Black males, which they saw as impacting on Black males' success. They perceived the reason for the lack of role models for Black male students to be that there are not enough people of color, specifically Black males, in education. The perceptions of the assistant

principals are largely consistent with the literature, which concludes similarly. John Ogbu, based on his research, believed that the best role models were found in the family. “Fathers were considered more effective role models because they were male authority figures in the home, and boys were more likely to listen to them than to their mothers. Students believed that ‘kids looked up to people like themselves.’ Male students, they emphasized, often did not listen to their mothers about school” (Ogbu, 2003, p. 161). As single mothers are increasingly leading Black families, Black male students lack appropriate role models. As all three assistant principals pointed out, there are few Black educators. In Newpark ISD, only 114 teachers, roughly 5% are Black (2010-2011 AEIS Reports, District, p. 7). Thus, homes and schools are void of individuals that Black males can identify with, one of many reasons for their disengagement. In Sparrow and Sparrow’s (2012) student, interviews with Black male students uncovered the importance of role models in their lives. One young man stated, “Black boys lack enough positive male role models, often having only “the drug rats on the street” (p. 44). “The streets” were not referred to by assistant principals in this study but play a significant role in the lives of many Black males. As seen in Sparrow and Sparrow’s study, it is a source for role models when the home and schools have failed to provide them. According to another Black youth, “Black boys drop out of school because they’re ‘following what they see,’” and they do not see black males who are traditionally successful (Sparrow & Sparrow, 2012, p. 46). Mr. John verbalized a hope that President Obama would be a strong role model in the lives of young Black men, inspiring them to be more successful.



## **Social Context**

Discrimination is a significant topic in the literature, but was not well represented in the discussion with assistant principals. Although all three assistant principals believed that it is impossible to be colorblind and that each individual has unique unconscious biases, they stated that in their role as administrators, it was expected that they were not to act upon them. Ultimately, the inability to be colorblind was dismissed as a non-problem, and there was no further reference of the possibility that this inability could manifest in negative ways. The implication of their responses is twofold. First, these responses imply that all assistant principals recognize their biases and actively choose to ensure that prejudices are not formed based upon these biases, which is arguable. Secondly, these responses imply that the nature of an unconscious bias is rooted in a lack of awareness of colorblindness, thereby making it impossible to control the resulting effect. The assistant principals in this study demonstrated perceptions that their biases did not impact structures, students, climate, etc. It is truly possible, though, to make this assessment? Even if one could, would one admit that personal perceptions are discriminatory and actually impact the nature of school? The likelihood of people in education admitting to participation in discriminatory practices is remote. In fact, generally, “just 13 percent of whites and 12 percent of blacks consider themselves racially biased” (CNN, 2006, para. 7). “University of Connecticut professor Jack Dovidio, who has researched racism for more than 30 years, estimates up to 80 percent of white Americans have racist feelings they may not even recognize” (CNN, 2006, para. 9). Research shows that “overgeneralized beliefs can directly affect the academic performance of members of negatively stereotyped groups” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, as

cited in Steele et al., p. 8). Consequently, the impact of stereotypes may be far greater than an individual might realize.

Mr. John stated that with time and, consequently, age, people are able to learn how not to be influenced by the biases that they have. He perceived that with experience came the ability to understand “being really rich or really poor” and that provides a better perspective so one actively will not exercise biases. But this too assumes that the assistant principal is aware of his or her own unconscious perceptions and biases, which by nature is untrue and is not supported in the literature. In fact, lengthy research did not produce any results supporting the perception that people are able to be less discriminating with age and experience. Also, race may play a significant role in one’s point of view about discrimination. “Almost half of black respondents -- 49 percent -- said racism is a ‘very serious’ problem, while 18 percent of whites shared that view” (CNN, 2006, para. 5). Even though this study was about White male assistant principals, their views might be consistent with the general population. Furthermore, the lack of acknowledgement about racism may be another example of how White male assistant principals view schools through the frame of White privilege.

Assistant principals were asked to discuss their perceptions of unconscious biases and the ability to be colorblind. All of them believed that people, including themselves, had unconscious biases that could not be avoided. But research shows that “stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination can all serve to undermine the moral functioning of our meritocracy, as individual efforts are often overshadowed by inaccurate perceptions and unfair expectations” (Steele et al., in press, p. 2). Mr. Ryan described a specific example of how physical appearance can trigger stereotypes in his own mind; this may be a

common occurrence for assistant principals. He described a Black male with “dreadlocks and saggy pants” as an image that assistant principals would associate with being a troublemaker in contrast to the image of academic success perceived in a White student in a “collared shirt.” Mr. Patrick stated that these biases do cross his mind but they do not “manifest themselves vocally.” Both of these responses recognized the over discrimination that by nature cannot be avoided but argued that they were able to control the actions that might reflect them. But again, the before mentioned argument holds true, namely, that not all assistant principals are going to recognize their perceptions as discriminatory.

Many of the responses by assistant principals contained stereotypes that they were even unaware of. "Contemporary racism is not conscious, and it is not accompanied by dislike, so it gets expressed in indirect, subtle ways" (Dovidio, as cited in CNN, 2006, para. 12). Discrimination was observed in responses by assistant principals perceived by the researcher solely on an unconscious level. For example, when asked to describe Black males in five words or phrases, assistant principals shed light on some unconscious prejudices. One assistant principal had almost entirely positive words and phrases, another had almost all negative, and the third had a combination of both. Although it may appear that having a positive frame of perceptions would contain the least amount of prejudice, this appear can be deceiving. Assistant principals chose their words carefully, possibly to ensure that their responses were not taken out of context, or so they appeared to not have any prejudices, or to ensure they did not appear racist. Thus, it is possible that having almost an entire positive frame of perceptions may be contrived or done as a form of overcompensation. “Unfortunately, there is growing evidence to suggest that

some people's true attitudes and behaviors toward stereotyped others do not always match the less prejudiced views that they espouse. That is, when given the opportunity, some people are still capable of being quite prejudiced" (Steele et al., p. 12).

Having mostly negative perceptions has clear implications that lead to deficit thinking, which may be detrimental to improving Black male achievement. This is reflected in one statement made by one of the assistant principal while discussing unconscious perceptions. He said, "it may sound negative but I just think that everyone brings their own life experiences with them and have a certain stereotype that they expect from Black kids." Steele et al., validates this stating "although stereotyping is not an inevitable or necessarily malicious process, it is important to recognize that knowledge of societal stereotypes can lead to a distortion of reality, creating a moral issue that needs to be addressed" (p. 10). In fact, Steele et al., argues that positive stereotypes can actually be beneficial as they can set expectations and be motivating in terms of a "self-fulfilling prophecy." But self-fulfilling prophecies can be based upon both positive and negative expectations, thus highlighting the dangers of discrimination by way of low expectations. Furthermore, there is extensive literature on how discrimination, real or perceived, impacts students. Given the more covert actions of discrimination, perceived discrimination will likely grow and "according to recent literature, African American youth are more likely to perceive discrimination as they get older" (Brown, 2008; Quintana, 1998, as cited in Thompson & Gregory, 2011, p. 6). According to Thompson and Gregory (2010), "for African American adolescents, there is evidence that perceived discrimination is linked with psychological maladjustments. Students found perceptions of discrimination to be associated with depressive symptomology (Simmons et al., 2002),

lower self-esteem (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000), anxiety and stress (Gibbons, Gerrard, Cleveland, Willis, & Brody, 2004) as well as conduct problems and engagement in risky behaviors (Brody et al., 2006, Nyborg & Curry, 2003, p. 5).

Assistant principals in this study were vaguely aware of the phenomenon of “acting White.” Only two of them could define it in a context similar to Fordham and Ogbu (1986). Mr. Patrick defined it in terms of a story where a Black male student described his perceptions of White students, but did not reveal how those perceptions affected the student. Mr. Patrick also did not state whether he observes “acting White” on his campus. This could be in part, because he did not have a clear understanding of the concept, which can be deduced from his response. An understanding of the term “acting White” came hand in hand with the recognition of it at their respective campuses. Mr. Ryan and Mr. John believed that “acting White” was a social pressure exhibited by peers to conform to White society or “social expectations of other African American males” and that these expectations and pressures were present on their campuses. Interestingly, Mr. Ryan and Mr. John’s campuses still have a majority of White students whereas Mr. Patrick, who did not adequately recognize “acting White” on his campus has a majority of students of color. Thus, it can be presumed that “acting White” is perceived to be more prevalent in schools where a considerable population of White students exists.

The term “acting White” is surrounded by controversy in the literature. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) developed the idea of “acting White” and argued, Black students began to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating white people in academic striving, i.e., from "acting white." Because of

the ambivalence, affective dissonance, and social pressures, many black students who are academically able do not put forth the necessary effort and perseverance in their schoolwork and, consequently, do poorly in school (p. 177).

Their study sparked various writings, reviews, as well as additional studies on this same topic. Signithia Fordham in 2008 followed up on what she believed was largely misunderstood in their work, which was two-fold. The first was the “widespread practice of blaming African Americans rather than racism or structural inequalities” (p. 235) and the second was “the common displacement of the word ‘burden’ with ‘fear’” (p. 235). Both Mr. Ryan and Mr. John stated that the pressure was peer based, resulting in actions that would be grounded in peer pressure or personal choice. Therefore, the assistant principals’ perceptions would be aligned with research that Black students feared the stigma of “acting White, which Signithia Fordham argued strongly against (2008). Steele and Aronson (1995) “argue that ‘disidentification from academics is a protective mechanism in response to the threat of performing poorly and validating racial stereotypes associated with intellectual abilities” (as cited in Thompson & Gregory, 2010, p. 7). This would be consistent with one assistant principal’s response when he stated that Black students do not participate in advanced classes out of feel of failure. Thus, the assistant principals in this study believed that “acting White” was either a personal choice based on social pressure or was exercised out of fear of academic failure. There was no discussion on whether institutional factors that might come into play.

Ultimately, the question comes down to whether intelligence is a reflection of race. Most reasonable people would argue that this is not the case and yet by utilizing the term and by believing that it exists, then “acting White,” makes intelligence a measure

based specifically on race. Believing this would be as stereotypical as to believing that blondes have less intelligence than brunettes or women have less intelligence than men. It is simply a form of institutional prejudice that has inherent implications of the inferiority of Black students.

### **Discipline Context**

When asked about their perceptions as to why there are a disproportionate number of discipline referrals and harsher punishments for Black male students for the same infraction, assistant principals were puzzled. None of them felt confident that they recognized the answer and perceived various reasons for this occurrence. Mr. Ryan responded to this question using the very definition of deficit thinking by stating he feels that he is less harsh on his students of color out of fear of being perceived as racist or giving the school the reputation of being so. Mr. Ryan stated that he gave students of colors additional opportunities not afforded to White students solely based on the color of their skin. Mr. Ryan's deficit approach is contrary to the literature that consistently states Black males receive harsher punishment. Nonetheless, this form of deficit thinking may be more common for assistant principals who are more compassionate or empathetic with Black male experiences.

Mr. Patrick's perception for the disproportionate discipline was the willingness of Black students to accept their consequences. The implications of this are twofold. First, it assumes that other races, notably White students, contest consequences and therefore are not as highly reported as the infractions and consequences of Black students. Thus, it is the students or the families that are to blame for the disproportionate numbers because

of their unwillingness to fight the system. But if you were to ask assistant principals whether they would perceive that Black families are unwillingly to fight school rules, you might find answers similar to Mr. John who perceived Black males as wanting “favoritism” or “exceptions to the rules,” which is contrary to Mr. Patrick’s response. Second, it assumes that each disciplinary referral that a Black male student receives is justified, that they do not come from biased teachers, or that no institutional problem exists. This is contradicted by the literature. Thus, if this perception were true, then Black males are accepting consequences for actions they did not commit and the data is not accurate. This would further perpetuate the perception of Black males feeling discriminated against in an oppressive White institution.

Mr. John’s response to disproportionate school discipline contained contingent perceptions, unconscious perceptions, deficit thinking, and candid prejudices. First, Mr. John assumes that discipline of Black males is solely given when the students makes “poor choices” and thus higher numbers of discipline referrals of Black males means they are making more “poor choices” than other students. Like Mr. Patrick, he does not recognize the possibility that discipline referrals may reflect teacher biases. Second, he ties discipline back to low SES and one-parent households assuming a positive correlation between them. Although this is an area for future research, disproportionate discipline would be a reflection of low SES or one-parent households and not based on being Black. Again, this is deeply rooted in deficit thought believing that these characteristics from the home assume poor achievement in school, especially given there are numerous students that fall into these categories that are Hispanic, White, etc. Third, he states that students with higher rates of discipline expect favoritism or exceptions to



rules. Research does not confirm the truth of this belief. This belief is a stereotype by Mr. John that was not expressed in any way in the literature or insinuated in any way by other participants in this study. Mr. John's response is considered a contingent perception that is strongly grounded in deficit thinking.

### **The Assistant Principal and Their Perceptions**

The role of the assistant principal has changed in the last couple of decades, especially with new federal guidelines, such as No Child Left Behind, that measures and tracks student achievement. As achievement gaps become a glaring problem, school leaders are charged with responding to the needs of students, especially those of color. In doing so, a better understanding of the relationship between students of color and assistant principals is beneficial. The purpose of this study is to explore this idea by studying White male assistant principal perceptions of Black males in high school.

A better understanding of the perceptions that White male assistant principals have may provide insight into their academic struggles. The results of this study were the detection of three types of perceptions that assistant principals had. These perceptions then shaped what they understood, what they believed, and contributed to unrealized biases.

The first perception known as contingent perceptions is what someone thinks to be true but recognizes uncertainty as to its accuracy. Contingent perceptions would be equivalent to an awareness of an issue. The second type of perception identified is known as unquestioned perceptions, or what someone believes to know is true. Unquestioned perceptions would be equivalent to ones' belief on an issue. This study

showed that most of the perceptions that assistant principals in this study had fell into this category. The last perception type is known as unconscious perceptions and is what the participant unknowingly believes to be true. These would be considered individual biases.

Three areas were constantly discussed and identified within these perceptions including the home life of Black males, their socioeconomic status, and the importance for them to be involved in extracurricular activities. The belief that the home life of Black males is poor and that their low socioeconomic status affects educators' ability to help them be successful tends to be over generalized by educators, especially assistant principals, according to this study. Nonetheless, there is accepted research supporting these struggles. But the perception about the importance of Black male involvement in extracurricular activities and the subsequent unconscious bias that it implies is not as prevalent and warrants discussion and possibly future research.

Mr. Patrick emphasized the importance of extracurricular activities for Black males time and again but stated that when discussing scholarships for Black males in extracurricular activities, it is almost always perceived or implied that they are athletic scholarships. In contrast, they are usually not assumed to be debate, dance, art, etc. The action based on this perception is that assistant principals subconsciously pushing Black males towards athletics. But there are important unconscious implications here, ultimately contributing to a *catch-22*, which contributes to the fundamental problem for Black males. Although extracurricular activities can motivate Black male students academically, it is only a bandage to the problem. The moment the season is over, teachers, principals, and coaches know that many of the students stop trying to pass their

classes since they no longer see the value in it. Thus, extracurricular activities are knowingly not helping Black males succeed in school generally, but only to succeed in school during the season of the sport they play. Therefore, do extracurricular activities serve a necessary purpose for Black males? Does it enrich their value academically? Arguably it does not. It is better, however, to find a short-term, motivating activity, or does such advice perpetuate a larger problem and one that is more harmful to Black males than helpful?

The second implication of stressing the importance of athletics is an unconscious message that schools are reinforcing in Black males. The literature reveals that Black males do not recognize how education leads to a successful future and they seek alternatives for success in ways that society has show them -- by becoming an athlete, a rapper, or illegally on the streets with few other alternatives for success. The heavy emphasis on extracurricular activities for Black males reinforces this belief because again, Black males are not being pushed into extracurricular areas that might open other doors, only ones that might make them successful athletes. But the catch-22 lies in the fact that any extracurricular activity does motivate Black males, even for only part of the school year. Although it may be reinforcing a negative message, for some Black males, it does open opportunities that were not there otherwise. Thus, the conclusion of this study does not argue that assistant principals and other educators should not emphasize athletics for Black males, but rather to not overemphasize it and to begin to place greater emphasis on various other avenues of music, drama, band, choir, philanthropy, student government, etc. Assistant principals unconscious perceptions, along with other educators, pigeon-

hole Black students and it is necessary for school leaders to broaden opportunities to Black males.

Many of the unquestioned perceptions of the assistant principals were blatantly inconsistent with the literature, which should cause the most concern. Assistant principals believed things that were entirely untrue. Each of these perceptions is important to the study of Black male academic achievement. Assistant principals shape policy, make decisions on student discipline, and contribute to the overall climate of the school. Their perceptions shape each of these and impact the experience of all students. Their perceptions result in the shaping of expectations, which is shown to be a factor in student success and is especially important to Black males. This study found that assistant principal perceptions are deeply rooted in deficit thinking, are a reflection of old-testament literature and are, at times, completely inaccurate. This study shows that assistant principals do not have a deep awareness of Black male struggles and have no understanding of the structural barriers that may contribute to this. Little change can take place without such awareness.

This study concentrated on White male assistant principals and it showed a lens of White privilege as a powerful reflection of their perceptions. But is it really uncommon that White males would view the world through this frame? They cannot change their race, their gender, or the experiences being a White male; nor can they change the structure of society that teaches or provides them the advantages they receive for being White. It is as natural to them as the sun rising and setting. But overcoming the issues of White privilege can be as simple as gaining an understanding its nature and its power. The assistant principals in this study were in no way intentionally or maliciously racist,

and, in fact, some feared of being construed this way. Their perceptions are in no way based on individual faults or overt prejudices. But what this study has found is their frame, like institutional racism in general, is subtle, unconscious, and prevalent amongst assistant principals as they are amongst teachers. It does not make them bad at what they do, but it is an area that cannot be ignored. White privilege is engrained into the fabric of our society, and without a conscious understanding of it, it can morph into more overt racism. Many Black families could arguably already identify areas of racism reflected by assistant principals, whether themselves or the policies they contribute to creating. Thus, this study concludes that assistant principals, as school leaders, must develop a better understanding of their own frame, of White privilege, and of institutional racism.

Without this understanding, the problem of racism in school, the general distrust of Black families for schools, and the psychological disconnect with Black males and school will only further contribute to problems such as reduced academic achievement. These must be addressed by future campus principals before they get into this role, so they can lead having a cognitive understanding of the experience that students of color have in school.

### **General Implications**

The implications of this study begin with the fact that the findings of this research contribute to a new field of study involving the role of the assistant principal. Research currently does not exist about assistant principals (Cranston, et al., 2007) and what their perceptions are on Black males, impacting their success and achievement in school.

Although there is no literature about the relationship of the assistant principal and Black

male students, participants in this study perceive that they play a significant role in these students' lives. This provides purpose and value to the qualitative study.

Secondly, this study highlights the antiquated and inaccurate perceptions that assistant principals have, which may be a contributing factor to the lack of academic success for many Black males. This does not mean that every perception they had was outdated or inaccurate. Assistant principals in this study had responses that reflected assumptions, stereotypes, and deficit thinking, yet appeared to have the best intentions at heart concerning students. Nonetheless, this study revealed that assistant principals' perceptions are deeply rooted in beliefs that the literature has largely outgrown.

None of the assistant principals were hostile in any way and generally appeared to be interested in the well being of all students. Nonetheless, their hesitation in answering questions, the code of silence that was apparent in all of the interviews, the contradictions in their responses, the outright admissions of stereotypes and deficit thinking were all observed at some point in this study. These are further examples of limitations in this study. It is difficult for people to openly recognize and admit that they have racial biases because the negative connotation that surrounds it. Fear of saying the wrong thing or sharing perspectives that are engrained in deficit thinking leave participants feeling vulnerable. The lack of objectivity in measuring bias based on interviews and observations give limited understanding about what is truly occurring in schools. Additionally, the omission of potential structural limitations or institutionalism racism indicates leadership blinded by individual perceptions and filtered through a lens of being a privileged White male. In fact, many of their responses encompass the very definition of White privilege.

This realization gives way to the third implication of this study, namely, that White male assistant principals' perceptions are unknowingly a reflection of White privilege.

In critical race theory, white privilege is a way of conceptualizing racial inequalities that focuses as much on the advantages that white people accrue from society as on the disadvantages that people of color experience. White privilege may be defined as the 'unearned advantages of being White in a racially stratified society,' and has been characterized as an expression of institutional power that is largely unacknowledged by most White individuals (Neville, Worthington, & Spanierman, 2001, as cited in Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki & Alexander, 2009).

A blatant example of White privilege in this study was when one of the assistant principals regarded White students as the standard of being "normal," unconsciously perceiving that academic achievement was a characteristic of race. The literature examines how school leaders make White students "the norm" alienating entire population of students that consider themselves inferior to White students (Milner, 2013, p. 4). These unconscious perceptions manifest into deficit thinking and assistant principals, whether knowingly or unknowingly, create a school environment that reflects their perceptions. This becomes hazardous for a variety of reasons. These perceptions, when communicated, can contribute to stereotypes, create classes of students, damage students' connectedness to school and well as harm their self efficacy and identity, which all impact achievement. According to Dr. Michael Miller (2005),

Stereotype threat can lead to self-consciousness that is not only distracting and anxiety-provoking, but can also interfere with achievement. For example, when

an exam is billed as a test of intellectual ability, blacks perform worse than whites, presumably because the situation evokes racial biases about intelligence. When the same test is advertised as a neutral problem-solving task, blacks and whites perform equally well (para. 3).

Thus, assistant principal perceptions can be verbally expressed and perceived in terms of a stereotype threat impacting Black males performance in school. Also, “African American adolescent male students have poor self evaluation regarding their academic abilities” (Martin, Martin, Semivan, Gibson, and Wilkins, 2007, p. 691). “Both general and personal experiences with discrimination were related to lower school self-esteem and school bonding, supporting the notion that experiences with discrimination are a potential risk for adolescent’s cognitive and affective school engagement” (Dotterer et al., 2009, p. 69-70). While these feelings already exist, they are further compounded with feelings of inferiority by actions of school leaders when they are “subject to low teacher expectations or denied adequate education and are placed in special education classes (Pollard, 1993, as cited in Martin et al., 2007, p. 691). The literature points to these inequalities time and again, and they are recognized by assistant principals in this study when they acknowledge the low population of Black students in advanced classes. Also, assistant principals participate in the formulation of campus policies, and their perceptions shape everyday rules and procedures, which contribute to the climate of the school. School leaders are able to create environments that are considered unfavorable or even hostile towards Black students. In turn, this perpetuates a structure based on White privilege, reinforcing the superiority of Whiteness. The implication of this is two-fold. First, it teaches *all* students the power of White privilege, perpetuating discrimination and



a continuous cycle of Whites who are unable to understand institutional racism.

Secondly, it validates an oppressive system of institutional racism that students of color, especially Black male students, try to resist. Many confuse this resistance to be a lack of value in education by Black males, but instead is an opposition to structural racism.

The literature unequivocally argues that perceptions, prejudice and stereotype threats has a negative impact on Black males in school. The impact that it has on their self-efficacy and self-identity causes them to disengage in school entirely. Assistant principals in this study did not appear to recognize that many of their responses reflected these negative perceptions. Nor did they recognize the potential harm that their responses implied.

### **Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research**

#### *Policy*

Federal testing has brought to light important discussions in education, one of the most important being the academic achievement gap. The purpose of No Child Left Behind was to ensure that every student, despite race, gender, or socioeconomic status had access to education filled with relevance and rigor. Instead, the act has identified significant areas of variance that fall along socioeconomic, and what some argue, racial, lines. Although data has prompted significant discussion as to the cause of the disparities, proposed solutions appear ambiguous and sometimes controversial.

Although research has emerged that Black achievement is positively correlates with discriminating practices and structures, these problems are difficult to address on a large scale. Terry Keleher and Tammy Johnson of the Applied Research Center stated

“institutional racism is frequently subtle, unintentional and invisible, but always potent” (Kunzi, 2009, para. 17). Unlike segregation prior to the 1954 decision of *Brown v. The Board of Education*, racism today is not as overt or large scale, which makes it more difficult to address by federal, state, or local policies. Currently, districts and schools are provided data about student achievement and their achievement gaps with financial incentives to improve scores. The status quo has been the only source of accountability in decades and yet achievement for students of color continues to be a problem. What system of accountability can exist in this nation-wide crisis? There appears to be few options that the federal government has in addressing the achievement gap since they have relinquished power of education to states, only providing guidelines and financial incentives for implementation and monitoring. Therefore, a discussion on policy is addressed mostly on the state and local level and thus brings forth a discussion of practice.

### *Practice*

The core question at this point is how can any policy address institutional racism? To answer simply, it cannot be done. How does the state or any local governing bodies oversee the day-to-day practices of schools, down to the words expressed by school leaders? The idea is impossible and unrealistic. Thus, the answer moves from policy to practice.

Practice must come from the following three steps: consciousness, concern, and action, all being a top-down effort. It must begin with school leaders being actively conscious of the issues that surround institutional racism and have an astute

understanding of their role within the structure. Principals and assistant principals must be highly reflective about their decision-making in terms of discipline, instruction, and policies. Principals and assistant principals should carefully examine data at their school, looking for disproportionate areas in multiple measures such as attendance, enrollment in advanced classes, enrollment in school activities, grades, and attendance to name a few.

Not only must school leaders have a deep sense of consciousness about institutional racism in their school, but also, they must have concern. For example, they must care enough to put themselves in the shoes of students of color and see decisions in the eyes of a Black male student. School leaders must actively attempt to develop a sense of empathy with students of color, which allows a new frame of reference and a sense of accountability on decision-making. This becomes even more effective when an administrative team is composed of multiple individuals that are highly conscious and concerned about the achievement of students of color and recognize the structural barriers that exist. Concern can only be productive though when it based on accurate information. Analysis of data, discussion with faculty members as well as students, intense study of research, and creating a culture/climate that is open to difficult discussions. Race is an uncomfortable topic for many people and strong leadership must open the forum for uncomfortable discussions that can yield productive results. Blame should be avoided at all costs as there is no one factor contributing to this complex problem. Every person in a school can actively make efforts to improve the equity of opportunities. The result of this is a strong sense of accountability within the entire school as a team that has the same goal, which is to break down the institutional racism that exists in their school.

Lastly, school leaders have to be committed to not only recognize these things, but to act upon them. Sometimes, actions are the most difficult part, especially when it is about something that makes people uncomfortable. Based on this study, the following recommendations of action for campus leaders are as follows.

First, schools need to develop a system to have Black male role models readily available to students. Schools should be actively supportive of the need to find successful alternate Black male role models. “The absence of male role models in single-parent households has hampered the young African-American male’s opportunity to enter into adolescence in a healthy environment” (Moore, 2007, p. 25). As all of the assistant principals stated in this study, the number of Black males in educating roles was so small, limiting the number of role models available. But why do Black role models have to be educators? I would argue that it is even more important to find successful role models from various fields: professional workers, whether white or blue collar, church leaders, college students, or from military services, to name a few. In conversations I have had with Black students, many do not realize the possibilities that are available to them, which is why role models are so important. Moore (2007) explains how he addressed this problem.

I solicited the support of my fraternity brothers, members of the local chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha, the first intercollegiate Greek-letter fraternity for African Americans. These successful college graduates became part of our school’s Boys to Men Mentoring Program. The adults received training and met weekly with their students. In addition to being role models, they assisted with homework, served as motivational speakers and became study buddies for their assigned

students. Communication was ongoing with parents and guardians as they began to notice changes in their sons at home and in their attention to schoolwork. As the boys began to improve in their behavior and academic performance, an atmosphere of trust grew between the parents and the staff. (p. 24-25)

This is a realistic program to implement into high schools. Taking this role model and mentoring program one step further, the high school students participating in this program could, in turn, be the same role models and mentors for middle school boys. The benefits of such a program in schools could surpass the efforts by schools themselves. Moore described a “60 percent drop in discipline referrals” and increased achievement (2007, p. 25) occurred after students participated in his program. Schools must recognize the need for role models and begin soliciting support from members of the community.

A second area of practice must be professional development to recognize institutional discrimination by school leaders as well as teachers and faculty members. In Gardiner and Enomoto (2006), the principals found that “too many teachers held a deficit perspective toward students from low-SES backgrounds, and that teachers needed to be guided toward a new view of believing in the capabilities of all students” (p. 569). According to Lynn et al., (2010), “About 80% of the teachers we interviewed at the school felt that African American students could be held primarily responsible for their own failure to meet academic standards” (p. 307-308). This study showed assistant principals suffers from similar perceptions and deficit thinking. Lynn et al., (2010) described teacher comments that were similar to assistant principal responses in this study, including lack of structure in the home, many broken families, absentee fathers,

and a lack of role models (Lynn et al., 2010, p. 311). Assistant principals, like teachers, attribute these characteristics for the lack of Black male success, and do not point to schools or institutional racism as a possibility. Thus, the need for knowledge to overcome this deficit thinking is an unquestionable need to overcome the deficit thinking that is so deeply rooted in the minds of educators. “Ongoing professional development refers to any number of training activities for teachers and school leaders aimed at helping them to address changing dynamics of educational processes” (Jordan & Cooper, 2003, p. 202). Moore (2007), discusses a professional development plan that was used with a group of teachers. “The staff learned general strategies to recognize their biases or stereotypes...[and] learned to recognize the complexity of diversity...[they] committed themselves to creating an inclusive curriculum by selecting texts and readings whose language was gender neutral and free of stereotypes” (p. 25). Teachers must make conscious efforts to implement curriculum to meet the needs of all students and develop high expectations for them. “Examples include innovative ways of teaching math and English as well as infusing culturally relevant pedagogy and material into academic courses” (Jordan & Cooper, 2003, p. 202). By doing so, schools are able to change “school norms and [create] a new culture...an important component of comprehensive school reform” (Jordan & Cooper, 2003, p. 202).

Professional development in the area of multiculturalism is especially important for school leaders who have direct control on shaping policies and climate. A study by Gardiner and Emoto (2006) analyzed principal preparation in this area. They found in their study that “principals in this urban school district reported they had little preparing in the multicultural dimensions of leadership” (p. 567). The certification requirements to

become an assistant principal are the same to become a principal. Thus, it can be reasonably deduced that the findings about lack of training in multicultural would be the same for principals as for assistant principals. Trainings for school leaders included, programs [that] were oriented toward traditional business management (e.g., planning, finance, management, human factors, and public relations). Currently most administrator preparations programs require at least a course in multicultural diversity or social justice leadership, but the principals in this study were prepared years ago when such a requirement did not exist (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006, p. 567).

The importance of professional development for school leaders, teachers, and staff members is an important aspect of practice to improve to the experience of Black males in school and starts with school leaders.

A third area of practice should be collaboration between the school and the Black community. Historical events and practices within society have built a general distrust between the Black community toward Whites, who compose the majority of faculty and staff nationwide.

Findings from this [Shaker Heights] study also indicate that Black students and parents have a strong mistrust of Whites based on cultural transmission, treatment of Blacks in the job market, and collective mistreatment. Because Black parents taught their children to be careful of teachers (whose ideas, words, and actions could not be trusted), schooling was rarely evaluated in terms of its pragmatic function and more often evaluated in the context of Black-White relations (Carter, 2004, p. 5).

Although Ogbu believed that Black parents should assert some amount of trust in schools and teachers regardless of race, “Ogbu’s notion of a pragmatic trust might be too much to ask of the Black community, given Blacks’ history of mistreatment and ‘mis-education’ in America” (Carter, 2004, p. 5). Thus, bridging the gap between schools and the Black community is imperative and requires schools to be proactive in this area. But schools are continuously tied to standards of achievement to maintain state recognition and avoid being labeled low performing. In doing so, many schools are barely able to keep their heads above water trying to meet these guidelines, so that there is little room to give to socio-psychological part of meeting the needs of Black students. Furthermore, as school budgets are shrinking, classes are becoming larger, qualified teachers are becoming more scarce, and further problems plague the educational system as a whole, what campus leader is willing to begin placing limited resources into new practices solely within the Black community? These actions could be political suicide for school leaders on campuses and in districts, especially those that still maintain majority White populations. This is where the importance of dynamic school leaders with deep levels of consciousness and concern that are ready to take action becomes so critical.

Bridging the gap between schools and the Black community can be done in a number of ways. For example, opening campus libraries allowing all community members access, students and adults alike will create a friendly environment for learning. Access to resources such as computers and Internet access is one way to open school doors to Black families and reinforce the importance of education. A second example would be to offer adult education classes at the school. These could vary from skill-based or psychologically-based instruction in how to be a more active participant in their



child's success in school. This would also be an optimal time to provide additional tutoring for students by other students or by role models. Another example would be allowing access to other facilities such as the gym and the weight room. By making schools a true part of the community rather than a place for only students, schools are able to build trust with families and promote involvement. This collaboration between schools and the community would be a practice to break down barriers that exist for the good of students.

A fourth area of practice would be increasing Black male awareness of how to be successful. "New findings indicate that many of the Black students did not seem to have a good understanding of the educational requirements needed for future jobs. Similarly, the students did not understand how their present course enrollment determined future enrollment and subsequent college preparation" (Carter, 2004, p. 6). Knowing this, is it possible that schools are simply not effectively communicating with Black males, but that by doing so, awareness could give rise to motivation? How many campuses address data with their students, explaining their meaning in terms of their achievement, and what it means overall? Are Black males adequately being taught how to apply for scholarships, loans, or college applications? Is it being explained how current enrollment can impact future decisions? It is difficult to argue against providing Black males with additional post-secondary preparation information and data driven conversations, a practice that should be considered to improve the achievement of Black males.

Furthermore, as discussed previously, Black males do not always recognize that they can be successful in various fields. Referring back to Sparrow and Sparrow (2012), who interviewed young Black males, success meant making money and they did not see

this by ways of an education but instead were limited to becoming an athlete, a rapper, or turning to the streets. Ogbu also discussed this stating “in the absence of perceiving schooling as a plausible means to achieve social and economic mobility, Ogbu’s findings indicate that some of the Black students identified sports, athletics, entertainment, and drug dealing as alternative mechanisms for achieving the ‘American Dream’” (Carter, 2004, p. 6). The problem here lies within society. Black males are sensationalized for their success in music and in sports, while other successful Black males are almost entirely ignored. Not only are successful Black individuals ignored, unsuccessful Black males are overexposed, contributing to the perceptions of others and perpetuating stereotypes. These results challenge educators and researchers to consider further investigations into the devaluing of education as an avenue to upward mobility by popular culture, youth culture, and the media (Noguera, 2003, as cited in Carter, 2004, p. 6). The literature states that Black males sometimes fear failure because it could validate stereotypes about this. In fact, this is true of most boys and is not unique to Black males.

The issue of fear of failure is particularly pertinent to boys and their construction of gender. For boys, fear of failure operates across a number of domains. It relates to fear of not living up to popular images of masculinity, fear of being labeled a sissy, or seen as feminine in any way, fear of powerlessness, and fear of having their sexuality questioned. In the learning domain, boys have been found to be unwilling to attempt new learning when they are uncertain of success and are less likely to re-attempt something that they had previously been unsuccessful at. Many of the problems boys experience during their education can be traced to their frustration and feelings of inadequacy in attempting to live up to what they

believe their peers and society generally expect of them as males (Martin, 2002, as cited in Cleveland, 2011, p 37)

Knowing this is true for boys in general makes it even more challenging for Black males attempting to construct their identity in a way that also reflects what the culture of Black males believes is masculine. The psychological part of identity construction makes the school experience of Black males more challenging and may contribute to problems of academic achievement.

The code of silence is a far more comfortable place to be, which is why we have not seen significant improvements in the performance of Black male students over the years. But to do this, leadership will have to reflect a large sense of cultural responsiveness and many principals and assistant principals are not adequately aware or trained in these areas. A larger commitment by central staff must be provided to support campus leadership following the same three steps. Again, this must be a top-down effort. Administrators must fully embrace this as part of being an instructional leader and lead by example. Then, it will be the responsibility to instill these practices in the classroom. “Principals who demonstrated multicultural leadership were able to embrace a position where they and their teachers and staff were learners who challenged stereotypes and conventional wisdom” (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006, p. 569). It will be practice, and not policy that will make strides in achievement for students of color.

#### *Future Research*

This study is only a small building block for what is necessary to improve the achievement of Black males in high school. It has uncovered important findings about

White male assistant principals and how their perceptions may be impacting Black males and all students of color. But future research, expanding this study in multiple ways, is necessary. First, only a small number of assistant principals were studied and in only one district. A larger study that includes assistant principals of various races and of both genders would be beneficial to determine whether the problems stated in this study are pervasive or if it is characteristic of White male principals only. Are we all to blame for our perceptions or does the problem lie within White privilege?

Secondly, future research should be done on the perceptions that Black male students have about assistant principals. This kind of study will assist school leaders to better understand the problem of institutional racism and how to develop applicable practices in their schools. Although there is a fundamental problem of institutional racism, it likely manifests itself in different ways on various campuses. This is why blanket policies from the federal and state levels will prove to be ineffective.

Lastly, case studies are necessary to measure the effectiveness of these practices. Schools that actively exercise the practice of consciousness, concern, and action solely to address academic achievement of students of color must be studied to determine what works and what does not. Future research in this area will open a discussion of ideas for other school leaders to utilize. Future research, using this study as a building block, is necessary to improving the school experience for Black male students.

### **What I Learned Conducting this Study**

This study began as an empirical analysis of assistant principals and their perceptions of Black male students in hopes of better understanding whether school

leaders played a part in their academic achievement. While studying this, a significant shift in the literature about how Black students are perceived became apparent. An older belief beginning with the Coleman and Moynihan Reports in the 1960's placed the blame for lack of achievement on the home, while more recent literature which places the burden on schools considered to be structurally or institutionally ridden with discriminating practices that impair academic achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As I began this study, I must admit that I believed that academic achievement was a choice and had nothing to do with structural limitations, like the other assistant principals in this study. My own perceptions, void of any research, was aligned with the belief that achievement was mostly an individual decision and that schools made every effort to be as raceless as possible. But the more literature I examined, the more I realized that my own views were guided by a privilege that Blacks simply are not privy to.

My first understanding of this was when I began to understand the idea of deficit thinking. What began as empathy and compassion for Black males turned into a generalization that most Black males face considerable hardship in their own lives. Consequently, I found myself being more understanding of their behaviors and more tolerant of their language and was even accused by some White students of showing favoritism towards Black students. I also began to generalize the depth of privilege for White students and was harsher on them and far less tolerant. I perceived myself to have a greater understanding of the Black male experience, and that made me a better assistant principal. What I did not recognize is that this form of thinking was rooted in deficit thinking. The assumptions I made were a reflection of my unquestioned perceptions that the lives of Black males outside of school crippled them inside of school, and that they

were destined to failure. Moreover, I paradoxically felt that achievement was a conscious choice and never conceded to the idea that structural barriers contributed to institutionalized racism.

The second area I learned about in this study was the existence of institutionalized racism. I have heard before that schools are racist, teachers have prejudices, tests are discriminating, etc., but I never observed it myself. I have only worked in two schools, and I believed I had never witnessed overtly discriminating policies. I had noticed a few teachers and even a couple of assistant principals whom I perceived as more unfriendly to students of color, and I even thought them to be slightly racist. I witnessed their disrespectful tones or their inconsistent actions with students of different races, but I believed that there were always going to be a few bad apples and that this was a reflection of the individual and not the school.

As I reflect on my past experiences, I feel that I see things through a whole new perspective. When our high school was inundated with new students from Louisiana after Katrina, the administration quickly rolled out a new dress code policy. Students immediately complained that it targeted Black students and was racist in nature. We all knew that it targeted our new population of students, but argued that it was necessary for the safety of our school. In reality, we had deep-seated fears of how these students would change the appearance, and, more importantly, the reputation of our school. I was a first-year high school assistant principal at the time and never questioned the change. I had not only witnessed overt discrimination, but I was a part of it and did not even realize it.

The most satisfying breakthrough in my research has been around the term “acting White.” I will admit that I knew what the term meant as defined by Ogbu and

Fordham and felt that it was very prevalent in schools. I work at a high school that is mostly composed of White students, and many of those students are very rich, White students. Our school also has the largest growing Black population amongst all of the high schools as well. My experiences with Black males were mostly in a disciplinary context, and almost all the Black males with disciplinary issues came from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. The few Black students that were high achieving participated in extracurricular activities dominated by White students like dance, band, cheerleading, debate, and drama, to name a few. Black athletes constantly struggled with academic achievement and discipline, so it was not necessarily a synonymous measure of success like the other extracurricular activities. The Black students that were successful seemed articulate, had mostly White friends, were well dressed, or more specifically, dressed like other White students. In my mind, they were “acting White.”

I read Fordham and Ogbu’s study on “acting White,” and I, like many researchers, believed that the choice to not act White was out of fear of being stigmatized from their own racial group. I believed that Black students were choosing between the life of a successful White student or a disengaged life of many Black students. Ultimately, it was their choice as to whether they chose to succeed. Part of me believed it more on a metaphorical basis that happens to translate pragmatically on occasion, on quite a few occasions really. I must have read Signithia Fordham’s (2008) follow-up to her study with John Ogbu at least half a dozen times, and out of nowhere, it clicked and began to pour out of me. Academic success and one’s intelligence is not a reflection of race in any way, shape, or form, and the mere reference to it is insulting and damaging to the self-esteem of Black students. This was my breakthrough. I understood why the mere

discussion of “acting White” was so troublesome to members of my committee, and it should have been. At best, it was plainly ignorant and at worst, advocated the prejudice I wholeheartedly opposed.

This study has taught me about how I view my own unquestioned perceptions. It took a depth of research to recognize how inaccurate many of my beliefs were. This is worrisome to me, because this study validated that other assistant principals are at least equally entrenched in what I used to believe, if not worse, and the implications of this are overwhelming. It has also made me more aware of my unconscious perceptions, and how others perceive my words and even my actions. I prided myself in believing that I understood the “Black male experience,” and yet I realized that I believed in something that did not even exist. If I felt so strongly that I was doing the right thing, then is this what is happening with other assistant principals, contributing to the lack of success of many Black males in school? Unfortunately, I have to say “yes.” This gives me little faith that things will change, because if it took this much for me to recognize the inequalities that exist, how will others without this experience become aware? Unfortunately, I feel the future is dim in this regard and can only hope that this experience will shape my decision-making when I one day become a building principal. I am committed to being consciousness, have great concern, and apply my better understandings into action.

### **Conclusion**

This study is an empirical analysis of White male assistant principals and their perceptions of Black male students. This study has shown that White male assistant principals have contingent, unquestioned, and unconscious perceptions about Black male



students. Many of their perceptions were comprised of stereotypes, biases, and deficit thinking, all detrimental to the achievement of Black males. This study also showed that assistant principals continue to think in outdated ways, verbalizing blatant stereotypes and had responses deeply rooted in deficit thinking. In this study, assistant principals pointed to the students, the families, peer pressure, and lack of role models to name just a few reasons why Black males are not successful in school. Although there is some truth to these based on the literature, many of their perceptions perpetuated stereotypes that Black males are poor, from one-parent homes, work extra jobs, and fear challenging courses out of fear of failure. None of the assistant principals pointed to the schools as a reason for their failures. Assistant principals did not acknowledge any structural barriers that exist that might impact Black males. Even worse, some of the assistant principals in this study perceived that Black males did not really struggle at all. If school leaders do not perceive a problem, then what expectation is there to change? It is disconcerting when school leaders do not perceive a problem while the literature and data show glaring problems. How is this possible?

Perhaps the problem circles back to the code of silence, especially amongst White males. The assistant principals in this study were so meticulous in their word choices, hesitating and thinking carefully before each response. None of them wanted to talk just about Black males, and, in many of their responses, they would re-quantify their answers stating it would apply to all students. Assistant principals were visibly uncomfortable talking about this topic, and even when seeking district approval for this topic, the response from central office was “this is not a benign topic.” That is absolutely correct, and it appears that because of it, people would rather not talk about it at all and

consequently, schools are ignoring entire populations of students. No Child Left Behind was meant to ensure equal education for every student, but, in practice, it only identifies those whom schools are leaving behind. Understanding this, school leaders must *want* to understand the problem, and seek a greater consciousness of the problem. They must be ready to have uncomfortable and volatile conversations. Furthermore, they must develop a level of concern that will result in practical actions for schools to carry out. Federal, state, and local policies cannot initiate these practices, and, even if they did, they would be ineffective. Therefore, central administrations must begin a top-down initiative to address the achievement gap for Black males and for all students of color. “To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here (McIntosh, as cited in Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2002, p. 79). Schools must evaluate these subtle forms of discrimination and acknowledge the privilege to which many of the educators come from by developing an introspective view of self and the impact all of this has on the school experience for students of color. But this is no easy feat.

Beneath the struggle that erupts over the definition of racism is the difficulty many Whites seem to have in accepting the degree of privilege that White skin brings. Asking White people to become aware of their privilege as Whites seems to be like asking fish to become aware of water; it is all around us and yet very difficult to see. Racism, a system of advantage based on race bestows advantages on White people daily – privileges and advantages given without our asking and often received without our being aware of it. We live in a very racist society – most Whites agree with that point. But grasping the subtle yet profound level of

privilege that each White individual has received throughout her/his life is difficult for many folks to absorb (Ayvazian, as cited in Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2002, p. 111).

Realizing these facts makes the crusade against White privilege and institutional racism more disheartening, especially when a study such as this exemplifies their existence. How do leaders fight battles that are virtually invisible and by and large, almost completely denied? The answer can be seen throughout history. The freeing of slaves, women's suffrage, and the Civil Rights Act are just a few examples in history where a single thought of equality transpired into awareness, that more importantly, mobilized people to act. Similarly, education needs to undergo a revolution to acknowledge the institutional oppressors that are undermining the socioemotional needs of students of color.

The purpose of this study was to analyze White male assistant principal perceptions of Black male students in high schools. The intent of this study was to analyze what perceptions White male assistant principals had, and, more importantly, to determine whether those perceptions might impact Black male students. The hope was this study would help better understand the Black male experience in schools and how school leaders can shape that experience in a culturally responsive way that would be more effective than the status quo. The conclusion of this study is that significant barriers to success exist in schools and are unknowingly perpetuated by school leaders. White male assistant principals are prime examples of how critical race theory describes White privilege. Discrimination in schools now is not as overt as it once was, but their effects are still powerful (Kunzia, 2009). Black male students perceive the dominance and oppression of White culture (Ponterotto, et al., 2009) and in education many Black

males choose to disengage. The impact is detrimental to Black males who suffer academically and then face challenges outside of school. This study shows that these challenges are a result of significant institutional issues but are being portrayed in the literature and perceived by school leaders in a misguided way. Rather than schools being a contributor to the problem, assistant principals in this study revealed that the blame falls primarily outside of school. Many educators believe that all of these problems are due to personal choice and few realize the perspective of the Black community. Schools are often accused of being racist and by experience I have that this notion is quickly dismissed by school leaders who whole-heartedly believe they are not. What they do not realize is that they are not racist in the way people were fifty years ago, but that all of us by nature have perceptions that create biases, and that those are revealed in ways we do not even realize. But the Black community is well versed in discrimination, and has been for some time. Although some do claim racism as a last resort; others claim it because they see it. A letter to a principal from a Black parent describes,

My involvement in the Black community in Toronto and in the Organization of Parents of Black Children (OPBC) has exposed to me the depth of the problems Black students generally face in schools due to racism, exclusion, stereotyping, and low expectations of many teachers. I have listened to parents discuss their children's difficulties in school, and have tried to counsel and support some who felt intimidated by the system. (Clarke as cited in Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2002, p. 110)

From experience, I have heard similar complaints from parents with children of color. School leaders must become more culturally responsive to these claims and not be so

quick to judge, because many of them suffer from White privilege or deficit thinking, which they have never heard of.

In the end though, the conclusions of this study do not label school leaders racist. Instead, it is to bring to light the realizations that I had myself, and that is the need to stop quantifying by race and to start addressing problems by need. From my experiences, the majority of school leaders are in their jobs because they love kids and want to make a difference in their lives. They want to be a role model, a counselor, an instructor, a coach, and a stable person in every child's life, especially Black males. School leaders take great pride in seeing students succeed and the assistant principals in this study believed this completely. The participants in this study are outstanding assistant principals, and will be even better school leaders once they have had the opportunity to learn as I have in my research. They have the commitment and heart for kids, and simply need more information in a field that no one really wants to talk about. The code of silence is made of steel walls, and change will only occur when educators are ready to break them down.

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