

The Impact of the Academic Achievement Gap on the African American Family: A Social Inequality Perspective

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SUMMARY. The academic achievement gap impacts the African American family in various ways. It can influence how African American children experience school; and it has implications for their high school dropout and graduation rates, college attendance, and college completion rates. For parents, the academic achievement gap may influence their own socioeconomic status via their educational attainment, which then has direct implications for their children. The purpose of this article is to present a comprehensive review of the academic achievement gap for the African American family from school entry through college graduation. We do so by examining current trends and theoretical perspectives, under the rubric

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of social inequality. The article concludes with implications for practice with African American families. doi:10.1300/J137v15n02_04 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

It has been argued by some scholars that the best opportunity this country has for achieving social and economic equality is to close the academic achievement gap (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Jencks & Phillips, 1998b; Klinkner & Smith, 1999). The “gap” is measured at many different levels and by various means with the purpose of illustrating differences in academic achievement between specified groups, which are often based on race/ethnicity, gender, and/or socioeconomic status (SES). Numerous studies have observed that African Americans, on average, score significantly lower than their White counterparts on various measures of academic achievement, scholastic aptitude, and intelligence (Grissmer, Flanagan, & Williamson, 1998; Hedges & Nowell, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998a; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1995). Considering the positive relationship between educational background and SES (Day & Newburger, 2002), coupled with the fact that African Americans as a group are disproportionately impacted by poverty (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2004; U.S. Census Bureau, 2004), academic achievement proves a critical factor in the overall social and economic well-being of the African American family. Hence, the ever present gap between African American students and their White counterparts is not only an educational problem, but it is also a significant socioeconomic problem that impacts African American children and their families from one generation to the next.

While substantial attention has been given to the academic achievement gap in the research literature, and many explanations have been offered, “the specific mechanisms that recreate and maintain it from one generation to the next are incompletely understood” (Thompson & O’Quinn, 2001, p. i). Its complexity as a social problem is informed by numerous multidisciplinary inquiries that draw on a variety of

perspectives. From an ecological perspective, causes of the academic achievement gap have been offered and critiqued at all levels, including individual, familial, school and institutional, community, and societal factors (for reviews see Jencks & Phillips, 1998b; Van Laar & Sidanius, 2001; Williams, 2004). The presence of this gap within various measures of academic achievement warrants concern in that below average (or poor) academic achievement has been established as a risk factor for a number of negative developmental outcomes including juvenile delinquency, conduct and behavioral problems, substance use, and dropping out of school (Dryfoos, 1990; O'Donnell, Hawkins, Catalano, Abbott, & Day, 1995; Richman, Bowen, & Woolley, 2004). Furthermore, educational attainment—that is, one's highest level of formal education—is associated with life course outcomes such as college attendance, employability, and income earnings in adulthood (Day & Newburger, 2002; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002a). Racial differences in such developmental and life course outcomes seem to converge with the adverse social conditions of inequality, discrimination, and economic disadvantage.

So, what does this mean for the African American family? The purpose of this review is to chronicle the impact of the academic achievement gap on the African American family from school entry through college graduation. Such a comprehensive approach is a contribution to the literature because examinations at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary education levels are often conducted independently. In this review, we attempt to concurrently examine all three levels and demonstrate their interrelatedness. The review begins with a historical and political commentary about the American educational system, as experienced by African Americans, followed by a presentation of key concepts and an examination of trends. Next, two theoretical perspectives regarding causes of the gap are presented. Last, we conclude with implications for practice with African American families [Note: The terms Black and African American will be used interchangeably throughout the article as they are presented in the literature].

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL OVERVIEW

Dating back to 1619 when the Maryland Segregation Policy recommended that Blacks be socially excluded, a system of inequality for African Americans was initiated and has continued to permeate American society over the past 386 years. Moving forward past the institution of

slavery in America, the Civil War, and the 13th Amendment to 1896, the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* judgment (“separate but equal”) set the stage for rigid segregationist policies of pervasive racial separation in many aspects of American life, including education (Orfield, 1996). More than a half-century later, the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision appeared to be a catalyst for change in that it prompted society, from a policy-driven perspective, to racially integrate schools and improve the quality of education for African American children. Through the *Brown vs. Board of Education* victory, desegregation was supposed to be dismantled “with all deliberate speed.” More than 50 years later, however, society is still grappling with an unequal educational system that is now experiencing a resurgence of segregated school systems.

The practice of segregation is important to highlight because it established and continues to perpetuate an unequal playing field to the disadvantage of African American and poor students. Kozol (1991) illustrates what he calls “savage inequalities” on the basis of race and SES in school districts across America. Examples of such inequalities include disparities in per-pupil expenditures on the basis of race and SES, physical characteristics and safety of school facilities. These disparities are based on measures of neighborhood racial composition and SES, educational and tax-based policies that benefit socially dominant groups, and teacher-quality differences that result in increased odds for children of subordinate social status to be taught by the least qualified teachers. Academic success is dependent on variables such as these because students learn more when better opportunities are offered to them. Orfield and Eaton (1996) argue,

if the schools lack certified teachers, offer few academically challenging courses, and track disadvantaged students disproportionately into low-level courses; if the community is economically depressed, with few libraries, museums, and other out-of-school educational resources; (then) disadvantaged students face more barriers and receive less reinforcement to succeed in school. (p. 69)

Today, Orfield and Lee (2004) argue that the most hopeful sign of recognition since *Brown vs. Board of Education* is the 2003 *Grutter vs. Bollinger* decision, which upheld affirmative action in higher education. This case reaffirmed *Brown vs. Board of Education*'s premise and verified that “the diffusion of knowledge and opportunity through public institutions of higher education must be accessible to all individuals regardless of race or ethnicity” (*Grutter vs. Bollinger*, 2003). This was

the first case to readdress the significant educational equities that *Brown vs. Board of Education* set out to define and unravel. It seems that in order to remedy educational inequalities on all levels, a legal precedent must occur.

KEY ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT CONCEPTS AND CURRENT TRENDS

Primary and Secondary Education

Intelligence quotient (IQ) and standardized achievement tests are common means for assessing academic achievement and the gap at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Additionally, at the secondary level, high school completion and dropout rates are also utilized to measure academic achievement and the achievement gap.

IQ Testing

Although it is the subject of heated debates related to cultural bias, IQ testing continues to be used as a measure of intelligence in the United States (Cohen, 2002; Jencks, 1998; Ogbu, 2002). On average, the mean IQ test scores of African Americans are one standard deviation, or about 15 points, below that of their White counterparts (APA Task Force on Intelligence Testing, 1997-1998; Neisser, 1998). However, it is important to note that this gap may be decreasing. In the restandardization of the Stanford-Binet IQ test (Terman & Merrill, 1960), 13- and 10-point Black-White differentials were observed for younger and older children, respectively (APA Task Force on Intelligence Testing, 1997-1998).

Standardized Achievement Tests

Since 1971, the U.S. Department of Education has annually administered a standardized test known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The NAEP, also known as the "Nation's Report Card," is the only nationally representative and continuing assessment of America's public and non-public school students at the 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-grade levels. The goal of the NAEP is to measure knowledge and skills in a number of subject areas (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002b). The longitudinal nature of NAEP

data allows for an examination of changes in academic achievement and the achievement gap over time.

According to the NCES (2002a), overall upward trends of improved academic performance, based on NAEP scores, have been observed for all students since 1970. For example, in 1971 the average NAEP reading score for White 9-year-olds was 214, increasing to 229 in 2003 (NCES 2003, 2002a). For their African American counterparts, the average NAEP reading score in 1971 was 170, which increased to 198 in 2003.

Although both groups have experienced improvement in their scores over time, a substantial differential in scores continues to persist. Over this 32-year period of time, the 44-point gap observed in 1971 has decreased by only 13 points to a 31-point differential gap. It is also significant to note that although the average scores of African American students in this group have increased by 28 points during this same period, the scores for African American students still remain within the range of the lowest performance level (between 150 and 200). Reductions in the gap were observed between 1971 and the early 1990s. During this period of time, African American students improved their average NAEP test scores at a rate more rapid than their White counterparts, thus suggesting a convergence of test scores for these two groups. However, during the early to mid-1990s, the convergence of scores ceased and reversed, and the Black-White test score gap widened again (Grissmer et al., 1998; Hedges & Nowell, 1998; NCES, 2000).

High School Dropout and Graduation Rates

Comparisons of the high school graduation and dropout rates of African American and White students provide another perspective from which to examine the academic achievement gap. Reports from sources such as the NCES and the U.S. Census Bureau corroborate the fact that African American students drop out of school at higher rates and graduate from high school at lower rates than do their White peers (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001; Newburger & Curry, 2000). According to the NCES, for example, the dropout rates for 16- to 24-year-old White and African American youths in October 2000 were 6.9% and 13.1%, respectively (Kaufman et al., 2001). The high school completion rates (graduation plus diploma equivalence) among 18- through 24-year-olds in 2000 were 91.8% for Whites, but lower for African Americans at a rate of 83.7% (Kaufman et al., 2001). As of March 2000, 8.4% of Whites between the ages of 20 and 24 indicated "not high school graduate"

status, while 19.5% of their African American counterparts reported likewise. In the same report, 91.6% of Whites and 80.5% of African Americans between the ages of 20 and 24 reported “high school graduate or higher” status (Newburger & Curry, 2000).

Post-Secondary Education

Although key concepts change from primary and secondary education to post-secondary venues, the effects of the academic achievement gap continue to persist—even for those African Americans who are able to defy the odds by attending college. At the post-secondary education level, factors such as admissions, enrollment, retention, attrition, preparedness, and persistence are documented indicators of the academic achievement gap where the differences are observed and measured by race.

Allen (1992) posits that the attrition of students of color at the post-secondary education level is one of the major obstacles to educational equity, which threatens to erode the significant gains of enrolling students of color over the past decades. Much has been debated about African American student retention rates at colleges and universities. This debate focuses on several critical factors that affect these problems: (1) the preparedness of African American students to matriculate in higher education; (2) the psychosocial and intellectual factors that affect African American students’ performance and success in college; (3) the institutional barriers to African American students’ success; and (4) the intrinsic social, economic, and political problems facing African American students (Green, 2001).

Differences in academic preparation are also an important factor observed in college enrollment and persistence rates. Adelman (1999) concludes that the quality and rigor of the high school curriculum are more important predictors of bachelor’s degree completion than test scores or class rank. As previously noted, African Americans are tracked into fewer academically challenging courses in high school, which results in problems with their academic preparation. Many are often unaware of the skills needed to balance the multiple demands of the college experience (Jones, 2001). Once a student is enrolled it is the institution’s responsibility to ensure that it is providing the essential tools and skills for students to navigate the academic environment they have selected to attend. Specifically, for African American students, it is imperative that administrators, faculty, and staff assist in the transition to alleviate obstacles these students may experience.

Assessments for College Entry/Admissions

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), administered since 1926, and the American College Test (ACT), administered since 1959, are given yearly to students with college aspirations. The purpose of these achievement-based tests is to assess the educational development (e.g., verbal and math ability) of high school students and their ability to complete college-level work. College and university admissions officers use these test scores to assist in making decisions about admittance. As in the measures of academic achievement previously detailed, differences for African Americans and Whites are observed for scores on these tests. For example, in 1991 the national average composite score for all college-bound seniors on the SAT was 999, with 1,600 being the highest score attainable (College Board, 2001). For White test-takers, the average composite score was 1,031, while it was only 846 for African American test-takers. Ten years later in 2001, the national average was 1,020 for all test-takers: 1,060 for Whites and 859 for African American test-takers. Minority SAT test-takers represented one-third of the college freshman class of 2001—the largest number of minority students in the history of the test (College Board, 2001). Among this group of 1.3 million students, approximately 364,000 of them also reported being first-generation college students. These facts, along with the increases in SAT scores during the 1990s, represent progress for minority and economically disadvantaged students; however, the 185-point differential between the scores for White and African American students suggests that the academic achievement gap observed in elementary school does not abate in high school or at college entry.

The Collegiate Experience

The *Minorities in higher education 2003-2004: Twenty-first annual status report* (Harvey & Anderson, 2005) shows significant gains for students of color in college enrollment, but these students still lag behind their White counterparts in rates at which they pursue higher education (Harvey & Anderson, 2005). The report revealed that from 1991 to 2001, college enrollment of minorities rose by nearly 52%, from 1.5 million to more than 4.3 million students. However, even *this* significant gain made by African Americans and other minorities did not eliminate the enrollment gap when compared to their White counterparts. The social and economic impact of these enrollment deficiencies will

continue to be one of the major challenges in higher education if policymakers, educators, and parents are not held accountable.

Once students are enrolled, retention then becomes the challenge. Retention refers to a higher education institution's ability to keep its students (Tinto, 1993; Gebelt, Parilis, Karmer, & Wilson, 1996; Young, 1992). Unfortunately, many students choose to leave their college or university before they complete their degrees. In his book *Leaving College*, Vincent Tinto (1993) states that of "nearly 2.4 million students who entered higher education for the first time, over 1.5 million will leave their first institution without receiving a degree" (p. 8). Therefore, the number of students leaving their college or university exceeds the number of students who decide to remain on campus.

Attrition, as defined by Levin and Levin (1991), refers to those students who either (a) permanently drop out of college or transfer voluntarily to another campus, or (b) drop out of college as a result of inadequate grades, and is another way to examine the achievement gap at the post-secondary level. Attrition rates in higher education institutions range from 10% to 80% (Braunstein & McGrath, 1997; Tinto, 1993). For African American students, higher attrition rates are largely attributable to these students' socioeconomic background and the characteristics of the institutional environment (Green, 2001). Regrettably, information related to satisfaction with the social life or student peer group is not available when initial enrollment/admissions decisions are made (O'Toole & Peterson, 1999). Therefore, there is not much information available to help determine whether or not there is a good institutional fit for students when they enroll. Subsequently, it is hard for institutions to control for their attrition rates.

As previously stated, the academic environment is an essential element in the retention of African American students. Young and Rogers' (1991) research showed that African American students who are from working class families and from inner cities appear to suffer the most from acculturation stress resulting from having to adjust to college culture. Further, Mayo, Murguia, and Padilla (1995) found, when comparing the college experience of African American students with their White counterparts at predominantly White institutions, that formal social integration had a much greater effect on African American student performance. Both of these studies help reaffirm Tinto's (1975, 1993) model of student persistence, which details a theoretical foundation that investigates why behaviors occur and how they affect student persistence. The basis of Tinto's 1975 model is built upon the notion of academic

and social integration whereby the student is immersed in the many dynamics of college life (Metz, 2004).

Educational Attainment and Income

The persistence of the academic achievement gap has long-term effects beyond college. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), postsecondary educational attainment varies significantly by race for U.S. citizens ages 25 and older. Table 1 provides an illustration of these differences by race.

The rates of educational attainment for African Americans are lower than those for both the total U.S. population and the White sub-population. This observation is significant because of the relationship between educational attainment and future economic status in America (Day & Newburger, 2002). Earnings increase with educational level. In 1999, the average income for a U.S. citizen without a high school diploma was \$18,900, while it was \$33,000 for those with an associate's degree, \$45,400 for those with a bachelor's degree, \$54,500 for those with a master's degree, and \$81,400 for those with a doctoral degree (Day & Newburger, 2002). These earnings, by educational attainment, compound over the life span. Based on statistical estimating procedures known as "synthetic work-life estimates," Day and Newburger (2002) demonstrate the magnitude of these differences by race. They estimate the work-life earnings (at age 65) for Whites and African Americans without a high school diploma as \$1.1 million and \$0.8 million, respectively (Day & Newburger, 2002). At the bachelor's degree level, their estimates are \$2.2 million for Whites compared to \$1.7 million for African

TABLE 1. Percentage of U.S. Population Over Age 25 with Postsecondary Education by Race/Ethnicity

Educational Attainment	% U.S. Population over Age 25 as of March 1999		
	Total	White, Non-Hispanic	Black, Non-Hispanic
Associate's Degree	7.5%	8.1%	6.4%
Bachelor's Degree	17%	18.5%	10.9%
Master's Degree	5.6%	6.2%	3.7%
Doctorate Degree	1.2%	1.3%	0.3%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2000). *Educational Attainment in the United States: Population Characteristics*.

Americans; and at the advanced degree level, the earnings are projected to be \$3.1 million for Whites and \$2.5 million for African Americans. Such differences suggest that the academic achievement gap is deeply rooted in economic inequality.

Taken in consort, these statistics support the importance of understanding why the academic achievement gap persists for African Americans; however, only small strides have been made to eliminate the gap. Even though we have seen IQ and achievement test scores, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment rates increase for African American students, these students continue to be plagued by a lack of preparation in K-12, and low retention and graduation rates at the collegiate level.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Substantial attention has been given to the academic achievement gap in the literature. Within the past decade, two theoretical perspectives have emerged that inform an understanding of why the academic achievement gap persists; social dominance theory and stereotype threat.

Social Dominance Theory

Social dominance theory (SDT) is an emerging social psychological theory that attempts to explain the persistence and sustenance of social inequality (Pratto, 1999). According to the propositions of SDT, all modern societies are characterized by dominant and subordinate groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Van Laar & Sidanius, 2001). Within the context of American culture, social dominance theory asserts that African Americans have subordinate group status. The allocation of resources is such that members of the subordinate group are less likely to possess or attain power and positive and socially desirable resources than the members of the dominant group.

Because of processes related to the presence or absence of social, economic, and cultural capital; the effects of personal and institutional discrimination; and reactions to the long-term effects of low social status, African American children are less likely to experience academic success at the same rates or levels as their counterparts who are members of high-status or dominant groups (see Van Laar & Sidanius, 2001 for a comprehensive review of these processes). Within this framework,

economic capital has an impact on a family's ability and/or inability to obtain social and cultural capital and pass it on to its children.

Within the educational or schooling domain, as categorized by Van Laar and Sidanius (2001) and supported by numerous studies and observations, African American children are (1) more likely to attend schools of poorer quality than the dominant group, (2) less likely to be referred to intellectually challenging and/or educationally gifted classes, (3) differentially tracked into less academically enriching classes than their dominant cohort, and (4) encounter differential (lower) teacher expectations regarding their academic abilities (see Biddle, 2001; Cabello & Burstein, 1995; Darity, Castellino, Tyson, Cobb, & McMillen, 2001; Ferguson, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998b; Kozol, 1991).

Stereotype Threat

The phenomenon of stereotype threat, a social psychological concept, attempts to offer an explanation for the ever-present differences in academic performance and achievement between minorities and their majority counterparts. It has been tested primarily at the college level; however, investigations have recently been conducted at the junior high and high school levels. According to Steele and Aronson (1998), members of minority groups are often aware of the negative stereotypes that exist about them. This awareness presents "the possibility of being judged or treated stereotypically, or of doing something that would confirm the stereotype. When a stereotype is particularly hurtful, (it) can seriously disrupt the lives of those to whom it might apply" (Steele & Aronson, 1998, p. 401).

The existence of stereotypes is strongly supported and documented in various studies under different circumstances. General findings suggest (1) a group's performance is significantly worse when group members are aware of the negative expectancy of their performance (Brown & Josephs, 1999; Croizet, Desert, Dutrevis, & Leyens, 2001; Leyens, Desert, Croizet, & Darcis, 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995); (2) negative stereotypes create pressure that undermines test performance (Leyens et al., 2000; Osborne, 2001; Steele & Aronson, 1995); (3) individuals fear fulfilling the negative stereotype associated with their group (Osborne, 2001; Steele & Aronson, 1995); (4) in the presence of stereotype threat, performance in a specific domain suffers because the individual's focus is taken away from the task and is placed on the importance of performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995); (5) when threat is eliminated, group differences no longer exist, or they are significantly

reduced (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Croizet et al., 2001; Quinn & Spencer, 2001; Steele & Aronson, 1995); and (6) anxiety is a mediator of racial differences in academic performance (Aronson, Quinn, & Spencer, 1998; Osborne, 2001; Steele, 1997).

Social dominance theory and stereotype threat both contribute to explanations of the ever present academic achievement gap in individual, institutional, and societal dimensions. They provide key concepts that frame the African American family as subordinate members of a group-based and hierarchical American society. According to these theories, it is this subordinate status, and not race, that places African American children at a disadvantage because it translates into differential access to, and their families' possession of, social, economic and cultural capital. Furthermore, these theoretical frameworks identify the impact of institutional discrimination on differential outcomes as well as the development of potentially self-debilitating coping strategies among members of a subordinate group.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

What happens if African American students continue to receive fewer resources than their counterparts? What will happen if the academic achievement gap does not close for African Americans? And more importantly, what can we do about it, if anything? The vulnerabilities of African American students in educational institutions are created to a large degree by the conditions that subordinate social status perpetuates. The many adverse social conditions associated with the gap (e.g., poverty, discrimination, social disadvantage and institutional barriers) implicate the need for intervention in social reform and political domains; however, intervention strategies that focus on the empowerment of the African American family system are also important.

Contrary to beliefs present in the *pop culture*, African Americans as a group love, highly value, and strongly desire educational attainment for their children (Greif, Hrabowski, & Maton, 2000; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; S. Hill, 2001). In the words of Constable and Lee (2004), "the family is the first educator of the child, and the school cannot accomplish its purpose without at least the implicit support of the family" (p. 220). Given the educational experiences of African Americans presented in this review, some might argue that the previous quote *blames the victim*. Instead, it is our stance that it actually empowers parents and caregivers

of African American children to positively influence their academic achievement, school experiences, and educational attainment by taking on proactive roles.

Parental involvement has many dimensions and is defined in a myriad of ways; nonetheless, research on parental involvement has demonstrated its positive and significant association with academic achievement (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; N. Hill, 2001; Meidel & Reynolds, 1999). In a synthesis of research findings on the impact of family involvement on student achievement, Henderson and Mapp (2002) summarized that families of all cultural/ethnic, educational levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds can and do support their children's learning in the home. Furthermore, they summarized the increased likelihood of positive outcomes for children whose parents are involved in their learning/education. Such children (1) adapt well to and regularly attend school; (2) earn better grades and higher standardized test scores; (3) have better social skills; (4) enroll in rigorous classes such as honors, advanced placement or college preparatory; (5) are promoted to the next grade; (6) graduate from high school; and (7) pursue post-secondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

African American families may provide educational-related support to their children both in the home and at school. Home-based correlates of improved academic achievement include food and nutrition, reading to young children, limited and monitored television time, school stability (infrequently changing schools), and assistance with completing homework (Barton, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Providing a supportive environment, characterized by structure, protection, and accountability, is also associated with academic success (Greif et al., 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Socially disadvantaged and/or poor families are likely to experience barriers to providing such supports to their children. However, practitioners, especially social workers and educators in the areas of early childhood development, literacy, social services, schools, community-based organizations, and after-school programs, are in pivotal positions to help eliminate such barriers in partnership with African American families.

It is important for parents and caregivers to communicate educational expectations to children. It is never too early to tell an African American girl that she will go to college or to tell an African American boy that he can and will become a doctor. Family support and setting early educational goals are two of the strongest predictors of student development, college aspirations, motivation, academic success, and college entry (Tierney & Auerbach, 2004). Students whose families regularly discuss

grades and academic expectations as well as college plans with them, beginning at an early age, are more likely to attend college. It is equally important for parents to communicate with teachers and school administrators.

According to social dominance theory, African American parents may not feel empowered to advocate for their children in the school setting. School social workers are strategically positioned in schools across the country to engage, empower, advocate for, and support African American parents—thus confronting and dismantling barriers to parental involvement. Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001) suggest that the notion of parental involvement in schools be reconceptualized as *collaboration*. This reformulation forces schools to acknowledge and value parents. Too often, schools label parents as apathetic and disinterested in their children's academic performance without acknowledging the presence of institutional characteristics and barriers that do not support family-school collaboration. In order to remedy the achievement gap, schools and their personnel must be willing to acknowledge the impact of culture, social status, poverty, and inequality on academic achievement. Furthermore, they must take the next step, which is to foster respectful and trusting relationships with African American families. According to Henderson and Mapp (2002), schools must develop a capacity to work with families; to engage them and elicit their ideas for and support of improving the school; and to develop their sense of confidence and power within the school setting, because these factors are all characteristics of higher performing schools.

Once the African American student reaches the collegiate level, his/her family continues to be a critical support system. Providing guidance and financial support become essential elements for academic success. As stated earlier, financial need is a major factor affecting student persistence. Even though low-income students try to avoid student loans, many of their families cannot afford to finance their college education. Hence, many are forced to borrow and accumulate substantial debt over the course of their college experience (King, 2002). Family finances and persistence influence academic achievement (Tinto, 1993). Due to personal family resources, or lack thereof, many students must work part- or full-time just to meet their expenses. Additional research is required to determine how many students would have persisted and/or maintained a higher academic performance if they did not have to work to either support their day-to-day expenses or to be able to pay for college. While the cost of college may be a short-term imposition on many families, the cost associated with not going to college is likely to be a greater hindrance for the long-term.

This review presented a trajectory of the long-term unfavorable effects of the academic achievement gap on African American children and their families. The gap's trajectory begins prior to school entry, continues to manifest itself across the entire life span, and is then transmitted to the next generation. The academic achievement gap is a reality that impedes social and economic advancement for the African American family. In order to strengthen the African American family via academic achievement and educational attainment, the amelioration of the gap must be a primary goal. As researchers we continue to grapple with what remedies can be implemented to address the achievement gap. In light of all the research and data that have been shared, one can assume that without quality education and higher rates of educational attainment at all levels, the road to social and economic equality for the African American family will continue to be plagued by barriers.

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