

PERCEPTIONS OF THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP AS EXPERIENCED AMONG  
ACADEMICALLY PROFICIENT TO HIGH-ACHIEVING AFRICAN AMERICAN  
ADOLESCENTS IN THE RURAL SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES: A  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Tony Antonio Dominic Roberts

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe how the achievement gap is perceived as a lived experience by African American adolescents in a southeastern United States school district. The perception of the achievement gap as a lived experience among African American adolescents is generally defined as the meaning this group ascribes to their lived experience in the academic achievement gap. The theory guiding this study was Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Vygotsky theorized that sociocultural learning precedes cognitive development; therefore, African American adolescents' sociocultural awareness of the gap, or the meaning or lack of definition in perceptions of the academic achievement gap, would then precede their abilities to make developmental strides to close the achievement gap. Following a purposeful sample, data collection consisted of a 1-hour individual interview with each adolescent participant encompassing questions designed to probe their academic experiences. The second interview was also 1 hour, conducted collectively as a focus group interview. Both the individual interviews and the focus group interview were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Participants journaled their thoughts throughout the data collection phase. Data were then analyzed by describing as well as coding to organize and classify information. This process served to identify categories and themes from the research. Interviews were coded to highlight significant statements and identify themes. Trustworthiness was confirmed by lucid descriptions as well as clarification of subjects' statements.

*Keywords:* achievement gap, adolescents, African American, rural, high-achieving

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### **Dedication**

This research is dedicated to my mother, Edna Elizabeth Goode Roberts and my sister,  
Monica Nadine Roberts Petty.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to acknowledge the thousands of students I have taught throughout my career. My magnified view of their learning experiences and environment have shaped my educational philosophy and influenced my educational interests, which led me to this research. I also would like to acknowledge colleagues who have shared their expertise with me, and critiqued as well as encouraged me throughout my career. Their knowledge and expertise have sharpened me as an educational leader. I thank my family, a constant support in my educational pursuits. Finally, I would like to thank my committee chair and committee members for their tireless work in this process.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

End of Grade Assessment (EOG)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

North Carolina Department of Instruction (NCDPI)

Standard Deviation (SD)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

The gap in academic achievement between African American adolescents and their Caucasian counterparts has been studied for decades. In addition, researchers have voiced varying opinions on the reasons for the achievement gap. Though improvements have been made incrementally, the gap remains worthy of investigation because it is a persistent reality for families and educators across the nation according to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). Chapter One of this study includes an exploration of the background of the achievement gap in America, along with motivation to study the phenomenon, and the assumptions brought to the research. In addition, the problem and purpose statements, the significance of the study, and the research question guiding the study are presented. Chapter One concludes with a list of definitions germane to the study, followed by a concise chapter summary.

### **Background**

#### **Historical**

The academic achievement gap in America has been a long-standing educational concern (Spitzer & Aronson, 2015). African Americans began their academic journey in the United States at a significant disadvantage in comparison to Caucasians (Mitchell, 2008). Refused education as slaves, Africans were at the mercy of some brave and compassionate masters or their children who would teach their slaves to read (Mitchell, 2008). After emancipation, African Americans were able to set up schools for themselves and, for a time, attempted to level the playing field of education in community-oriented schools established just for them (Pellegrino, Mann, & Russell, 2013). This brought about the creation of the Jim Crow laws of

the South that embedded racism in the very fabric of American society, causing separation and disenfranchisement of a people that had endured the harshness of slavery for hundreds of years (Graff, 2011).

The systematic racism of the Jim Crow laws affected the education of African Americans by requiring separation (Graff, 2011). This separation was very different from the schools African Americans created to educate themselves to take advantage of their newfound freedom. The separation of Jim Crow was a separation encompassing the intent to establish the superiority of Whites and the inferiority of Blacks in the United States (Graff, 2011). According to Carter-Andrews (2012), the concept of race is rooted in the power hierarchy, rendering many people of color as subdominant in mainstream contexts. Hucks (2011) added that historically, African American males bore the weight of timeless atrocities, experiencing a painful history of discrimination that continues to influence their marginalization in society. In 1954, the Supreme Court decided in the landmark case of *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* to desegregate students in the United States. Differentiation in educational instruction became very important as educators were then faced with learning how to nurture and develop students from very different backgrounds and confront their cultural differences with students (Madyn, 2011).

## **Social**

The NAEP was first administered to eighth graders in 1969. Since that time, the NAEP (otherwise known as The Nation's Report Card) has shown persistent discrepancies in educational achievement among student groups, with African American, Latino, and American Indian student outcomes at the lowest levels of achievement (Pitre, 2014). A considerable gap in academic achievement existed in the assessment performances of African American children and their Caucasian counterparts ranging typically from a half a standard deviation (SD) shortfall in

elementary school and stretching to a full SD by the time the students reached their senior year in high school (Gorey, 2009).

There have been significant gains in achievement that have paralleled political gains for African Americans in the United States. As educational equality has improved, the gap has decreased. Improvements in achievement resulting from the civil rights movement of the 1960s allowed more ethnic minorities access to quality schools with high quality curricula and well-prepared teachers outside of their neighborhood schools, but this progress has steadily and gradually declined (Pitre, 2014).

According to Levine and Levine (2014), change in the achievement gap has been slow, but incremental. The small increments of improved achievement per decade suggest that cultures change slowly and persistently over time (Levine & Levine, 2014). For example, the more than 20-point divide in test scores in reading and mathematics between Caucasian and Hispanic students on NAEP tests have not changed significantly since 1990 and the gap between African American and Caucasian students has followed a similar pattern (Beatty, 2013).

As the achievement gap has persisted, there has been a steady rise in the debate regarding the gap between White and most minority student groups (Easley, 2011). In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) made clear the intention to reduce the achievement gap when first enacted (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014). Following the NCLB passage, lawmakers and educators developed standards in attempts to point educators toward upward mobility for all students. The NCLB standards were educational benchmarks or academic skills that students were required to master at certain points in their educational matriculation. The NCLB of 2002 was overhauled in 2015 with a subsequent bill called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which gave greater flexibility to the states.



## **Theoretical**

There are many theories that have guided research into the achievement gap. The following are some examples of theories espoused in recent research. Some theories have focused on the individual, such as the expectancy value model used in a study of at-risk African American students by Darenbourg and Blake (2013). With the expectancy value model, Darenbourg and Blake proposed that the more interesting school is to students or the more they perceive it as important to their future goals, the more likely they will be to invest or exert energy which, in turn, produces academic success. In contrast, Kincaid and Yin (2011) used the need achievement theory to describe how perceptions influence the academic success of African American males. The premise of the need achievement theory is that if certain conditions are met, the student will be motivated to achieve and avoid failure. Additionally, Hucks (2011) employed the “cool pose” theory in his study of the cross-generational schooling experiences of African American males, suggesting that African American males act “cool” in school as a coping mechanism for the challenges they face.

Some theories have also been focused on the school environment and how the student responds to external stimuli. For example, Vega, Moore, and Miranda (2015) utilized the theory of invitational education to propose that urban youth may feel invited or uninvited in the areas of people, places, and policies; and suggest these forces impact their attitudes and behaviors toward school. In addition, Land, Mixon, Butcher, and Harris (2014) applied the theory of social capital, which suggests that social structures, such as school support systems, are important for the academic achievement of African American males.

The following theories stand out as seminal guides to research on the achievement gap and focus more widely on the total environment of the student, including home and culture.

Many of these theories have been guided by Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, in which he theorized that values and expectations developed in individuals are due to their social environments which, in turn, impact an individual or group's value of education. Bandura's theory was renamed the social cognitive theory in 1986. Another theory popular in the study of the achievement gap is Ogbu's (1992) cultural ecological perspective, which suggests that school is an improper aspect of African American identity. Therefore, students devalue education because some students do not believe it fits their definition of being Black.

### **Situation to Self**

I am an assistant principal with the Cleveland County Schools headquartered in Shelby, North Carolina. Having spent the vast majority of my career in the middle school setting as a teacher and administrator, the achievement gap has stood out as an important element of Western education that affects the development of the African American student's academic career. Though I have worked in a rural setting in recent years, most of my career has been in an urban setting. I have been afforded the opportunity to observe the differences in the two settings and the differing challenges inherent to each.

This research was born from my nearly 20-year career in the education of this age group and an interest in the perceptions of the achievement gap among African American adolescents. I am also an African American who only became aware of the academic achievement gap after going into the teaching field. The topic may have been raised during my college years, but I have no memory of any in-depth study of the problem or its impact on education or its social impact. I realized after 15 years as a teacher and administrator that African Americans by and large are unaware of this problem, even though it has been documented and studied by researchers for the past 50 years. The term "achievement gap" holds almost no meaning for the

students, parents, and other residents of communities where the achievement gap is most pronounced and who have the most at stake (Flono, 2015). There may be a variety of reasons for the lack of awareness.

Philosophically, I am a social constructivist in that I believe knowledge is constructed through experiences over time. “Social constructivists develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). I also believe that these experiences shape an individual’s reality and that the emerging reality produces a set of values espoused by the individual. I respect the values of all and understand that they are affected by an environment that may differ significantly from my own.

I also bring an axiological assumption to the study and concede the value-laden nature of the information gathered in this study (Creswell, 2013). While the participants hold a set of values constructed from their experiences, I also bring a set of values necessitating disclosure. My motivation for conducting the research comes from first-hand experience as a school test coordinator with the responsibility of handling test data. In my position as a school test coordinator, I have collected data through the North Carolina standardized testing protocol and subsequently helped to analyze data in order to improve the school educational program. As an African American educator, the research is personally valuable because it explores a shortfall in academics that has plagued my racial group for decades. I hope the inquiry helps educators and policymakers confront the issue with a broader understanding. Not only is there a scarcity of African American voices in the research concerning the gap, there is also little evidence that the existence of the academic achievement gap is widely known in the African American community. In my role as an assistant principal, I have attempted to educate African American students about the gap and motivate them in the area of achievement. I have found the topic

needs be delicately navigated, and one must have wisdom, fully embrace the concept of mattering, and communicate with sensitivity.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem at the center of this study is the lack of African American adolescents' perspectives on their experiences living in the achievement gap. Though the body of research is wide, present extant research lacks depth due to this omission. The literature reveals a distinct gap in knowledge of the perspectives of African American adolescents (Carter-Andrews, 2012; Darenbourg & Blake, 2013; Owens, Stewart, & Bryant, 2011; Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams & Portman, 2014). The voices, experiences, and perspectives of African American adolescents should be explored because high-stakes testing continues to indicate an academic achievement gap between African American adolescents and their Caucasian counterparts. An understanding of African American perspectives could provide researchers and educators with additional insight into the plight of African American adolescents and enable the development of strategies that could close the gap that now persists. Madrigal and McClain (2012) noted that quantitative studies contribute significantly to research, but leave unanswered questions as to why participants respond the way they do. Therefore, there is an important need for qualitative research focused on African Americans who are most affected by the academic achievement gap. This current research represents an effort to bring voice to those who live in the gap and matriculate their academic careers within it.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe how the achievement gap is perceived as a lived experience by African American adolescents in a southeastern U. S. school district. The perception of the achievement gap as a lived experience

among African American adolescents is generally defined as the meaning this group ascribes to their lived experience in the academic achievement gap.

There is little research giving voice to high-achieving African American adolescents. I believe that not only should researchers learn more from the African American adolescent experience by probing that population, but also should strive to understand more clearly the extent to which the achievement gap phenomenon is known or unknown in the African American population in the United States. Moon and Singh (2015) suggested that more exploration needs to be done to discover additional factors that contribute to or hinder academic success for African American adolescents, from their own voices. The present research was an exploration of the experiences of proficient and high-achieving African American adolescents as they live within the academic achievement gap.

### **Significance of the Study**

Understanding the experiences of African American adolescents living in the academic achievement gap may help researchers and practitioners understand how best to aid African American adolescents in closing the persistent gap. This research will extend the existing body of knowledge by giving voice to African American adolescents who live within the academic achievement gap on a day-to-day basis in schools across America. Missing from the literature are the collective voices of African American males regarding their school and life experiences, and the issues and challenges they face (Hucks, 2011). I sought to understand more fully how African American adolescents perceive and navigate life within the achievement gap.

This research has the potential to benefit all achievement gap stakeholders, including family, community, educators, municipalities, and regions. This research will add to the body of knowledge and thereby contribute to a deeper understanding of the problem.

This research was also significant partly because of the stakeholders who will benefit from its findings. Schools and educators will better understand the experiences of their African American students and the perceptions that they bring to the school environment. Educators and schools will then be better equipped to foster positive relations based on respect and an understanding of the experiences of African American adolescents. Kincaid and Yin (2011) supported this supposition by their findings that the factors detracting most from African American male academic success involved deficiencies in positive adult support. Positive adult support includes support that is well informed concerning students and their experiences in education.

While the families of African American students will benefit from this research, educators will be those most equipped to utilize the newfound knowledge in practical application. Burchinal et al. (2011) suggested that in the case of African American students, the school's characteristics, and not those of the family, were stronger predictors of gains in mathematics skills over time in comparison to Caucasian children. This may be, in part, due to the high levels of poverty in the African American community. If families are unable to provide the basic educational tools readily available to more affluent families, the students in each respective home will have vastly different educational experiences at home. Armed with knowledge gained from the experiences of children of similar background and culture, schools may utilize the information as a starting point of programs aimed at closing the gap in schools.

### **Research Questions**

This transcendental phenomenological study was guided by the following research questions:

**Research Question 1**

How do academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their experiences living in the academic achievement gap?

Recent research shows that the voices of African American adolescents concerning the achievement gap are missing from the literature. Carter-Andrews (2012) called for the need to analyze the experiences of high-achieving Black students and what sustains their success. In the current study, Research Question 1 was used to explore the experiences of this subgroup of African American adolescents as they live within the academic achievement gap.

**Research Question 2**

How do academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe the level of awareness of the academic achievement gap among African American adolescents?

This question served as an attempt to gain understanding of the participants' general awareness of the existence of an achievement gap. The term *achievement gap* holds almost no meaning for the students, parents, and other residents of communities where the achievement gap is most pronounced and who have the most at stake (Flono, 2015). Beard (2012) underscored the significance of this lack of awareness: "Appropriately identifying the achievement gap problem is foundational to corrective action" (p. 61).

**Research Question 3**

How do academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their African American peers in the achievement gap?

African American adolescents are in a uniquely advantaged position to share about their African American peers' educational experiences. Darenbourg and Blake (2013) suggested that

examining influences that exclusively impact the achievement of African American youth can provide insight into protective factors that foster achievement in this population.

#### **Research Question 4**

How do proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their school in relation to the achievement gap?

Hucks (2011) revealed the need for further exploration of the school experiences of African American boys. Owens et al. (2011) warned that there is a lack of strength-based inquiry into the school experiences of African American female students. Arguing for a broader scope of investigation, Williams and Bryan (2013) stated that future studies of African American students should encompass a variety of contexts, including rural, suburban, affluent, and multiracially populated schools.

#### **Definitions**

1. *Academic achievement gap*: The difference between the average test scores of one group and another.
2. *Adolescent*: A young person between the ages of 11 to 18 years who has reached biological puberty, but has not yet reached the age of adulthood.
3. *African American*: American-born descendants of native Africans; generally, the descendants of American slaves.
4. *High-achieving*: A student who scores a 4 or 5 on the End-of-Grade assessment (EOG) in both math and/or language arts. According to the North Carolina Department of Instruction, a score of 4 indicates the student proficiently performs on grade level. A score of 4 additionally means the student currently performs at a level predicted to be on track for future college-level courses.



5. *Proficient*: A student who scores a 3 on the EOG in both math and/or language arts.

According to the North Carolina Department of Instruction, a score of 3 is academically proficient and indicates performance at grade level, but the student is not on track to be college-ready.

6. *Transcendental phenomenology*: An approach to research that encompasses discovering the meanings people assign to lived experiences.

7. *Urban*: A high-population center.

### **Summary**

There is a lack of research regarding African American adolescents living in the academic achievement gap that exists between African American students and their Caucasian counterparts. In Chapter One, I provided the reader a brief background of the problem, the purpose, and significance of this research, as well as the research questions answered during the study. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how high-achieving African American adolescents describe their experiences in the achievement gap.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

Chapter Two reviews extant research on the academic achievement gap. The research is theoretically grounded, and this chapter seeks to explain how and why the theories chosen will guide the research process. Two theories aid in explanation of the phenomenon and guide the current research. This chapter also explores related topics such as standardized test scores in reading and math and how family, community, and socio-economic status impacts African American adolescents. I further explore how these factors impact the population before the age of compulsory education begins and how they may influence where the African American student starts school in relation to their White counterparts. This chapter also deals with research on stereotypes, educational access, and school culture, population, and composition. The literature related to the achievement gap also examines the impact of mattering in school, a student's support system which includes peers and adults. I delve into the subject of the African American adolescent's value of education and what may influence this value. Lastly, I probe the national perspective and strategies that public officials have taken. Research on the achievement gap is wide and spans several decades. What has not been explored to a great extent are the voices of those affected most by the gap--African American students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used to guide this study was Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Jaramillo, 1996). The premise of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is that sociocultural learning precedes cognitive development. The African American adolescents' sociocultural awareness of the gap or the meaning or lack of definition in perception of the academic achievement gap would precede development as it relates to the achievement gap. This study represents an effort

to understand how African American adolescents experience the achievement gap, which may illuminate the extent of the participants' awareness of an achievement gap. Vygotsky posited that social experience shapes how one thinks and interprets the world and that cognition occurs socially (Jaramillo, 1996). Therefore, a student's development cannot be understood by a study of the student alone; we must examine the environment in which the student's life developed (Jaramillo, 1996). Vygotsky is generally considered a constructivist, though his theory predates constructivism. Students construct new knowledge as a product of their experiences.

### **Related Literature**

#### **High-Stakes Tests**

Testing is the measure by which the academic achievement gap between Caucasian students and their African American classmates is observed. There are limits to "high-stakes" standardized tests. Up to this point, there is no consistent and, therefore, no convincing evidence that high-stakes standardized testing works to increase student achievement among Black or White students, except weakly in certain areas of the math curriculum (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012). Tests are simply a means of measuring performance and proficiency. Pershey (2010) explained that high-stakes tests do not identify the academic support that at-risk students need to enhance engagement, and such tests seldom identify how individual students can be helped to perform better on curriculum demands and subsequent tests.

The educator bears the burden of growth by developing interventions and engaging students in a way that increases their performance on standardized tests. One must also note that good performance on a test is not the complete measure of achievement. Achievement is also a reflection of not just one factor, but multiple contexts that engender student performance and that sometimes make test performance less intensive (Pershey, 2010). Testing, though, is an

important component of education. In order for the educator to identify deficiencies, there must be a measure that shines a light on the deficiency.

The NAEP measures educational achievement in public schools throughout the country. The organization is described on its website as the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas (NCES, 2018). Beginning in the 1970s, the NAEP has served as “the nation’s report card” by evaluating the academic skills of a representative sample of students across the United States (Condron, Tope, Steidl, & Freeman, 2013). The NAEP comprises part of the duties of the U. S. Department of Education. The Department has been assessing educational progress in America since 1963 and this assessment is conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The latest report specifically measuring the achievement gap that exists in reading and math between African American and Caucasian students was the NAEP Achievement Gaps report (NCES, 2009). This report included data from the main NAEP assessment of 2007 as well as the NAEP Trends in Educational Progress report of 2006. For the purposes of this study, I only utilized data in the NAEP Achievement Gaps (NCES, 2009) from the main NAEP Assessment of 2007, but used the NAEP Trends in Academic Progress (2013) for the latest data on trends, as it is more recent trend data than that which is included in the 2007 study. The main NAEP assessment measures the performance of students in fourth and eighth grades. The trend assessment measures students at ages 9 and 13.

**Math.** Though the gap between Caucasian and African American students has decreased over the last 40 years, the gap still persists. The Trend in Academic Progress (NCES, 2013) assessment for math showed that in 1973 African Americans at age 9, on average, scored 35 points below their Caucasian students of the same age; but by 2012, the gap had decreased to 25

points, a total decrease of 10 points. In 1973, African American students at age 13 scored 46 points below the Caucasian students of the same age; but by 2012, the gap had decreased by 18 points to 28.

The main NAEP assessment of 2007 (NCES, 2009), which measures students in Grades 4 and 8, indicated similar trends. The main NAEP assessment showed African American students' scores at 26 points lower than did their Caucasian classmates in 2007. In addition, African American students in eighth grade scored 31 points below their Caucasian classmates in 2007.

**Reading.** Likewise, the gap in reading followed a similar trend. The NAEP Trends in Academic Progress (NCES, 2013) assessment indicated that African American students age 9 scored 44 points lower than did their Caucasian counterparts in 1971; but by 2012, the gap had decreased to 23 points. At age 13, African American students scored 39 points below that of their Caucasian counterparts in 1971; but by 2012, the gap decreased to 23 points.

The main NAEP assessment of 2007 (NCES, 2009) showed a significant gap in reading scores among African American students and Caucasian students in fourth and eighth grades. African American students in the fourth grade scored 27 points lower, on average, than did Caucasian students in the same grade in 2007. African American students in the eighth grade scored 26 points lower than did their Caucasian classmates in 2007.

### **Economic Disparity**

**Poverty.** SES plays a role in the achievement gap (Hucks 2011). According to the Census Bureau's report on income and poverty in the United States: 2014, 26.2% of African Americans live under the poverty line, more than twice the percentage of any other group by race. According to a report by the Pew Research Center, there are now a greater number of African Americans who live in poverty than there are Caucasians, while African Americans only

make up 13% of the total population as compared to Caucasians, who make up 72% of the total population (Patten & Krogstad, 2015). Williams and Portman (2014) posited that there is an urgent need to identify factors for fostering the academic success of Black students in response to the rise in the number of poor Black students in the United States.

One must understand the significance of poverty on assessments that show the gap exists. Many Black students score above the average for their White counterparts and many White students score below the average for their Black counterparts (NCES, 2009). The NAEP (NCES, 2009) cautioned interpreters of the data, warning that results are presented in terms of average scores, reflecting a range of performance by African American and Caucasian students. It is important to consider the plethora of research that shows the negative effect poverty has on school-age students and make a connection to the concentration of poverty that exists in the African American community. That poverty concentration will affect assessment averages based on the disproportional racial distribution when compared to the averages of other groups that have less concentrations of poverty.

Many African American families suffer in poverty, and educators may consider the academic gap that exists in the United States between Caucasian students and their African American counterparts with poverty near the forefront to the discussion. Hucks (2011) stated that many of these families also struggle for equal educational opportunities for their children, especially poor and working-class families living in inner-cities and rural areas. This struggle continues in the classroom for poor African American children, as lower expectations and failure to successfully communicate expectations and provide effective instruction and evaluations result from the cultural differences between middle-class teachers and lower-income families (Burchinal et al., 2011).

**Mobility.** Poverty has detrimental effects on children of any race and disproportionately affects African Americans (Patten & Krogstad, 2015). Beatty (2013) found that low-income children are more likely than are their peers to move (change residence and often school or district) frequently as a result of destabilizing factors of a low income status, with the impact on children increasing with each move. Grigg (2012) found a statistically significant negative effect from student mobility and student growth in both reading and math.

Student mobility often negatively affects student academic success, but another problem that has been noted is absenteeism. As Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2011) reflected on students who were among the lowest performers at their school, they noticed problematic patterns in those students' attendance and engagement. After this observation, Fisher et al. implemented strategies such as first noticing the absences, employing social workers to make random visits to the homes of absent students, celebrating attendance, and addressing engagement in the classroom. "Overall, after the intervention, 91% of the students passed the English Language Arts exam the first time they took it. The state average was 79%" (Fisher et al., 2011, p. 63).

**Access.** Lack of access to quality education is a disadvantage faced by students who live in poverty. Once the age of compulsory education has been reached, access to quality education becomes a factor. Some scholars use the terms *achievement gap* and *opportunity gap* interchangeably. Pitre (2014) stated that in progressive circles the term *achievement gap* is becoming synonymous with the term *opportunity gap*, which gives consideration to the unequal schooling practices in the country that consistently denies racial and ethnic minorities equal opportunities for high-quality education. Pitre (2014) explained that inequalities are well-documented as related to well-prepared, high-quality teachers and quality curriculum. According to Milner (2012), attention should be refocused away from analyses and discourse

around the achievement gap, which inherently has a standardized emphasis on the opportunity gap. This refocus may help researchers gain a better understanding of the myriad of ailments that contribute to the gap, one of which is segregation. Condrón et al. (2013) suggested that school racial segregation is one of the many sources of the Black–White achievement gap. As Easley (2011) stated, “Along with high quality curricula, the parity of access to educational opportunities is an indisputable maker of academic success” (p. 232).

Some researchers place blame on systematic factors such as equal access. Condrón et al. (2013) posited that recent literature does not give adequate attention to the fact that Black and White students in the United States do not attend the same schools. According to Tucker-Drob (2012), any gains made to close the gap in preschool are erased by the militating factors of inequalities that exist during the elementary school, middle school, and high school years. Beatty (2013) brought a balanced view to the discussion, noting that to experience multiple risks over long periods of time presents the highest risks to student wellbeing and achievement. Additionally, Beatty pointed out that children and adolescents in those circumstances require greater support from many coordinated sectors. In essence, home, school, and neighborhood factors may contribute to the disparity.

Another element of disparity is the access to social resources. Social capital, for example, is knowing someone who has gone off to college, owns a business, or is involved in the local political system. Students from disadvantaged communities and cultural groups often lack the connections in the community to advance themselves, even if their academic performance is proficient to high-achieving. Zeisler (2012) called this the worst part of the achievement gap; the cycle in which those who have high social capital maintain their status while those with little or no social capital are inhibited from gaining a higher status. A potential danger in past research



on the achievement of African American students has been focusing too narrowly on poverty as a condition or reality and not enough as a structural limitation to potential socializing opportunities (Madyun, 2011).

While some scholars believe social capital inhibits ethnic groups and those from low economic status, others present cultural capital as more impactful. For example, Harvey, Slate, Moore, Barnes, and Martinez-Garcia (2013) explained Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. Bourdieu distinguished between three subtypes of cultural capital: (a) Embodied cultural capital is an impression upon one's character and way of thinking; (b) Objectified cultural capital consists of objects owned that are symbolic or resources; and (c) Institutional cultural capital includes forms of academic credentials or qualifications. Harvey et al. (2013) argued that social capital will not necessarily embellish academic success among students, but suggested that cultural capital may directly enhance academic success. Ford and Moore (2013) made an important point, stressing that African American families are usually concerned about their sons' education, but at times, they have little social, cultural, educational, or fiscal capital to assist them.

### **Political Response**

Some describe the achievement gap as a pervasive and pernicious problem facing the country (Burchinal et al., 2011; Darnesbourg & Blake, 2013), and see the successful education of America's children as a type of barometer of the health, continued power, and global influence of the United States. "Furthermore, the health of any democratic society is predicated on the ability of its population to make informed choices at the ballot box. When large segments of the population are inadequately educated, democracy's health is at risk" (McKown, 2013, p. 1120). McKown (2013) also associated academic achievement with eventual jobs and wages. Li and

Hasan (2010) globalized the focus by suggesting, “The academic success of minority students is important because the nation cannot successfully compete in a global market when a considerable portion of its school population is under-educated” (p. 47). Gorey (2009) saw the problem facing America throughout its sometimes dark history, saying that the disappearance of the academic achievement gap will mark the end of the nation’s civil rights march, symbolizing the arrival at the “promised land” spoken of by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Currently, the gap is a sentinel indicator of society’s remnant injustice.

These issues will only change when citizens believe there is a need for a concerted effort to tackle the achievement gap problem, but African Americans are at a political disadvantage. Hartney and Flavin (2014) found that Caucasian opinion in support of education reforms and subsequent teacher quality reform policymaking are significantly tied to the performance of Caucasian students, but not African American students. Moreover, Hartney and Flavin reported that Caucasian citizens are less likely than African Americans to think that government has a responsibility to close the gap and that it is less of a policy concern. In most areas of the country, Caucasian Americans make up the voting majority, so these opinions about education reform can significantly impact the political importance placed on African American educational concerns. “Recognizing the gap as being morally wrong and harmful to some (while not others) marks the beginning of ethical responsibility” (Beard, 2012, p. 61).

**Policies.** Academic standards are not new; they have been around for some time and have developed in waves (Easley, 2011). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law by then-President Lyndon B. Johnson in response to poverty and inequity in the education system (El Moussaoui, 2017). The ESEA did not specifically address the academic achievement gap among Blacks and Whites, but did serve to focus attention on the

issues facing Americans who were poor, creating the Title 1 program. The standards movement experienced its inaugural thrust from the National Commission of Excellence in Education in 1983 with a report titled *A Nation At Risk*. The report suggested, influentially and controversially, that the United States was at risk due to its inadequate education system (Aguilar, 2010). Scholars note the report has increasingly become politicized with little input from educators (Easley, 2011). Easley (2011) recalled the 1980s as a decade that included a persistent focus on the international competitiveness of the U.S. education system, although he also recognized the emphasis waned.

The NCLB was the 2002 reauthorization of the ESEA signed into law by then-President George W. Bush. The NCLB represented an attempt to revitalize the focus on education by mandating standards of achievement in public education. One of its priorities was to narrow or even close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice (NCLB, 2002). The cornerstone of the NCLB would be to level the academic field among African American students entering kindergarten by fully funding Head Start and other early childhood education programs (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Gaddis and Lauen (2014) noted that some researchers minimize the ability of schools to eliminate achievement gaps, but the NCLB increased pressure on schools. Hucks (2011) seemingly agreed with NCLB and its intent, saying the lens of collective achievement forces a look beyond the “what” of engagement and investment to the “who” as it relates to accountability, not just for the student, but for everyone involved in the educational process (p. 342). Vega et al. (2015) also agreed, but took a more hard-line stance toward schools, saying that the gaps between students of color and White students suggest that the public school system is one of the many systems failing to meet their educational needs.

In 2015, then-President Barack H. Obama signed the ESSA into law, another reauthorization of the ESEA and overhaul of the NCLB. The ESSA marks a distinct departure from the NCLB, most importantly, shifting the decision-making power back to the states (El Moussaoui, 2017). The stated purpose of the ESSA is to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps (ESSA, 2015).

**Funding.** Appel and Kronberger (2012) explained that eliminating factors responsible for the achievement gap may be the key to addressing future shortages of educated individuals in the workforce. Politicians and educators have, in recent history, attempted to affect the achievement gap by formulating policy to enhance the academic achievement of African American students.

There are some, like Beatty (2013), who argue the opposite point: that more money should not be placed into educational programs, saying that the picture of specific ways in which economic resources influence education is beginning to emerge, but it has not yet resulted in policies that significantly narrow the gaps. Gaddis and Lauen (2014) countered this notion, interjecting that their use of difference-in-difference models with school fixed effects, found that accountability pressure reduces Black-White achievement gaps by raising mean Black achievement and does not harm mean White achievement.

School choice has been a recent funding intersection that has created debate among differing political factions. Funding for public schools is often provided through vouchers to private schools. Simms (2012) took on the discussion of school choice and the achievement gap and found that the gap between Blacks and Whites did not differ significantly when comparing public schools to private.

## **The Student**

**Adolescence.** Adolescence is an important time of development. “Adolescence in general is a time of self-exploration and of finding one’s identity” (Owens et al., 2011, p. 34). Beatty (2013) described the adolescent phase as an important interaction among brain development, other biological processes, and social and environmental influences. Adolescents experience many developmental stresses, and these stressors may be compounded when coupled with stereotypes, less-than-ideal family situations, and poverty.

**Peers.** Peer relationships are factors that should not be ignored. Butler-Barnes, Estrada-Martinez, Colin, and Jones (2015) reiterated the importance of adolescent peers in shaping academic outcomes and found that adolescents’ feelings about their school impacts their motivation and academic outcomes. Educators may unintentionally give little attention to the importance of peer relationships and their connection to academic success. Gaddis and Lauen (2014) deemed these social characteristics of students as the most important school factors explaining achievement. African American peer relationships present even more complications when interacting within the context of the dominant culture. Owens et al. (2011) reported that African American girls in their study experienced negative peer reactions when they behaved assertively: they were called names and assigned disparaging labels. Rowley and Wright (2011) suggested that there may be a difference between African American and Caucasian students in relation to peer effect, implying that African American students are influenced to a greater extent than are Caucasian students by peers, and that more research is warranted. Olszewski-Kubilius and Clarenbach (2014) suggested educators deliberately create groups or organizations of peers who share students’ goals of high achievement and offer encouragement.

**High achievers.** High-achieving African American students exist in every area, but there has been little research conducted on this group of students. Ford and Moore (2013) stated that scholarship as well as simple advocacy for gifted and high-achieving African American males is miniscule. The absence of prolific research on this group occurs simultaneously to an underrepresentation of African American students in advanced placement courses. The underrepresentation of African American males in gifted education and other advanced academic programs, as well as their underachievement and low achievement, should not exist (Ford & Moore, 2013). Henfield, Washington, and Byrd (2014) cautioned that gaps in academic achievement also exist at advanced academic levels between Black and White students. The NAEP (NCES, 2009) reminds that many Black students score above the average for their White counterparts and many White students score below the average for their Black counterparts.

**Resilience.** Though some students face a plethora of challenges such as poverty, single-parent homes, and stereotypes, many show resilience. Many researchers also agree that being African American does not predetermine academic problems. Williams and Portman (2014) posited that though risk factors exist, the factors are not assurances that students will have academic problems, but rather increase the probability. Land et al. (2014) reported students in their study realized that if they were going to succeed, they had to grow up and act years ahead of their age in order to overcome what they called the “bad hand that they had been dealt in life” (p. 154). In other words, when dealt a hand that may be more difficult than others, persistent effort to overcome those challenges is essential. Carter-Andrews (2012) suggested that one of the most important interventions a school could employ is the encouragement of academic persistence.

There has also existed a cultural resilience. African Americans have consistently improved academically despite the systematic inequalities and injustices they have historically faced. Span and Rivers (2012) stated that in the last 30 years, African Americans have consistently raised their NAEP average reading scores to narrow gaps between themselves and their peer groups, and in a single generation doubled their high school graduation rates; adding that statistics of this nature are usually deemed progress and those who achieve them, successes.

### **The Family**

**Home life.** In addition to socioeconomics, family and community make-up may impact the achievement gap. Burchinal et al. (2011) challenged the premise of a genetic disparity: “Although cognitive skills and intelligence do have large heritable components, careful examination of the evidence suggests that genetic differences cannot explain most of the disparities in such attributes because they emerge after infancy” (p. 1405) and added that the race gap is well-established by age 3. The family and its make-up play an important role in the persistent achievement gap experienced in the United States. Parental, household, and neighborhood factors can probably account for between 25% and 50% of the Black–White achievement gap in the United States according to Gorey (2009). Some factors that may negatively impact the family unit and directly impact a child’s academic performance are single-family homes, poverty, stability, and neighborhood elements.

Similarly, Land et al. (2014) studied six successful African American male high school students and found that despite their success, most were dissatisfied with their home life because of the economic and social strains placed on their parents. These students lacked sufficient financial support and parental involvement. Something as simple as having a parent home when they arrived from school to help with homework was not afforded them (Land et al., 2014).

Land et al. also found that a family structure that excluded a father has a significant impact on children. Not having a father figure in the home caused them to have to “grow up” and often fend for themselves in ways that other students who had fathers or a father figure to guide and instruct them did not (Land et al., 2014). This phenomenon of the missing father creates a negative image that Hucks (2011) described as disengaged from their families or worse, seen as deserters of their children. Madyun (2011) added that the number of single-parent households as well as mobility, diversity, and poverty undermine a community’s ability to socially control and pass on the norms, expectations, and values that lead to acceptable successful outcomes by diluting modes of socialization. This weakened social unit, whether single-parent or poverty, makes the student’s path to success more difficult. This more difficult path is not insurmountable, but may cause a successful educational journey to require greater effort and support.

With some students facing multiple negative factors from home and community, the impact on academic success multiplies. Beatty (2013) noted that extreme disadvantage may be the most harmful, noting that infants and very young children who deal with highly stressful family situations enter school at a significant disadvantage and will present different challenges to their teachers.

**Community.** Educators are a key factor in the success of students, but as mentioned above, Easley (2011) included the community as an important factor that contributes to student success. Williams and Bryan (2013) discovered that social networks within the community provided encouragement, support, and advice at critical points in a student’s life. One can deduce that neighborhoods without these important community connections can have negative effects on student success. Beatty (2013) suggested that if a neighborhood struggles with



unemployment and safety, then students from those neighborhoods will likely struggle academically. This neighborhood factor is directly reflective of the impact that single-parent homes have on neighborhoods, according to Madyun (2011). In addition, Madyun explained that a single-parent household is a social problem more than it is an individual problem; the danger for educational researchers is their focus on family composition rather than on the presence of adult supervision and role-modeling in the community. Madyun (2011) made an interesting argument stressing that the absence of fathers in a community deprives young males of role models for the community, not just the family. This community perspective broadens the scope that research on single-family homes should take.

Communities with unemployment, safety issues, and single-parent household ills may see the institution of education within their community as a sign of hope. African American communities are increasingly and understandably frustrated over the failure of schools to educate their young men, but leaders in such communities often disagree as to how the problem can be corrected (Kincaid & Yin, 2011). The debate among leaders around how to deal with the education of their young can become points of contention that cause no steps to be taken toward improving the system. Land et al. (2014) suggested several beginning steps for leaders in struggling communities. Community mentoring and tutoring programs developed cooperatively with school and church organizations should work together to support these young men (Land et al., 2014). Williams and Portman (2014) added that community members should mobilize politically in local, state, and national levels for the benefit of increased resources for low-income communities.

**Value of education.** Adolescent relationships are akin to the interplay of individual values. African Americans now bear the weight of poverty in greater percentage than any other

group (Patten & Krogstad, 2015). Therefore, poverty and its survival is as much a part of the African American story as any. The outward display of coping with poverty and racism may, to some, show a devaluing of education and achievement. According to Henfield et al. (2014), “Most families care about their children’s academic success, but factors such as family and community socioeconomic status, number of parents in the household, and students’ age were found to hinder families’ involvement level” (p. 148). Darnesbourg and Blake (2013) observed the unfortunate reality that programs and strategies to reduce the effect of low SES on African American students’ achievement have not been forthcoming, and commented on a recent theory called disidentification hypothesis that is an attempt to explain the underachievement of African American youth, namely, that they do not value education. However, Darnesbourg and Blake warned readers to take note of the significant limitations of such studies. In contrast to the theory that Darnesbourg and Blake (2013) gave warning to, Kincaid and Yin (2011) found that the sample of young African American men who participated in their study valued their school experience. Hucks (2011) stated emphatically, “African American families value education. Their engagement and investment in the schooling process of their children has often been interpreted in ways that point out their limitations instead of the limitations of the public school system in this society” (p. 353). Similarly, Carter-Andrews (2012) stated, “As a people, African Americans embody a strong achievement orientation that is reflected in their continuous struggle for equal educational opportunity and educational attainment and success” (pp. 2–3). The state of adolescence may play a storied role in some students’ attitudes about education.

## **The School**

**Educators.** African American families are obvious stakeholders in the success or failure of closing the academic achievement gap. Educators are also stakeholders and Beatty (2013)

stated that what happens once children enter school may support those with disadvantages or may perpetuate or exacerbate the gaps. “There is evidence that White students, on average, benefit from better teachers, more challenging curriculum, and better relationships with teachers than their Black peers with similar records of achievement” (McKown, 2013, p. 1124). Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, and Holland (2010) suggested that educators may even create a warmer socioemotional climate for students for whom there are high expectations. “As shown in the literature, unchallenged beliefs in educators can lead to complacency, acceptance of failure, and low teacher expectations for African American and other underserved student populations” (Pitre, 2014, p. 214). Vega et al. (2015) stated that it is critical for educators to be cognizant of how their attitudes and behaviors may affect student perceptions and that educators should be aware of how students perceive their educational experiences in order to address their concerns. According to Carter-Andrews (2012), educators should engage meaningfully in professional development designed to help build leaders and to help classroom teachers think through the implications of their interactions with African American students. Andrews also explained that the raising of critical consciousness has to occur over a sustained period of time.

Cultural proficiency is important. Land et al. (2014) declared that teachers must become culturally proficient. This does not mean that the teacher should attempt to be colorblind. Earp (2012) explained that the intentions behind a “colorblind” approach to teaching are impeccable, but warned that mounting evidence suggests educators with the most egalitarian mindsets at the forefront of issues on race in education may be making a fatal error. Milner (2012) argued that the adoption of colorblind ideologies, positions, and practices makes it difficult, if not impossible, to recognize broader, systemic disparities in educational policies and practices.

To attempt to be colorblind risks blinding one's self to the real problems facing African American children; challenges that are not faced by Caucasian children. Therefore, an egalitarian-minded educator may attempt to treat two very similar children the same way, even though they may exist in two very different realities. This is also not to suggest students be given special treatment. Appel and Kronberger (2012) warned that any special treatment given to members of a stereotyped group that is not based on a systematic effort to reduce inequalities, but rather, is based on a spontaneous impulse by the teacher likely increases stereotype threat.

Reducing rigor in the classroom is one impulse implemented with good intention to allow students to feel a sense of achievement, but may increase stereotype threat. "Teachers often think that they can build a student's self-esteem by reducing the rigor in the classroom" (Land et al., 2014, p. 157). Easley (2011) asserted that the opposite is true by offering the following principles: (a) Students learn best when teachers, administrators, and the community have clear and common expectations for what students should know and be able to do; (b) High expectations improve learning; and (c) Student success is advanced through focus on results.

**School composition.** School composition is the general demographic make-up of the population. The academic achievement gap has been studied for decades, but according to the NCES, the relationship to school composition has generally not been explored (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). The NCES conducted an analysis of the data collected during previous administrations of the NAEP. An initial surface analysis of the NAEP assessment data in relation to school composition revealed that when Black student density is high, both Black and White student achievement was lower, but the achievement gap between Black and White students was not different. When SES and other student, teacher, and school characteristics were accounted for, the analysis revealed that White student achievement in schools with high Black student density

did not differ from White students in schools with low Black student density. For Black male students, achievement was lower in high Black student density schools than in low density schools. The analysis also revealed that the Black–White achievement gap was larger in high Black student density schools than in low density schools. The Black–White achievement gap was larger in high Black student density schools for males but not for females. Hanselman, Bruch, Gamoran, and Borman (2014) argued that larger numbers and a greater percentage of marginalized students by population reduces the potential for social identity threat. The NCES reported that when their analysis accounted for student SES and other student, teacher, and school factors, the size of the achievement gaps within each category of Black student density was smaller, suggesting these factors explained a large portion of the observed achievement gap (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). This finding suggests environmental factors play a large role in the establishment of an achievement gap.

As above, the NCES found that population composition matters in the complex nature of the achievement gap, evidencing the positive effects of diversity and that diversity does not negatively affect students of the dominant race but positively impacts students of African American descent. Gaddis and Lauen (2014) found that schools with more affluent populations are the most successful at reducing the Black–White achievement gap and reiterated the notion that differences in school composition and resources play a significant role in the ability of schools to reduce racial inequality. Gaddis and Lauen (2014) also suggested that schools target interventions to subgroups to close the achievement gap that are more specific than system or school-wide measures.

Another element of school composition is class size. Bosworth (2014) found that smaller classes have smaller achievement gaps and are especially beneficial to struggling students.

Teachers should monitor student work and provide specific feedback quickly, so students can immediately improve products and correct misconceptions, or receive praise for a job well done (Palumbo & Kramer-Vida, 2012).

**School culture.** Resilience may also be an important protectant in the school setting. “Being a Black body in a sea of White bodies is no easy task. Having to constantly manage being racially spotlighted and ignored in the school context requires effective strategies for resisting racism and, in turn, demonstrating resilience” (Carter-Andrews, 2012, p. 38). Earp (2012) even argued that some students’ homegrown cultural identities are at odds with the cultural values endorsed, both implicitly and overtly, by the schools they attend. In partial defense of the educational system in America, Gorey (2009) pointed out that schools could not have singularly caused and should never be required to be the singular solution to the Black–White achievement gap. Further, according to Gorey, schools are places mandated to support academic development and are places where children spend 30 or more hours a week, so they are probably an important component cause of the gap.

**Stereotypes.** Access to quality education includes an environment free of the covert impact of stereotypes. Stereotypes are widely held ideas individuals apply to different groups; it is a type of racism. These ideas or images are overly simplistic and are often applied generally without regard to nuances or individual characteristics of persons from that group. Stereotypes are powerful and often dictate how persons interact with or view positively or negatively an entire group of people. Appel and Kronberger (2012) defined stereotype threat as a factor that inhibits stereotyped individuals from performing to their full ability, and added that both testing and learning are made to be stressful due to the situational predicament of stereotype threat. Hucks (2011) reported that participants in his study indicated the threat of a negative stereotype

had an impact on their performance at school on a daily basis. Evans, Copping, Rowley, and Kurtz-Costes (2010) found that stereotyped individuals will internalize stereotypes and rate themselves lower in ability than their White counterparts when there is no real evidence of abilities being different. Others espouse an activist approach. Carter-Andrews (2012) suggested that it is insufficient to teach African American students to cope with racism, but that a commitment to teaching them how to resist racism and to work at dismantling the very systems and structures that allow racial microaggressions to persist is a step in the right direction.

**Mattering.** Some suggest the concept of mattering contributes to academic achievement (Appel & Kronberger, 2012; Butler-Barnes et al., 2015; Pershey, 2010). To matter and to be seen positively as an important part of the school environment is as significant to the academic achievement of African American students as it would be for any student. School counselors and educators play an important role in the way African American students perceive their worth at school. Research regarding mattering relates it to higher self-esteem, lower depression and academic stress, and greater psychosocial well-being and wellness among diverse racial and ethnic groups (Tucker, Dixon & Griddine, 2010).

According to Kincaid and Yin (2011), the factors that detracted most from the African American academic success involved deficiencies in positive adult support. Butler-Barnes et al. (2015) found that having a connection to school matters and personal assets (e.g., achievement motivational beliefs) are particularly important for African American boys. This personal connection and sense of mattering to adults in the school building may affect the extent to which teachers engage students. This engagement encompasses developing and sustaining a student's social, emotional, civic, and intellectual capacities, as well as fostering a classroom and school-wide environment where students feel welcomed, supported, and feel socially, emotionally, and

physically safe (Pershey, 2010). Appel and Kronberger (2012) even went as far as to say items found in the classroom can possibly affect the students' sense of belonging, their academic identification, and learning activities. Further, communication that activates a link to the group's underperformance or any devaluing communication or action increases the likelihood of an emergence of stereotype threat (Appel & Kronberger, 2012). If educators are willing to conduct targeted interventions that tackle the achievement gap, Tucker et al. (2010) suggested integrating the concept of mattering into discussions of school climate. Madyun (2011) lamented that often, role models are not present in the school and the youth's perceptions of work and the workforce are indirectly influenced.

School counselors are vitally important to the subject of mattering and its effect on the achievement gap. Owens et al. (2011) stated that the most prominent finding of their study of African American female adolescents was the students' reluctance to share and discuss personal issues with school counselors, and noted that one reason for the reluctance was these students not receiving counseling services upon request. Researchers have suggested counselors take an active role and meet with students individually (Owens et al., 2011; Vega et al., 2015).

**Support system.** With appropriate accountability measures in place, the African American adolescent will need appropriate support systems. At home, supports contribute to closing the achievement gap. While studying high-achieving African American male students, Kincaid and Yin (2011) affirmed the importance of home support. Williams and Bryan (2013) found that parents who praise for good grades, set high and realistic expectations, monitor academic progress, help with school work, and use physical discipline in response to bad grades and unacceptable behavior contributed most to their children's academic success.



Increased engagement with students in classrooms is essential, but schools and parents must also engage each other in order to create an environment in which students feel safe and welcome. “Because of the absence of the parent-teacher relationship in school, the students’ inner motivation to succeed caused them to seek help for themselves in the schools by identifying mentors and role models” (Land et al., 2014 p. 155). Li and Hasan (2010) found that it is crucial for the academic success of African American students that teachers develop positive personal factors through supportive learning environments. Teachers must make building positive rapport a priority so that students will approach them and seek help. When adolescents are forced to seek help for themselves, those mentors or role models may too often be their peers.

**School-wide strategies.** Individual student, classroom, and grade-level strategies are good, but school leadership should develop school-wide strategies. Researchers have attempted to prescribe solutions aimed at closing the achievement gap. Olszewski-Kubilius and Clarenbach (2014) suggested increasing the challenge level of educational opportunities. Templeton (2011) proposed that narrowing the gap begins with an understanding of the need to increase the amount of instructional time in the four core subjects offered to minority students. Based on their findings about minutes of instruction, Desimone and Long (2010) stated that increasing math instruction by 100 minutes for Black students per day during kindergarten and first grade would decrease the Black–White gap by 10% by the end of first grade.

Wright and Harris (2010) suggested a district-level initiative is needed to tackle the achievement gap challenge by becoming more culturally proficient. In addition, Wright and Harris found that in several different districts, “this level of commitment to leading the district to be more culturally proficient led to reducing the achievement gap in all of these districts by at least 10%” (p. 231). According to Elias, White, and Stepney (2014), the strategy at the school

building level should be similar by creating a nurturing school culture and addressing students' sense of meaning, purpose, voice, value, social, emotional, and character competencies. They also warned that if ethnic minority students are made aware of the long-standing gap between themselves and their White, advantaged peers, it is unreasonable to expect them to sustain a strong commitment to learning if they feel unsafe or not valued (Elias et al., 2014).

**African American-specific interventions.** African American adolescents need specific interventions targeting their population. Testing is only a measure and not an intervention; therefore, schools must develop strategies and interventions to close the gap. Land et al. (2014) suggested that when given the right motivation, encouragement, and support, students can be successful. Beatty (2013) underscored the fact that gaps are not “an inevitable fact of nature” (p. 1). When developing strategies, Hucks (2011) reminded educators that school-reform strategies must include consideration of the lived experience of African Americans and, specifically, African American males across generations. Gaddis and Lauen (2014) explained that Black students seem to gain from the attention that comes from Black subgroup-specific accountability measures, while White students, at a minimum, are not harmed and sometimes gain as well.

### **School Versus Family**

Adolescents depend on strong families and schools working together. There also exists a continued intellectual battle of school versus family in the academic achievement gap debate. Burchinal et al. (2011) found that the race gap was present by 3 years of age and concluded that both family and school characteristics were related to the development, maintenance, and perhaps widening of this racial achievement gap. “However, most educators and scholars who study the achievement gap agree with a body of literature suggesting there are both ‘in-school’ and ‘out-of-school’ factors that correlate with student achievement” (Pitre, 2014, p. 212).

Though Burchinal et al. (2011) concluded that both family and school characteristics contributed to the gap, he added that the stronger predictor of academic gains in Black children was the school and not the family. Gaddis and Lauen (2014) agreed, stating their study results suggested that schools can close achievement gaps, but warned that between school factors or factors while out of school contribute to inequality. The NCES stated in the Report on School Composition and Achievement that the portion of the Black–White achievement gap attributed to within-school (e.g., access to critical resources) differences was larger than the portion attributed to between school differences (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015).

Schools can be the great equalizer. Where “mean streets” exist, schools should be their antithesis, joining with other social service organizations to become centers of community life, providing a rebirth of opportunity (Palumbo & Kramer-Vida, 2012). Students come from many backgrounds and family circumstances, and the school may serve as a haven and the best and only option to a better path in life.

**Pre- and early compulsory education.** The age of compulsory education is the time period mandated by law for children to attend school. The experiences of students before this mandated time period of education are also said to contribute to the academic achievement gap. Ford and Moore (2013) emphatically stated that African American children are not born underachieving or low-achieving. Geoffroy et al. (2010) found that formal childcare arrangements could reduce the force of discrepancies in cognitive outcomes in kindergarten and first grade between children of mothers with low levels of education and those with more education. Beatty (2013) stated that Head Start focuses on school readiness for low-income children, but warned that as children age out of the program, their families continue to experience obstacles that undermine their capacity to meet academic challenges. Easley (2011)

argued that the capacity for educational equity is further compromised for marginalized students and families to negotiate in and out of school support services associated with achievement because of the absence of the tools necessary.

Research shows that an early focus on language acquisition and literacy increases the chances of academic success. For example, Cameron, Grimm, Steele, Castro-Schilo, and Grissmer (2015) stated children who learn more earlier, learn more overall, and the most rapid learning in reading and mathematics is evident before the third grade. SES plays a part in this early achievement. Ford (2011) observed that by first grade, only 25% of students in the top quartile academically are from lower-income families. By fifth grade, only 56% of lower income students maintain their status as high achievers in reading (vs. 69% for higher-income students). Cameron et al. (2015) confirmed a pattern of initial rapid learning, which is followed by a shift to steadier and slower rates after middle elementary grades.

### **Summary**

This chapter included discussion of standardized tests in reading and math to demonstrate the empirical data showing the gap in scores between African American adolescents and their Caucasian counterparts. A broad overview of related literature to help the reader grasp the complexity of the problem was provided. The literature shows African American students often begin compulsory education behind their Caucasian classmates. The variety of reasons for this gap were detailed, from socioeconomics to culture, as noted by researchers and others in academia. The literature points to the clear impact the achievement gap has on school test scores, but also projects its impact on the nation at large. The present research will contribute to the body of knowledge by lending voice to African American adolescents, a scarcely heard population in academic research.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe how the academic achievement gap is perceived as a lived experience by African American adolescents in a southeastern U. S. school district. The academic achievement gap is generally defined as the consistent score discrepancies on standardized reading and math assessments between African American adolescents and their Caucasian counterparts. This chapter includes an overview of the research design and a restatement of the research questions. The chapter also includes a description of the study's participants, a description of the setting, procedures, and role of the researcher; and an explanation of the data collection process. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the manner of data analysis and addresses the issues of trustworthiness and ethics.

### **Design**

This was a qualitative study using a transcendental phenomenological approach to examine the perceptions of African American adolescents in the urban setting about their lived experiences within the academic achievement gap. The phenomenological approach was best-suited to discover these experiences among a group of individuals. A phenomenology is used to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon experienced by a group of individuals (Creswell 2013). Likewise, Heppner and Heppner (2004) defined the phenomenological approach as a description of the meaning of experiences of a phenomenon for several individuals. Maxwell (2005) stated that the researcher should continually assess how the design of research is actually working, how it influences and is influenced by its environment, and suggests the researcher make adjustments and changes so that the study can serve to accomplish what is desired. I monitored the research design and made adjustments as necessary. Each individual in the

present study experienced the phenomenon differently, and I synthesized those experiences into a description of common themes. Creswell (2013) suggested the researcher reflect on essential themes that make up what constitutes the nature of the lived experience.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Research Question 1**

How do academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their experiences living in the academic achievement gap?

#### **Research Question 2**

How do academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe the level of awareness of the academic achievement gap among African American adolescents?

#### **Research Question 3**

How do academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their African American peers in the achievement gap?

#### **Research Question 4**

How do proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their school in relation to the achievement gap?

### **Setting**

The study included a sample of participants from multiple sites. Participants were chosen from African American churches within two adjacent counties in North Carolina located in the southeastern United States. North Carolina is home to 17 public universities and more than 20 private universities. Public elementary and secondary education is governed by an elected state board of education that hires a state superintendent as the head of the North Carolina Department

of Public Instruction (NCDPI). Local municipalities also elect boards of education who hire superintendents to administrate education in the local school district.

One county (Agastha) from which participants were chosen has a population of 206,000 individuals. The county is mostly rural with several urban centers. The racial make-up of the county is 83% Caucasian, 13.9% African American, 1% Asian, 1% Native American, and 1% Pacific Islander. The unemployment rate in Agastha is 4.4% and the median household income is \$39,500, with 11% of the population below the poverty line, including 14.5% of the population under the age of 18 who are below the poverty line. The local school system's graduation rate was 86.3% in 2015. The county is home to a public community college.

The second county (Clavene) from which participants were chosen has a population of approximately 98,000 persons. The county is mostly rural with urban centers. The racial make-up of the county is 74% Caucasian, 21% African American, .69% Asian, .15% Native American, and .01% Pacific Islander. The unemployment rate in Clavene is 4.7% and the median household income is \$35,000, with 13% of the population below the poverty line, including nearly 18% of the population under the age of 18 who are below the poverty line. The local public school system's graduation rate was 86.6% in 2015. The county is home to a public community college and a private Christian university.

Urban centers were chosen because of the probability of a greater concentration of African Americans residing in large cities and metropolitan areas within the United States. The African American church provided a diverse population of students from varying schools in the area with differing experiences from a variety of school settings. The African American church is similar in leadership to other religious organizations, consisting of a lead pastor, ministry staff, board of directors, and members. The churches from which participants were chosen is a part of

local African American churches belonging to the Baptist Association, with approximately 80-member congregations.

### **Participants**

African American adolescent students that are academically proficient to high-achievers in the public school setting represented the targeted participants for this study. Proficiency is a standard by which the state of North Carolina rates the success of public schools. A school's attainment of a determined percentage of students who achieve proficiency earns the school a passing or failing grade. North Carolina's proficiency standards are among the most challenging of any state in the nation and rate well compared to the NAEP (NCDPI, 2015).

North Carolina rates students' mastery of the curriculum by assigning each student an achievement level from 1 to 5. Students who scored a 3 on the most recent reading and math EOG assessments are deemed proficient by the NCDPI. Therefore, students who score a 3 were generally defined as mid-achievers in this study. Students who scored a 4 or 5 on their most recent reading and math EOG assessments are deemed college and career ready by the NCDPI. Therefore, students who scored a 4 or 5 were generally defined as high achievers in this study.

The sample size ranged between 12–15 adolescent students. Both genders were represented in the sample. This was a purposive criterion sample, meaning that students who met the criteria of having achieved a score of 3 or higher on the EOG were purposely recruited. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) defined a criterion sample as a group that satisfies particular specifications or standards. I shared the following criteria with gatekeepers at the African American churches: participants must self-identify as African American or Black on school documents containing demographic or background information. Participants must have attained a 3 or higher on the most recent reading or math EOG assessment. Gift cards in the amount of



\$10 were given to adolescents who participated in the individual interview. Adolescents who participated in both the individual interview and focus group interview received \$25 gift cards.

### **Procedures**

After successful defense of the study proposal, application was made to the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval to conduct the research (see Appendix A). After receiving IRB approval, I solicited participants from each site. Gatekeepers at the various Baptist churches were approached via letter detailing the criteria for potential participants (see Appendix B). After receiving approval from the sites and identifying potential participants, letters of consent were delivered to parents with deadlines for return (see Appendices C and D). An interview schedule was developed and distributed to consenting participants. Scheduling confirmations were sent to individual participants with dates and times of their respective interviews. The interviews were conducted in the church life center or another space deemed comfortable for participants. Students had a multitude of options to create a space where speaking freely about their experiences would be a pleasant experience. Several parents were present for the interviews, but did not participate.

In the first week, data were gathered by conducting individual interviews with participants to gain their personal perspectives on the achievement gap and a focus group interview to place on record a collective perspective. Students were encouraged to keep journals to record their thoughts and feelings about the achievement gap and their academic experiences throughout the data collection period.

In the second week of inquiry, 1-hour interviews were conducted with each individual participant. All interviews took place in a common area of the respective student's church or another predetermined location. Each interview was unstructured and open-ended (see Appendix

E). Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) defined an unstructured interview as one in which the interviewer does not use a detailed guide, but asks situationally determined questions that gradually lead participants to eventually give the desired information. In this type of unstructured format, it is assumed that the individual respondent defines the world in unique ways (Merriam, 1998). According to Creswell (2008), in qualitative research the researcher should ask general, broad questions so that one can learn from participants. An open-ended question leads to participants expounding on their answers and solicits sentences instead of one-word answers. Maxwell (2005) made an important distinction, stating that research questions formulate what one wants to understand; that is, interview questions are asked of participants in order to gain that understanding. The current researcher had the responsibility to probe further when students alluded to something interesting for the purposes of this study. In that sense, the researcher's skill was an important part of revealing the contents of the students' psyches.

The interviews were recorded using both a primary recording device and a back-up in case of malfunction. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a contracted transcriber omitting unnecessary non-language utterances like "um" and "ah" and fillers like "you know" (Heppner & Heppner, 2004).

A focus group interview occurred at the end of the second week of the data collection period in a centrally located church facility. The life center is a central meeting place in the church and provided enough room and privacy for the focus group to take place uninterrupted. Gall et al. (2007) described a focus group as an interview involving a group of research participants who are free to talk with and influence each other while sharing their ideas and perceptions about a topic. In the present study, this focus group interview was a collective interview of all participants previously interviewed individually. Gall et al. (2007) highlighted

that researchers have become interested in focus group interviews in recent years because the setting seems to stimulate participants to state feelings, perceptions, and beliefs that they would not express if interviewed individually. The focus group interview was audio recorded and transcribed in a similar fashion to the individual interviews. Participants were instructed to identify themselves verbally when speaking.

Data analysis occurred by first describing the data from reading and taking notes. After organizing and classifying the research, the discernment and identification of categories and themes took place. Member checking, which allows participants the chance to give their view of the credibility of the researcher's findings and interpretations followed to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis. This was done by restating responses, summarizing responses, and questioning the participants to ensure accuracy.

### **The Researcher's Role**

I am an African American with a very proud sense of heritage and a desire to impact those of similar heritage positively. As an educator in a public school in North Carolina, I serve as an administrator and work with students from a diversity of backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures. The academic trends of African American students, their successes and failures, are familiar to me. Although these trends reflect many successes, the academic achievement gap remains stubbornly persistent in the local district data, reflecting a pattern noted by researchers in the nation at large.

My background includes being reared in a rural setting in North Carolina, yet teaching for the entirety of my career in an urban area of the same state. Having earned a bachelor's degree in music education from Appalachian State University, I taught middle and high school music in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. After 7 years in Charlotte, I earned a master's

degree in biblical studies from Dallas Theological Seminary and an education specialist degree from Liberty University Online, whereupon I returned to the Charlotte metropolitan area to continue my career in education and work toward a doctorate in education.

The researcher is the human instrument in the phenomenological approach to research. Hopefully, that role will be a helpful one: “Being the primary instrument of data collection has its advantages, especially if you are a highly sensitive instrument” (Merriam, 1998, p. 80).

I had no authority over or association with the participants of the study. I brought to the study the assumption that African American adolescents are generally unaware of the achievement gap that exists between themselves as a group and their Caucasian counterparts as a group. This assumption arose from years of experience in educating both Black and White students as well as being a member of the targeted community.

Creswell (2013) suggested the researcher decide how and in what way his or her personal views will be disclosed to the reader of the study. As a member of the targeted community, I was aware of the possibility of a biased tendency and a desire to present issues facing the African American community as promising and hopeful. The aim of this research was, of course, objectivity, as objectivity is ultimately the best way to study problems and suggest or ascertain workable solutions.

### **Data Collection**

Data collected for this study included interviews, focus group interviews, and journaling.

#### **Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions**

1. Introduce yourself to me.
2. How would your friends describe you?
3. Do you play sports; are you in any clubs or other extra-curricular activities; what are

- some good moments you have had with your peers and teachers?
4. Tell me a little about your family, how many siblings you have, whether you live with your mother and father.
  5. Tell me about your school. What is it known for?
  6. What do you like and dislike about your school?
  7. How would you summarize your school experience?
  8. How would you describe your academic performance compared to your White classmates?
  9. On a scale from one to five, with one being unaware and five being completely aware, how aware were you before this study of the achievement gap?
  10. Describe for me any conversations you've had about the achievement gap and when they occurred?
  11. How did you know an achievement gap existed at your school? How was it brought to your attention?
  12. Please walk me through your understanding of the academic achievement gap.
  13. Can you recall any significant experiences you believe were the result of the achievement gap?
  14. If so, what made them significant?
  15. What does it mean to you to be in the cultural group that is lower performing in the academic gap?
  16. Where do you fit in the achievement gap?

Questions 1–8 were general knowledge and rapport-building questions meant to be straightforward and nonthreatening (Patton, 2015). These questions were intended to gain

insight to how the student fits into his/her environment and navigates it. Research suggests the importance of understanding the experiences of successful African American students in predominantly Caucasian contexts and what sustains their success in it (Carter-Andrews, 2012; Williams & Portman, 2014). Williams and Bryan (2013) suggested intra- and interpersonal and contextual factors of education contribute to successes.

Questions 9–16 were used to gain understanding of the participants' general awareness of the existence of an achievement gap. The term *achievement gap* holds almost no meaning for the students, parents, and other residents of communities where the achievement gap is most pronounced and who have the most at stake (Flono, 2015). Beard (2012) underscored the significance of this unawareness: "Appropriately identifying the achievement gap problem is foundational to corrective action" (p. 61).

### **Focus Group Interview Questions**

1. Did you perceive a gap before you were told about how it existed at your school?
2. Why, from your perspective, does the gap exist?
3. What characteristics of the environment of your school reflect or assist your perception of an achievement gap among African American students and Caucasian students?
4. What social factors, if any, make you aware of an achievement gap?
5. Based on your perception of Caucasian students' academic performance, how do you describe African Americans' academic performance in comparison?
6. How do you think your teachers feel your academic performance compares to your White classmates?
7. What supplementary academic support is perceived by African American students?

8. Describe your role as a student in closing the academic achievement gap.
9. Is there something else you would like to tell me of your experience in the achievement gap?

Focus Group Questions 1–9 were intended to foster understanding of the achievement gap from the perspective of the African American adolescent. There is, in general, a lack of inquiry in educational research that gives voice to the African American adolescent (Butler-Barnes et al., 2015; Easley, 2011; Hucks, 2011; Land et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2011). This current study represents an effort to correct that.

### **Journaling**

Students were given journals to record their feelings about their experiences in school during the data collection period (see Appendix F). Edwards (2006) chose journaling as a method because of its therapeutic process to enhance self-awareness, build self-confidence and/or self-esteem, and track adherence progress. In the present study, students were instructed to make entries in journals a minimum of three times during the 3-week data collection period. Students were to take at least 10–15 minutes during the day to journal. Journaling had the most potential to answer the research question: How do African American adolescents describe their experiences living in the academic achievement gap?

### **Data Analysis**

Several data analysis methods were used to describe the shared lived experiences of participants. Significant statements were identified and organized into families or emerging themes. I made every effort not to extrapolate themes from my own viewpoint or from the context of my own experiences. Creswell (2013) supported this restraint, noting the logic a researcher should follow is inductive—from the ground up—rather than handed down from

theory or the inquirer's preset perspective. Therefore, the contents of each individual interview and the focus group interview were transcribed and studied verbatim in the current study.

According to Merriam (1998), transcription provides the best database for analysis. In this study, the transcribed interviews were stored in a computer database and only accessible by the researcher.

The words of the participants were read carefully after transcription was completed. While reading the transcribed interviews, I recorded memos. Creswell (2008) noted that memos are notes the researcher keeps throughout the research in order to later elaborate on ideas about the data and the coded categories. Through memos, I was better able to keep track of thoughts and ideas concerning specific statements and to make coding corrections or adjustments as needed.

This was followed by a description of initial perceptions of the transcription. This textural description is an account of the researcher's intuitive, prereflective perceptions of the phenomenon from many angles (Gall et al., 2007). Creswell (2013) stated that the textual description activity is when the researcher builds detailed descriptions, develops themes or dimensions, and provides an interpretation in light of his or her own view or views of perspectives in the literature.

The data were then coded according to categories formulated during the memoing process. According to Merriam (1998), "Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of short-hand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data" (p. 164). The notes taken of my initial perceptions of the transcribed interviews helped me to group the information in categories. The data were organized and



classified as the research was again thoroughly read and memoed (Creswell, 2013). Memoing allowed the initiation of the process of identifying themes present in the data.

Thus, each interview was transcribed, memoed, and coded individually; and, subsequently, a cross analysis was conducted. Heppner and Heppner (2004) suggested that researchers cross-analyze the data, such that core ideas or codes are compared across the individual transcripts to determine a set of themes. This constant comparison of the codes and notes made of individual interview data helped to make connections between the disparate data.

After the cross-analysis was conducted, emergent themes that developed collectively from each data source were ascertained. According to Creswell (2013), themes or categories are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea. Those themes or ideas found to be common among participants helped to delve deeply into the common experience African American adolescents have in the achievement gap.

Subsequent to discovering the themes that emerged from the data, I interpreted the data. According to Creswell (2013), interpretation involves abstracting beyond the codes and themes to determine the larger meaning of the data. This interpretation is the core meaning deduced from the themes discovered. This collective experience of the achievement gap from the perspectives of participants revealed the essence of their experiences, which was the goal of this phenomenological research.

### **Trustworthiness**

Pyrczak (2008) noted, “When qualitative researchers speak of research validity, they are usually referring to qualitative research that is plausible, credible, trustworthy, and, therefore, defensible” (p. 139). In the current study, trustworthiness was established by triangulating qualitative strategies to confirm qualitative validity. The chosen strategies of trustworthiness

ensured that the research was credible, confirmable, transferable, and dependable. Gall et al. (2007) defined triangulation as “the use of multiple data-collection methods, data sources, analysts, or theories as corroborative evidence for the validity of qualitative research findings” (p. 657). The use of triangulation reduces the risk that conclusions will reflect only the biases of a single method and allows for a broader understanding of the issues (Maxwell, 2005). As Merriam (1998) suggested, “This strategy reduces the risk that your conclusions will reflect only the systematic biases or limitations of a specific method, and allows you to gain a broader and more secure understanding of the issues you are investigating” (p. 94). Evidence of qualitative research validity is demonstrated by collecting data multiple ways and from several sources.

### **Credibility**

Member checking was used in the present study to ensure credibility. Participants were enabled to give their view of the credibility of the findings and interpretations. According to Heppner and Heppner (2005), “The credibility of these presentations is measured by their acceptance by those same participants” (p. 177). Therefore, I shared my findings with participants. After participants have confirmed their intentions have been grasped and represented accurately, the researcher will proceed. Gall et al. (2007) advised researchers to “correct factual errors and, if necessary, report for accuracy and completeness” (p. 475). This process ensures that the participants believe their perspectives are being represented with precision.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Merriam (1998) suggested that reliability should be less of a concern in qualitative research because of the difficulty of replicating such a study. Because of the subjective natures of the participants and the human instrument, subsequent studies may not yield similar results.

Instead, focus should be on concurrence that given the data collected, the results make sense and are consistent and dependable (Merriam, 1998).

Creswell (2013) posited that intercoder agreement employs multiple coders to analyze transcript data. Utilizing multiple coders will lend support to interpretations of the data by comparatively cross-checking the codes assigned by another coder. The additional coders were individuals that have experience with the practice of coding from previous research.

Creswell (2013) suggested that bracketing or epoché is a challenge for most qualitative researchers and cited LeVasseur's stance that bracketing personal experiences may be difficult for the researcher to implement because interpretations of the data always incorporate the assumptions that the researcher brings to the topic. However, in the current study, bracketing of personal experiences took place during analysis in order to approach and interpret the data objectively. To ensure that the research was dependable, bias was forthrightly conveyed to the reader and steps were taken to dependably convey the thoughts and perspectives of the participants.

### **Transferability**

The setting and participants being studied were written about extensively to provide the reader rich, thick description. Merriam (1998) explained that in qualitative research, words and pictures—rather than numbers—are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon. Readers are able to make judgments as to whether the research findings are transferable. This method was employed as the essence of the findings from the present research are reported in Chapter Four.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Because human subjects are the focus of research, ethical practices must be kept in mind while collecting data. Regardless of the approach, a qualitative researcher faces many ethical issues during data collection in the field in analysis and dissemination of reports (Creswell, 2013). Strategies to prevent potential ethical problems before they arise during the research have been devised. One ethical safeguard is the approval of parents to conduct research using their students' responses. This is important because of the age of the participants and their inability to make such decisions on their own. Confidentiality was maintained by closely monitoring and limiting access to data and by using pseudonyms when revealing results. The research proposal was submitted to an IRB, and negative ethical consequences found by the committee in their review were removed for the protection of all participants. Each student received an explanation of procedures that will be followed during the research (see Appendix G). Students were able to terminate their participation at any time.

### **Summary**

This study was conducted to gain insight into the lived experiences of African American adolescents who live within the academic achievement gap. This chapter included details of the design, including the rationale, setting, research questions, participants and how they were chosen, procedures leading up to data collection, the manner of analysis, the role of the researcher, methods of data collection, and the techniques employed to analyze the data. Additionally, the chapter included discussion of trustworthiness and ethical issues. The overarching goal of this research was to reveal the essence of the participants' experiences living within the academic achievement gap.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe how the achievement gap is perceived as a lived experience by African American adolescents in a southeastern United States school district. The transcendental phenomenological approach was selected to give focus to participants' experiences with the achievement gap. Participants included 12 African American adolescents attending middle and high school in two adjacent southeastern U. S. counties. The findings represent an analysis of the participants' individual interviews, the subsequent focus group interview, and journaling. Chapter Four contains detailed findings of the study and narrative descriptions of the participants, using pseudonyms. Results are presented in relation to themes which emerged in the analysis of the data. Research questions are answered following the discussion of the identified themes.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study included a purposeful sample of 12 selected participants who attended public school in two rural counties in North Carolina. The participant sample included five female and seven male students (see Table 1). All participants attended high school, except for two students who attended middle school. Agatha County was represented with four students, of which two were females and two were males with one being the lone male middle school student in the study. Clavene County was represented by eight students, of which three were females, including the lone female middle school student, and five were males. Participants (represented by a pseudonym) provided a narrative description of their lived experiences and individual perspectives.

Table 1

*Participant Names, Gender, School, and County*

Participant	Sex	School	County
Amari	Female	Sheill High	Clavene
Antwuan	Male	Pioneer High	Clavene
Brykeem	Male	Pioneer High	Clavene
Caleb	Male	West High	Agastha
Elijah	Male	Northeast Middle	Agastha
Izay	Male	Castle High	Clavene
Justus	Male	Pioneer High	Clavene
Kasyris	Male	Pioneer High	Clavene
Nivea	Female	Pioneer High	Clavene
Samira	Female	Astoria High	Agastha
Savannah	Female	Astoria High	Agastha
Terrica	Female	Castle Middle	Clavene

*Note.* Table 1 shows each participant, their respective gender, and the name of their school and county. The names of participants, schools, and counties are pseudonyms.

**Amari**

At the time of the study, Amari was a 12th grade student at Sheill High School, a small school in the more densely populated center of Clavene County. She is academically high-achieving. She described herself by saying, “I’m fun, smart, energetic. I love to play around, and serious about my work.” Amari is enrolled in at least one advanced course and is a member of the school band. She lived in a multifamily complex with her sister and their mother. Amari seemed nervous during her interview, but seemed to become more comfortable as she fielded more questions. She said of her African American classmates, “They think that the teacher

doesn't really care about them, that they care more about the Whites.” Her interview was conducted in a quiet area at the local mall. Her mother was present but did not participate.

### **Antwuan**

At the time of the study, Antwuan was a 10th grade student at Pioneer High School, a large school in a small town in Clavene County. Antwuan is academically high-achieving, was enrolled in one advanced course, and was a student athlete, participating on the school football team, cross-country team, and the wrestling team. He described himself as funny and nice. He believed his social capital was based on his sports ability: “I have a lot based on sports and the things I do outside of school; extracurricular activities.” He lived with a sibling, his mother, and his father. His mother has a college degree. His interview was conducted in the city public library. Antwuan was curious about the topic of the interview and spoke freely once he was aware of the subject. His mother was present, but she did not participate. His family attends church in Agastha County.

### **Brykeem**

At the time of the study, Brykeem was a 12th grade student at Pioneer High School, a large school in a small town in Clavene County. Brykeem is academically proficient and performs on grade level. He was a student athlete and played on the school's basketball and football teams. He was also a member of the Spanish club. Brykeem lived with two brothers and their mother who is a single parent. His mother has only a high school education. Brykeem seemed very comfortable and interested in the interview topic and questions and answered freely. He described himself as funny, adding that he jokes around sometimes. Speaking of his African American peers, “Just with like the whole test, it's like they study, but when it's time to take it

they just don't know the importance of taking it." His interview was conducted in the kitchen of his home. His mother was present, but did not participate.

### **Caleb**

At the time of the study, Caleb was an 11th grade student at West High School, a mid-size school in a small town in Agastha County. He is academically high-achieving. He was enrolled in advanced classes and has been the recipient of academic awards. He described himself as hardworking, "goofy," but serious when needed, a joy to be around, and there for people when he is called on. He was a student athlete and a member of the track team. He started as a cross-country runner, but had to drop the sport to maintain membership in the marching band. Speaking of what place his African American culture has at school, he said, "I mean, it's just, I'm Black, and the person next to me is a Caucasian, and we just move on. There's nothing really big about it." Caleb lived with his mother and father. Neither parent attended college. Caleb's interview was conducted at the kitchen table of his home. His parents were in another part of the house and did not participate.

### **Elijah**

At the time of the study, Elijah was a sixth grade student at Northeast Middle School in the largest city in Agastha County. He was the lone male middle school student in the study. The middle school has a high-density African American population, outpacing the Caucasian population. Elijah is academically high-achieving. He was a part of the robotics team and a student athlete participating on the school's football, baseball, and track teams. He described himself as good at sports and good at school. He believed it would matter if his African American peers knew about the gap, saying, "Competitive. We are real competitive." He was living with his mother who was a single parent until she recently married just over a year prior to



the study. Neither his mother nor his stepfather attended college. Elijah's interview was conducted in the living room of his home. His mother was nearby, but did not participate. Elijah was arguably the most verbal participant of the study. He seemed very thoughtful during the interview. His family attends church in Clavene.

### **Izay**

At the time of the study, Izay was a ninth grade student at Castle High School, a large school in a rural community of Clavene County. He is an exceptionally tall student and a stand-out player on the school's basketball team. He is academically high-achieving and enrolled in advanced courses. Izay lived with a sibling, his mother, and father. His mother is an educator in the local school system. Izay described himself as funny, athletic, and someone who makes the best out of situations. Izay seemed very comfortable in the interview and had no difficulty elaborating on his answers. Speaking of whether his culture is celebrated at his school he stated, "I mean, it's usually made fun of and joked about, you know like, 'Black people like chicken or watermelon.' Stuff like that, you know." His interview was conducted in my office. His mother was present for the interview, but did not participate.

### **Justus**

At the time of the study, Justus was a 12th grade student at Pioneer High School, a large school in a small town in Clavene County. Justus is academically proficient and performed on grade level. He was a student athlete on his school's soccer team and the manager of the school's varsity basketball team, a job consisting of keeping the players organized, managing equipment, and maintaining uniforms. Justus described himself as dependable and someone that friends can go to. Justus lived with his mother and father. Speaking of his teachers, he stated, "So if they are teaching and our test grades are going up, that means they are doing their job and

they might get a raise.” Both parents are university graduates who met in college. Justus’s interview was conducted at the city public library. He seemed very comfortable in the interview and spoke freely.

### **Kasyris**

At the time of the study, Kasyris was a 12th grade student at Pioneer High School, a large school in a small town in Clavene County. Kasyris is academically high-achieving, the recipient of academic awards, and was enrolled in advanced courses. He described himself as talkative, “hyped,” and pretty straightforward. He was in the National Honor Society, Beta Club. He was also a star basketball player on the school’s basketball team. Kasyris lived with a sibling, his mother, and his father. His father is retired from the military. Speaking of whether there may be some indication of an achievement gap at his school, he stated, “When I’m in honors classes, and there’s only two Black people and 20 White people.” Both parents graduated high school, but neither parent attended college. Kasyris seemed very easy-going during the interview, but very curious when the topic was revealed.

### **Nivea**

At the time of the study, Nivea was a 10th grade student at Pioneer High School, a large school in a small town in Clavene County. She is academically high-achieving and the recipient of academic awards. Nivea was vice-president of her sophomore class, a member of the art club, and a student athlete on the track and cross-country teams. She described herself as funny, creative, and outgoing. Nivea lived with a sibling, her mother, and her father. Her mother is a college graduate. Nivea shared how her culture is accepted at her school saying, “My school is predominantly White, so not that much.” Nivea’s interview was conducted at the local city

public library. Her mother was present, but did not participate. Nivea seemed comfortable during the interview and was able to elaborate on her answers easily.

### **Samira**

At the time of the study, Samira was a 10th grade student at Astoria High School, a large school in Agastha County. She is academically high-achieving and an athlete, participating in cross country, track, and cheerleading. “A lot of my friends view me as a positive, lift up everybody’s spirits type of person,” she stated. Samira lived with her sister, her mother, and father in a single-family home. Both parents have advanced degrees. During her interview, Samira said of the gap, “I feel like everybody . . . all African Americans have a role in closing the gap. Because it doesn’t take just one person or 10 people. It takes all of us.” She enjoyed her school and described herself as a good listener. Samira seemed very thoughtful and methodical throughout the interview. Her interview occurred after school at the main county library. Samira was one of four students who participated in the focus group interview.

### **Savannah**

At the time of the study, Savannah was an 11th grade student at Astoria High School, a large school in the largest city in Agastha County. She is academically proficient and performed on grade level. She was a student athlete and ran track, in addition to serving as the manager of the girls’ basketball team and playing in the marching band. She described herself as easy to talk to, outgoing, a team player, and respectful. Savannah was enrolled in at least one advanced course. She lived with a sibling, her mother, and her father. Both parents attended university, have obtained advanced degrees, and one is a school administrator. “I went to a meeting before with my dad about. . . . It was for teachers, but they were talking about statistics and numbers, and numbers, and numbers, but they were showing a diagram on how. . . . They always show a

bar graph about how, ‘Here’s White people, Here’s Black people, Indians, Asians, and others.’ It would show which ones were doing better, and who’s growing and stuff.” Savannah’s interview was conducted in the main county public library. Savannah seemed very comfortable in the interview and eager to answer the questions. She had little difficulty elaborating on her responses.

### **Terrica**

At the time of the study, Terrica is a seventh grade student at Castle Middle School, a large school in a rural community of Clavene County. She was the lone female middle school student in the study. She is academically high achieving, the recipient of several academic awards, and a member of the Beta Club. She also played on the school’s basketball team coached by her mother, who is also a teacher at the school. Terrica lived with a sibling, mother, and father. Terrica was very timid and seemed nervous during the interview; she did not elaborate on her answers at all unless prompted. Even after prompts, she offered little more than short, often one-word answers. Her interview was conducted in my office. Her mother was present during the interview, but did not participate.

### **Results**

This study was guided by four research questions exploring how academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their experiences living in the academic achievement gap, their level of awareness of an achievement gap, how they describe their African American peers in the achievement gap, and how they describe their school in relation to the achievement gap. A cross analysis was conducted, comparing core ideas or codes to make connections and determine a set of themes between the diverse data. Emergent themes

that developed collectively from the data sources are presented and discussed below. Later, the themes are related to answering the research questions.

Each student received a journal after their individual interview. Students were asked to journal about their experiences in the gap and specifically any thoughts or experiences concerning any of the topics covered in their individual interview. Nine participants returned the journal. Three of the participants who returned journals made no entries. The remaining six journals contained data replicated from the other data collection methods. The focus group interview included four of the total 12 participants. Focus group interview data were used to further reiterate the thoughts, perceptions, and feelings expressed by participants in their individual interviews.

A verbatim transcription of the contents of each individual interview and the focus group interview was completed. Subsequently, journal entries were incorporated. After carefully reading the transcribed interviews, I recorded memos and described my initial perceptions of the transcription. Memos of initial perceptions of the transcribed interviews were recorded as I read to aid in understanding the interviews. The data were then coded according to categories formulated during the memoing process. Next, the data were grouped into categories of information which led to the process of identifying themes present in the data. I subsequently conducted a cross-analysis in which core ideas or codes were compared across the individual interview transcripts, focus group interview transcripts, and journal entries to make connections and determine a set of themes between the diverse data. Table 2 contains a breakdown of the themes, subthemes, and codes that resulted from this process.

Table 2

*Themes, Subthemes, and Codes*

Theme	Subtheme	Code
Life in the gap	A definition of the gap	No definition Attempt at definition
	Awareness of score comparisons	Unaware Assumed Compare Testing Bubble sheet Not aware  Value education Very important A lot Go somewhere with education Study hard Very serious College Pretty high value Success in school Degree Work really hard Advance in the world Knowledge Good/better job Move up Education is important
	Social capital	Low social capital Relationship None Not really Interaction Guidance counselor Coach There to help Not a lot Out of school White peer more social capital Not diverse Not very high Relate to teacher Couple Talk to me

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Theme	Subtheme	Code
		Church Sports Extracurricular activities Band teacher Not that many
	Mattering	Smart Adults at school Give me a chance Academic performance Strict High expectations Care Succeed College Sports team Coach Counselor accessible Teacher like me Teacher pay Raise Get paid Talk to me Conversations Personal interaction Encouragement Help me
African American peers	Approach to education	Do not value Parents Do not care Some value Depends on the student
	Attitude toward high-stakes tests	Do not take them serious Do not really care Do not know the importance Done with school Get by Do not try Depends on the student
	Score comparisons	Not aware Make difference if known Would try if known

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Theme	Subtheme	Code
	Academic effort	Do not try Parents not strict
	Parental expectations	Black parents not as strict Economic disadvantage Do not see importance
School	Perceived indicators of the gap	Few African American students in advance classes
	Subgroup specific support	No interventions specifically target African Americans

*Note.* Table 2 shows the themes, subthemes, and codes discovered in the analysis of the data collected.

### **Theme 1: Life in the Gap**

The first theme to emerge during data analysis was life in the gap. This theme aligned with Research Questions 1 and 2, which were used to discover the experiences of African American adolescents living in the academic achievement gap and their awareness of the academic achievement gap among African American adolescents.

Participant responses described their understanding and perceptions of the gap and how they experience it and are affected by it in their lives. Responses included their own valuation of the importance of educational achievement in their lives, the level of social capital they enjoy, and their descriptions of mattering to adults in their school building.

**A definition of the gap.** Students verbally rated their knowledge of the achievement gap on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being the least aware and 5 being most aware. They were also asked if they had previously heard of the term or had any previous conversations about the gap. Lastly, they were asked if they could define the term *achievement gap*.



Table 3 shows that only two out of 12 students were aware of the achievement gap, in spite of living in it for multiple academic years. A third student gave an ambiguous answer as to the existence of the gap.

Table 3

*Participants' Knowledge of Achievement Gap*

Participant	Knew of achievement gap
Amari	Yes
Antwuan	No
Brykeem	No
Caleb	No
Elijah	No
Izay	No
Justus	No
Kasyris	Yes
Nivea	No
Samira	Maybe
Savannah	No
Terrica	No

After asking the previous questions, I defined the achievement gap and confirmed its statistical existence. All participants affirmed that they understood. I then asked if there was anything at their respective schools that indicated that there was an achievement gap.

**Awareness of score comparisons.** One participant was aware of the gap because of her father’s profession as an educator. Savannah said, “I went to a meeting before with my dad about. . . . It was for teachers, but they were talking about statistics and numbers, and numbers, and numbers, but they were showing a diagram on how. . . . They always show a bar graph about how, ‘Here’s White people. Here’s Black people, Indians, Asians, and others. It would show which ones were doing better, and who’s growing and stuff.” Justus assumed that the scores were being compared based on the demographic information they have to complete before testing each year: “Well, we have to fill out that little bubble sheet every year.” Table 4 shows that only two students were aware that scores were compared between Whites, Blacks, and other ethnic groups. One participant “assumed so” because at the beginning of tests, students were asked to identify their ethnic group through marking a “bubble sheet.”

Table 4

*Participants’ Awareness of Score Comparisons*

Participant	Knew of score comparisons
Amari	No
Antwuan	No
Brykeem	No
Caleb	No
Elijah	No
Izay	No
Justus	Assumed so
Kasyris	No
Nivea	No
Samira	No
Savannah	Yes
Terrica	No

**Approach to education.** All of the participants spoke of personally valuing educational achievement very highly. The students used superlatives to describe their feelings.

Amari said she “very much” values education and “I think it’s very important to get through life.” Samira said, “I think it’s really important to me.” She further described the sentiment by equating it to her partial desire to teach, saying, “Part of me wanted to be a teacher, but then part of me wants to do something else. But, yeah, I value it very much.”

Brykeem stated that he values education “a lot.” He continued:

I take it serious because you need to go somewhere with an education because you won’t be able to do anything without your education, so I value that a lot. . . . I have to have that hunger for my education, studying, tutorials, if I need to go to get help. I stay focused. . . . Sometimes I want to fall off, but I know I have to keep moving because I want to meet the goals of college and stuff.

Savannah echoed Brykeem’s sentiments: “A lot, I guess. As much as I don’t like it at times, I value it. I think it’s important for everybody to have education.” Nivea agreed: “I think it’s very important . . . even over sports and extracurricular activities.” Terrica rated her value of education on a scale between 1 and 10 saying, “A 9 out of 10.” Justus equated his education with his future life contentment:

I value it a lot because I know you need to get it done just so you can get a good job. ’Cause the more you have, the better job you’re going to get. And nowadays, it’s all about money. So if you get that good job, you’re going to get a lot of money, so then you’ll probably be happier.

Elijah was thinking of upward mobility as well: “Education is very important; you can’t go nowhere without education, you can’t even get into college without education. You can be good

at sports, but if you don't have an education, you ain't going to do anything in life." Caleb agreed with Elijah: "I value education a lot, 'cause they [teachers, parents, the pastor] beat that into our heads; 'Education is important.' Without education, we can't get jobs or anything."

**Social capital.** Participants overall felt their teachers cared about them and they had positive relationships in the school environment. In general, though, they did not believe they enjoyed much social capital at their school in the form of relationships with individuals of influence and power, such as teachers, principals, and counselors. Some related this lack of social capital as being related to skin color.

Elijah simply said, "None. In general, none." Nivea agreed with Elijah: "None. Not really, any. I don't really know any of my teachers outside of school."

There were some teachers who were particularly significant to the students, though. Samira spoke of one teacher whom she believed is social capital for her: "Yes, I do. One actually. One relationship. She's the African American studies teacher. She's really strict, but she acts like a second mom to me." Electives teachers sometimes were perceived as social capital for some students.

Extracurricular activities seemed to enhance social capital with adults in the school. Savannah said, "Not that many, I would think. There's just one, which is my band teacher. He's also my marching band teacher. Since I'm on the BLT, the Band Leadership Team, he usually has the leadership and him [band teacher]. Then, we go out and do something. It could be, like, leadership-wise to help us with cooperation as a team, stuff like that. It's just really him."

Antwuan said, "With some teachers I have a lot based on sports and the things I do outside of school; extracurricular activities."

Caleb said, “It’s probably like a couple teachers. Not a lot.” He continued:

Well, one was cross country. So, we did that outside of school. And, I can depend on her. And, one of my counselors, she’s not there anymore, she said that if I ever need her for any college, to come and talk to her and she’ll help me.

Justus did not have the same opinion of counselors at his school:

But like the counselors and stuff, I don’t really go to them because they really don’t talk to us like that. So I’m . . . it’s just, like, they’ll send you an email really, but I would rather be told in person-to-person.

He did speak highly of coaches:

’Cause if it’s like a coach or something and you know them, they are going to expect you. . . . They are going to push you more. ‘Cause, like, my math teacher, he’s the basketball coach, so he pushed me more, and then he gave me extra help and stuff.

Elijah believed his White peers had an advantage with teachers that he did not have: “Most of my Caucasian peers, they are cool with the teachers and they’re always saying they see these teachers this place, they know these teachers from somewhere, or their parents know this teacher.” Izay stated that he did not have much social capital among the adults at his school:

Not a lot. Because they’re not very diverse. You know, they’re all usually White women or White men. . . . Well, it’s usually the White students that can relate best to the teacher. Like, they know them outside of school; like, they go to church with them and stuff like that. They’ve been to different events.

Brykeem believed his White peers had more social capital than himself: “Because, you know, White peers; they hang around other White peers. They close. The things they do outside of school and it’s not school.” Kasyris raised the same issue during his interview:

Well, the White people at our school, they usually go to all the same places and they usually see those teachers there at church, so they already have a better relationship than the Blacks, just because that's how it is.

**Mattering.** Most participants said unequivocally that they mattered to the adults at their school. Terrica offered a caveat, “Probably because I try.” Some felt as though the reason the teachers cared was because the students did well in their classes. Brykeem said,

I matter a lot because I'm very smart and they want to see me succeed in life and go to college, and I'm good at sports, so they try to send me off to play sports, get an education, go to a college that I would like to go to and further my education.

Caleb stated, “I hear a lot of teachers say that I'm a joy to be around. One of my teachers is leaving this year and she pulled me to the side in the hallway, and she thanked me for what I do.”

Nivea said, “My art teacher is very fond of me because I'm very creative in the art . . . I'm in Art I, but she believes I can go really far with my art.”

Elijah proposed that the reason he mattered was pure teacher self-preservation:

The students matter a lot 'cause our test grades, I think, determine their pay really. So if they are teaching and our test grades are going up it's . . . that means they are doing their job and they might get a raise or something.

When asked to describe a characteristic of teachers that he believed cared about him, he said, “Anytime that somebody is messing with me, they make sure that they see something is going to happen about that and they won't mess with me anymore.

Samira expressed a similar sentiment to that of Elijah:

No, I do not. I feel that some of the adults at our school, which are mostly teachers, I feel like they just want to do their job, get paid, and just go home, make sure the test is done.

Now there are a few, like two or three adults that I feel care, but part of me thinks that most of them do not care.”

When asked to describe the teachers she did feel cared she said, “They tell me what to expect on the exam. Literally help me, give me tools that encourage me, they say hello every morning to me, and I’m really close to them; we have conversations.”

Kasyris added that students know when an adult cares:

Because you can just get that vibe from some teachers. But some of them, you can tell actually care, and that’s where I go back with my coaches. I think if you spend more time with somebody, I think you’ll be able to automatically make a better bond with them than you just being in the classroom with the teacher or somebody you just see in the hall.

In general, the students seemed to feel that they mattered because of their own efforts and positive personalities; in other words, they made themselves matter.

## **Theme 2: African American Peers**

The second theme to emerge was African American peers. Theme 2 served to develop understanding of Research Question 3, which was used to discover the participants’ perceptions of the attitude toward education held by their African American adolescent peers. Participants, now having been informed of the existence of an academic achievement gap by the researcher, described their perceptions of their African American peers’ experiences living in the academic achievement gap and how widely known the academic achievement gap is among that subgroup. Participants also described their perceptions of their African American peers’ knowledge of the gap.

**Approach to education.** After speaking about the students’ personal value of education, they were asked how they would describe their peers’ valuation of education. Caleb spoke

frankly:

Honestly, at my school, they don't care about it that much. It's always about basketball or football. And, if they get, like, a D or F, they say, "Oh well, it'll be alright." And they just keep moving forward as long as they get the passing grade, it's okay.

Brykeem's circle of African American friends placed a high value on educational achievement: "They take it serious. Sometimes they won't even go to the gym and play ball or walk around or something, but sometimes they study with me and things like that."

Most of the participants expressed a mixture among their African American peers when it came to valuing education. Elijah said, "Some of my peers, they value education, they know that you can't go anywhere without it; but some of my African American peers, they just don't care."

Amari said, "Some of them don't care, but you need to care to get where you need to go."

Kasyris gave a similar response, "I know some that's really dedicated, others is just not."

Terrica, again, rated her African American peers' value of education on a scale of 1–10 saying, "Like 5." Antwuan agreed:

Probably in the middle at the moment. . . . Like they probably do care about it, but they probably don't take the time to study as much as they should or do some of the things that they'll need to do that'll move themselves up into class or make good grades.

Savannah simply said, "Some of them." Nivea said, "Some do. Some go pretty far, but others don't really care about it."

Justus answered carefully: "It's like . . . some of them, my friends, they value . . . some of them value it, but some people they just go [to school] because they were forced to." Justus also qualified his response by saying,



It depends on the African American situation. ‘Cause most people they are, like, “Oh, I’m going to make it out with sports.” And some of them, some African Americans are like, “I’m not good at the sports, so I’m going to do education instead.” And some are both.

Samira had another perspective: “At my school I feel that they don’t value it very much,” but then qualified her answer, adding, “But when it comes to going to the places like church, my peers over there, they value it very well.” She paused and said, “Well, maybe it’s like how they were raised . . . or just them not caring.”

**Attitude toward high-stakes tests.** Participants generally did not feel their African American peers took high-stakes tests seriously enough. Samira stated,

I don’t think they take it seriously. Part . . . it was like 80% don’t take it seriously, the rest do and of those who do they lie and say, “Oh, I’m gonna fail.” When really they’re passing, but then they lie and say, “Oh, I flunked that thing.”

She continued,

I feel like more of us, African Americans, should take these tests . . . pretty much any test seriously. Not just EOGs and not just lie about saying, “Oh, I don’t know this or I don’t know that.” Just study. It’s not hard. Just study and ask questions.

Amari said, “They don’t really care about them. They don’t try to study. They just be like, ‘I don’t care about it. Just let it go.’” Brykeem said,

Just with, like, the whole test; it’s like they study, but when it’s time to take it they just don’t know the importance of taking it and it’s just something I can just slide by, and they do or something like that.

Terrica said simply, “Not that seriously.” She added, “Yeah, well, the EOG doesn’t really matter if you make good grades.”

Izay stated, “They don’t take them really serious, they just try to get by, you know, pass. They don’t try.” Antwuan said,

They take it like half and half because on some things they are really good at it and they know what to do and then other things they need help with and they might not ask or they just don’t do it.

Justus said, “Some of them are like real serious about it. Just depends on who the person is, really.”

Caleb described some of the emotions he had witnessed in some of his classmates: “Maybe a couple will be serious. Maybe like five will be serious. They like to downgrade themselves, and they’re already walking into the test saying, ‘Oh, I’m about to fail,’ or, ‘I know I’m not about to do good.’” Elijah simply said, “As a group? Not very serious.” Kasyris agreed: “Okay, not very seriously.” But he also added, “I think any kind of standardized test isn’t showing who learn the most or whatever.” Nivea said, “I would say they kind of do care about it, but in a sense, they don’t. They know that if they do good, it’ll be fine, but they don’t. They just don’t really care if it’s good or bad.”

**Score comparisons.** None of the participants felt as though their African American peers knew that their scores were compared by race and predicted the outcome if they did discover this. Samira stated,

If they don’t know they’ll probably just let it go like they’re doing now. They’re just not caring, but if they heard this comparison between White and Black, I’m pretty sure they’d

be like, “Oh my gosh, I need to try harder because people are gonna see that and I feel that we need to take a stand and show that we’re smarter than they think we are.”

Amari answered similarly, saying, “I don’t think they know it’s being compared.” When asked “If they knew, would it make a difference?” Amari said, “They want to be better, but if they feel like somebody else is better, they’ll try to do it more.” Brykeem stated, “I think it would, because the African Americans, when they have a desire to do something, they want to see what they can do and try to find a way like our White peers.” Izay said, “I mean, if they knew, they’d probably try harder.” Antwuan explained, “If they knew about that, they would probably react and do something about it.” Justus said,

I think it would. Because like if you put. . . . If you’re, like, an athlete, and you put everything into a competitive mood, then you’re going to try your hardest. ’Cause, like, football players, all you got to tell them, “You’re trying to beat this one guy.” Like, you could say, “I want you to out-lift this one guy in the weight room.”

Caleb was a little more pessimistic than were the other participants: “I’m not saying everyone would, but the majority of them, not sure. Some might care and try to, like, progress the African American race, but other than that, no sir.” Elijah, in contrast, said, “It would boost the African American students. We are real competitive.” Kasyris agreed: “They would try harder.” Nivea said, “I feel like they would try to do better, knowing that they would be the lower and think that they’re not good enough or something with the grades.” Table 5 shows that the study participants were uniformly of the opinion that their African American peers were not aware that scores between ethnic groups were compared.

Table 5

*Participants' Perceptions of Peer Awareness of Score Comparisons*

Participant	Peers are aware of score comparisons
Amari	No
Antwuan	No
Brykeem	No
Caleb	No
Elijah	No
Izay	No
Justus	No
Kasyris	No
Nivea	No
Samira	No
Savannah	No
Terrica	No

**Academic effort.** After confirming for participants that a gap did indeed exist, the theme of effort as an explanation emerged among those who offered opinions on causes. Some did not have an opinion on causes. Samira answered frankly by saying, “I honestly don’t know.” Justus also said, “I don’t know.” All participants who responded agreed it was not ability, but effort that led to academic achievement. Amari had this explanation: “Just because Blacks don’t try and they don’t really want it as bad as I feel like they should.” Asked if there is a reason for that, Amari replied, “Most of it comes from the home. If you have somebody push you through some of it . . . most people, they don’t have that.” Brykeem said, “Yeah, it’s effort-wise. At our school, you got to put in the effort because they are helping you. They doing their part. You just

got to meet them there, and everything fall in place.” Izay agreed with Brykeem, saying, “No, it’s more they’re not trying. You know? Because most African Americans aren’t trying in school.”

Antwuan answered similarly: “I think they just don’t want to try as hard as they should or would want to.” He proposed, “Maybe because they’ve had a problem with their family, maybe, or they just don’t really care about it.” Savannah answered simply, “Because we don’t try, I guess.” Caleb answered thoughtfully:

The gap . . . I just feel like we can do better as a race. And I feel like we can . . . I mean, I’m not too fond of studying and all that. And, I feel like we can achieve more if we just put the time in. And, I feel like, I’m not trying to be like this, but I feel like a lot of African Americans are focused on sports. Because it might be that we grew up outside, and we find football fun, and basketball fun. And you always hear African Americans saying, “I want to play basketball when I get older, or football.” You never hear them talking about being an engineer or a scientist or something like that.

Elijah offered a balanced view: “I think African Americans or people in general, it don’t matter what race you are, I think if you put your mind to it and you put God first, you’ll be able to do anything you want.”

Nivea agreed with other participants that it is a matter of dedicated effort: “Not that they’re [African American adolescents] not capable, but not that they just don’t really care about the gap.” She added a socioeconomic perspective: “Opportunity. . . . Growing up, most people have more opportunity than others, like predominantly White people have better situations, like have better ability to do other things than Black students.”

**Parental expectations.** The researcher never asked about parents during the data collection process, but the topic of parents was a theme that continued to appear in the data. Several students among the two groups spoke of their observations of parental norms, implying that they believed parental expectations were too low for some students. Samira stated,

Well, their parents are a lot more stricter; White parents. Black parents, they're strict too, but not as strict. Like they expect just Bs and Cs, but some of the White parents expect As or at least one B, and to get a scholarship and just to improve.

Amari believed that the reason the gap existed was partly because of a student's home experience: "Most of it comes from the home. If you have somebody push you through some of it . . . most people, they don't have that." Brykeem agreed:

They know that, with their parents, they get to go places. They can do things, but with our African Americans, they really don't see the quality of taking education serious as White parents. . . . With the parents, you know, they gone be on them to do your homework, study . . . but with our African Americans, their parents ain't going to really be on them like the White parents. They going to be, like, "Do your homework." They going to take their answer instead of checking.

Antwuan posited that some of his peers' value of education is diminished because of difficulties at home: "Maybe because they've had a problem with their family, maybe, or they just don't really care about it." Justus also believed that the financial prowess of the parent was instrumental in the shaping of a student's value of education. Saying of his White peers, "They're kind of in between, because some of them they know they can get into wherever 'cause [of] their parents. But they value it a lot, though." Speaking of his African American friends, he said, "Like, 'cause the financial situation sometimes. 'Cause most of my friends, they are smart

enough, but they don't get their scholarship, their parents . . . they'll just pay for it." He added, "Yeah. It gives them a little wiggle room, kind of." Elijah stated it simply: "So when you have parents that don't really care, that brings the student not to care."

### **Theme 3: School**

The third theme to emerge during data analysis was school and it addressed Research Question 4, which was used to discover how African American adolescents describe their school in relation to the academic achievement gap. Participants described their perceptions of the educational programs of their respective schools in relation to the academic achievement gap.

**Perceived indicators of a gap.** The majority of participants did not perceive any school characteristics that indicated a gap, but a few did. Amari initially did not believe that there was anything characteristic about her school that would have indicated there was an achievement gap. But then when asked, "Were you aware there was an academic achievement gap?" she responded, "Yeah, because all the Whites easily get 4's or 5's on EOGs. Most of us get maybe 4, maybe 3." It should be noted that educators keep scores confidential, so students have to rely on peers self-reporting, which is not always reliable. Amari continued with the theme of effort being the key: "Just that with the African Americans, they didn't really try."

Brykeem said, "I did not know that there's a gap like that or how they separate it, everything like that." Izay affirmed the gap by saying, "Yeah. Because, in my higher classes, there's usually only two or three Black people in that part of it, you know." Antwuan said that the indication for him was, "Most of my White peers only took a pre-ACT test. They are top of class."

Elijah posited,

I think that I could see it because they separate us. Most Caucasian kids. . . . Now,

there's a couple African American kids, they're separated into . . . most White kids are in this class called AIG [Academically and Intellectually Gifted], which is academically gifted. Then you have Title 1 students, which are not that far away, but just a little bit smaller, and it's mostly African Americans.

Kasyris said of the achievement gap, "When I'm in honors classes, and there's only two Black people and 20 White people." Nivea responded similarly, "If I go to all my classes, you can kind of see that with looking at all the lower . . . the non-honors classes and looking at the honors classes, you can just kind of see and tell the gap."

**African American subgroup-specific support.** Each participant agreed that they observed no supplementary academic support specifically designed to target African American students at their school. Each student acknowledged that there were supplementary academic help programs that were open to the entire school and that many African American students participated in them, but that there was nothing designed specifically for them. Table 6 shows unanimity among the participants that their schools were not offering specific help to African American adolescents to address and overcome the achievement gap.



Table 6

*Participants' Perceived Subgroup Specific Support*

Participant	Perceived subgroup-specific support
Amari	No
Antwuan	No
Brykeem	No
Caleb	No
Elijah	No
Izay	No
Justus	No
Kasyris	No
Nivea	No
Samira	No
Savannah	No
Terrica	No

**Research Question 1**

The first research question served to examine how academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their experiences living in the academic achievement gap. Notable is the fact that they were, for the most part, not consciously aware that they were living in such a gap. When the gap was defined and made evident, students evinced understanding and recalled noting the disproportionate amount of White students as compared to the number of Black students in honors classes and AIG classes. The students drew upon their own experiences living in the gap to corroborate the evidence that the gap exists on a large scale. Those with parents in the educational system displayed more awareness of the gap.

From this pool of proficient to high-achieving students, several subthemes emerged that clearly distinguished them from non-proficient students. The participants related marked personal high valuation of educational achievement. This value system, which some attributed to home influence, caused them to make the effort they felt was necessary to bridge the achievement gap. They seemed to feel they had little social capital and revealed that extracurricular activities, including sports, were their most likely sources of social capital when relating to adults in their school but not core subject teachers. Caleb said, “I feel like a lot of African Americans are focused on sports.” It must be noted in light of this that according to this sample of participants that sports are where African American adolescents make a connection to an adult at school. This adult connection may be an indication of why there is a focus on sports by some African American adolescents. These students tended to believe they mattered, but tied to their belief that effort, not innate ability, determined outcomes, they also believed that they made themselves matter through good performance, good attitudes, and achievements.

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question addressed how academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe the level of awareness of the academic achievement gap among African American adolescents. As noted, the students were not consciously living in the gap themselves. Some of the participants attempted to describe their understanding of the achievement gap while other participants simply admitted they had never encountered the concept. Students did not think other African American adolescents were aware of the gap either. Some believed if other African American adolescents were aware of the gap, they would bestir themselves to make the kind of effort that proficient and high-achieving students like themselves make because of factors like competitiveness or a desire to advance and prove the

efficacy of African Americans when they have goals. Participants also expressed that they were unaware of their school's annual process of comparing the scores of the African American student population with scores of the Caucasian student population. However, as with the achievement gap itself, some students recalled that they had to fill out "bubbles" on standardized tests in regard to their ethnic group. One, whose parents were educators in the school system, had actually seen comparison charts of academic achievement broken down by group.

Research Questions 3 and 4 were only answered after participants were made aware of the existence of the academic achievement gap. Because of their heightened awareness of its existence, students' answers as to causes were thoughtful and penetrating.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question was used to understand how academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their African American peers in the achievement gap. Responses concerning participants' African American peers led to the realization of the second theme in which they described their perceptions of their African American peers' attitudes toward education. Theme 2 generated a number of subthemes; namely, attitude toward education, attitude toward high-stakes tests, score comparisons, academic effort, and parental expectations. Participants described their perceptions of their African American peers' attitudes toward education as either not caring, pretending not to care, or harboring erroneous notions that becoming a sports star would be sufficient to propel one into life success, rather than education being a more reliable booster. Some, however, saw their peers as breaking down 50–50, with half being serious about academic achievement and half not so serious, or 5 on a scale of 1 to 10. They felt their African American peers were not serious enough about high-stakes tests, thinking the impact of the tests on their futures was negligible.

The students believed that their African American peers were unaware of any score comparisons but, as noted above, believed that if they were aware of them would be more motivated to prove themselves and to vindicate their ethnic group by making the effort needed to attain higher academic achievement. Participants also shared their perceptions of their African American peers' academic efforts and what factors might negatively affect that effort. Participants described their perceptions of parental expectations and their impact on the students' approaches to education. Family stressors were also noted as possible factors holding African American peers back from higher academic achievement.

#### **Research Question 4**

The fourth research question served to explore how proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their schools in relation to the achievement gap. Responses concerning each participants' respective school supplied data essential to exposing the third theme. Participants shared their perceptions of any indicators of the gap present at their school once they became aware there is a gap. They seemed to evolve in awareness and piece together factors that they had noticed, but not put together previously into an understanding of a pervasive achievement gap. Once awareness was heightened, students came up with many examples of how Black and Whites were separated in their schools into different levels of achievement, with Whites disproportionately represented on the higher levels of achievement such honors classes, having to take only one pre-ACT, and earning consistently higher scores on the EOGs. It was as if their eyes had been opened so that they could relate sensory data they picked up on a regular basis to the existence of the achievement gap. Participants also expressed that they had no knowledge of any subgroup support specifically for African American students. While African American students often availed themselves of extra instruction or tutoring available to all, there

were no efforts on the part of the schools dedicated to helping African American students overcome the achievement gap.

### **Summary**

This study represented an effort to gain insight into the lived experiences of African American adolescents in the academic achievement gap. This chapter included a detailed report of the findings of the study according to themes that emerged during data analysis. The data analysis revealed the participants were largely unaware of the existence of an academic achievement gap between African American adolescents and their Caucasian counterparts. Participants were unaware of the annual practice in education of comparing student scores by race and that this practice is the mechanism with which the gap is identified. The findings revealed the participants' perceptions of mattering to the adults in their school, mostly by making themselves matter through their own efforts, and their analysis of their own social capital or lack thereof.

Participants also shared their perceptions of their African American peers' attitude toward education. There was a collective view that their African American peers did not take high-stakes tests very seriously. Analysis of the data revealed that participants believed their African American peers' academic efforts lagged behind those of their proficient to high-achieving counterparts and discussed their perceptions of parental expectations and the impact of those expectations on academic performance. Students further expressed their beliefs that their African American peers were unaware of the annual process of comparing student scores by race, but that this information might motivate them.

After being made aware of the existence of the academic achievement gap, participants expressed what seemed to be indicators of the gap in hindsight. A major recurrence of this type

of indicator was the lack of students of color in honors or advanced courses. However, participants saw no evidence in their respective schools of subgroup-specific academic support.

The next chapter contains a summary of findings as well as a discussion of those findings within the context of the theory guiding the research and a comparison of the findings in relation to the literature review in Chapter Two. Implications of the study are examined theoretically, empirically, and practically. Delimitations and limitations are explained, and recommendations for future research presented.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe how the achievement gap is perceived as a lived experience by African American adolescents in a southeastern United States school district. The collective experience of the achievement gap from the perspectives of participants was explored through individual interviews, journaling, and a focus group interview. Through collection and analysis of this data, three themes, with varying numbers of accompanying subthemes, emerged that helped to interpret the experiences of the 12 participants. These themes and subthemes were explored in Chapter Four. Chapter Five includes a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings including the findings in relation to the literature, implications and recommendations for stakeholders, acknowledgement of limitations, and a discussion of recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

#### **Research Question 1**

After the achievement gap was defined and explained to the participants, they began to recall or realize that certain information they had stored in their minds without conscious interpretation was due to this gap (i.e., there were more Whites than Blacks in honors classes; Whites consistently scored higher on EOGs, etc.). Thus, in relation to Research Question 1: “How do academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their experiences living in the academic achievement gap?”; it became apparent that the participants were not, for the most part, aware that they were living in such a gap. The majority of the participants were unaware that the gap existed until it was defined and evidenced for them; they were mostly unaware that test scores between ethnic groups were compared. At the same time,

the themes that emerged, were clearly a large part of their lived experience in the academic achievement gap, allowing them to transcend the gap they lived in, even as they were unaware of it.

Carter-Andrews (2012) called for the need to analyze the experiences of high-achieving Black students and what sustains their success. The themes that emerged from the present study defined elements of life in the gap that help African American students attain and sustain academic success; specifically, their attitudes toward education, whether they felt they mattered, and their social capital at school. Not only were the participants largely unaware that they were living in the achievement gap, they inferred that their African American adolescent counterparts were unaware of the gap because they were uniformly certain their peers were unaware that test scores between ethnic groups were compared.

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question for this study was, “How do academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe the level of awareness of the academic achievement gap among African American adolescents?” Participants supplied information that described what helped them achieve academic success, including the effort born of taking education seriously for their future flourishing; feeling that they mattered to teachers and administrators; and social capital at school. The participants did not feel that their peers took education as seriously as they did, although they acknowledged that it could be about half and half between the serious and the unserious. This applied to standardized test-taking as well. An interesting finding was that the participants felt that if their peers knew about the comparisons, they would put forth the effort that the proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents knew was necessary to achieve at school and on high-stakes tests. In other words,



they believed that, if their peers knew about the gap, others in the school would make efforts just as they themselves did. There was an implicit pride and faith in their peers, their competitiveness and desire to prove themselves that pointed to a healthy understanding that effort and attitude can make a difference even in unfavorable circumstances.

### **Research Question 3**

The third question guiding the research was, “How do academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their African American peers in the achievement gap?” Moon and Singh (2015) suggested that more exploration needs to be done to discover additional factors that contribute to or hinder academic success for African American adolescents from their own voices. The literature reveals a distinct gap of knowledge from the perspective of African American adolescents (Carter-Andrews, 2012; Darensbourg & Blake, 2013; Owens et al., 2011; Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams & Portman, 2014). For the most part, they described their African American peers’ attitudes toward education as being less serious than theirs, with exceptions about half the time; participants agreed that their peers did not take high-stakes tests seriously, and noted that some had erroneous notions about what efforts in what direction would bring them success (i.e., efforts in sports as opposed to academic efforts).

The participants implied that motivation could be important in academic achievement: They thought knowledge of the achievement gap and comparison of test scores could be motivational factors for their peers. They also noted that their African American peers were perhaps suffering from lack of encouragement due to stressed family situations and/or low parental expectations.

#### **Research Question 4**

The fourth question for this study was, “How do academically proficient to high-achieving African American adolescents describe their school in relation to the achievement gap?” As shown in Table 5, a major finding was the participants uniformly saw no specific efforts from their schools to address the achievement gap. Moreover, participants perceived their own social capital among the adult personnel of the school as wanting (coaches, after-school club teachers, and a teacher who taught African American studies were exceptions). Once again, much of the support these proficient to high-achieving African American students received from adults at their schools, from their perceptions, was because they made themselves matter through their efforts and attitudes, not because the adults freely and willingly gave extra care and attention.

Research suggests the importance of understanding the experiences of successful African American students in predominantly Caucasian contexts and what sustains their success in those contexts (Carter-Andrews, 2012; Williams & Portman, 2014). A voice that has remained unheard in discussions about how to promote academic success among students at risk of school failure is that of poor, urban, African American K–12 students (Williams & Portman, 2014).

The voices of the African American participants in this study seem to plead for greater motivation for their peers from adults (and an implicit faith that their peers will put forth the effort needed if such motivation is provided), more investment on the parts of adults in the school setting in general, and more school involvement in addressing the achievement gap through programs specifically targeted for African American adolescents.

## Discussion

### Empirical Literature

Previous research suggests the importance of understanding the experiences of successful African American students in predominantly Caucasian contexts and what sustains their success in those contexts (Carter-Andrews, 2012; Williams & Portman, 2014). The present study provided an opportunity for such African American adolescents to describe their experiences. Nine of the 12 participants were high achievers based on their scores of 4 or higher on their latest math or English EOGs. Furthermore, the majority of the participants, 10 of the 12, are from schools with low-density African American populations. These students have perspectives based on their experiences that provided insight into the achievement gap that only they could provide. Indeed, the participants were eager to be recognized for their achievements and to speak about their educational experiences.

The research findings confirmed many other studies in the field of education concerning the academic achievement gap. Flono (2015) suggested that the term *achievement gap* holds almost no meaning for the students, parents, and other residents of communities where the achievement gap is most pronounced and who have the most at stake. Seven of the 12 participants in the present study did not attempt to define the gap and expressed they previously had not heard the term. However, two of those six rated themselves 3 out of 5 when asked to rate their understanding of the academic achievement gap, which would have indicated they would be able to give some type of definition to it. Six out of the 12 participants attempted to define the gap. Kasyris was probably the closest to an accurate definition of the achievement gap, though he only rated his knowledge of the phenomenon a 2 out of 5: “Like, the achievement

gap is in White people being further ahead than Black people.” He was unable to give any further details. Justus supposed that it was, “Like Beta Club and all that.”

Furthermore, none of the students were aware that schools routinely compare subgroup scores. In response to this question, Elijah stated, “I hope they don’t do that.” Justus made an educated guess about the subject and assumed that there were some comparisons occurring based on the annual task of having to fill out demographic information on bubble sheets.

A potential danger in past research on the achievement of African American students has been too narrow a focus on poverty as a condition or reality and not enough as a structural limit to potential socializing opportunities (Madyun, 2011). Zeisler (2012) called it the worst part of the achievement gap: the cycle in which those who have high social capital maintain their status while those with little or no social capital are inhibited from gaining a higher status.

Participants in the study were asked to describe their social capital after giving a simple definition of it as their opportunity to socialize with individuals of influence or power at the school such as teachers, principals, and counselors. Caleb named a counselor as a potential source of social capital, but mentioned that the counselor had recently left the school, leaving him with none there. Two participants, Samira and Savannah, named elective teachers as sources of social capital for them at their respective schools. Samira named her African American studies teacher, and Savannah named her band teacher. Caleb, Antwuan, and Justus named coaches as sources of social capital, citing the time that they spend with them outside of school. The students, though, did not have relationships with the coaches outside of the coaches’ jobs. Four participants believed that their White peers enjoyed more social capital than they did. Izay gave some insight on why he believed he had no social capital among individuals of influence and power at their schools (i.e., teachers, principals, and counselors): “Because they’re

not very diverse. You know, they're all usually White women or White men." Kasyris similarly felt that Whites stuck together: "Well, the White people at our school, they usually go to all the same places and they usually see those teachers there at church, so they already have a better relationship than the Blacks, just because that's how it is."

Ford and Moore (2013) made an important point, stressing that African American families are usually concerned about their sons' education' but they, at times, have little social, cultural, educational and fiscal capital to assist them. According to the participants in the current study, social capital is sparse at school, too.

Kincaid and Yin (2011) found that the sample of young African American men who participated in their study valued their school experience. The participants in the present study corroborated those findings. They valued their school experience and also valued their education highly. According to Brykeem, "I take it serious because you need to go somewhere with an education because you won't be able to do anything without your education, so I value that a lot." Elijah stated, "Education is very important; you can't go nowhere without education, you can't even get into college without education. You can be good at sports, but if you don't have an education, you ain't going to do anything in life."

Darnesbourg and Blake (2013) discussed a disidentification hypothesis that serves as an attempt to explain the underachievement of African American youth by the idea that they do not value education. The present study appears to contradict this theory based on the participants' own stated values of education and their perceptions of the value their African American peers placed on education, although their reviews on this particular point were mixed. The present study seems to give credibility to the conclusion of Hucks (2011), who stated, "African American families value education" (p. 353). The NAEP (NCES, 2009) reminded its readers

that many Black students score above the average for their White counterparts and many White students score below the average for their Black counterparts. Similarly, some African American adolescents value education more than others because diversity exists within the African American culture.

Vega et al. (2015) stated that it is critical for educators to be cognizant of how their attitudes and behaviors may affect student perceptions, and that educators should be aware of how students perceive their educational experiences in order to address their concerns. In the present study, each participant believed that they mattered to adults at their school, but at least one, Elijah, noticed actions by teachers that seemed to place a lesser value on African American adolescents:

During the class they might not have it separated or something like that, but they're in a class, certain teachers will only call on certain people. Certain teachers always seem to call on Caucasian students because they know they're going to have the answer. In certain classes, if I raise my hand and a Caucasian person is sitting right beside me, even if they don't have the answer they will call on them first because they think they have the answer.

Elijah was the only participant to give such an account, but one should consider how perceptive African American adolescents are to seeming bias.

Bergh et al. (2010) suggested that educators may create a warmer socioemotional climate for students of whom they have high expectations. The participants in the current study are proficient to high-achieving adolescents and several of them believed that the reason they matter is because of their academic performance. They made themselves matter to teachers, as Terrica pointed out: "Probably because I try." Brykeem explained,

I matter a lot because I'm very smart and they want to see me succeed in life and go to college, and I'm good at sports, so they try to send me off to play sports, get an education, go to a college that I would like to go to and further my education.

Could this perception of why one may or may not matter affect African American adolescents who perform poorly but in a negative way? In other words, are students made to feel that only the high performers "matter" to the adults at the school? This is important, because Butler-Barnes et al. (2015) found that adolescents' feelings about their school impact their motivation and academic outcomes.

The participants observed that there was not a very high representation of African American adolescents in their gifted and advanced courses. The degree to which African American males are underrepresented in gifted education and other advanced academic programs, as well as their underachievement and low achievement should not be as prevalent as it is (Ford & Moore, 2013). The participants confirmed that this was true at their respective schools. Four students recognized this disparity as an indicator of an achievement gap as a characteristic of their school. Izay, Elijah, Kasyris, and Nivea mentioned low representation of African American adolescents in their advanced courses as an indicator. According to Izay, "Because in my higher classes, there's usually only two or three Black people in that part of it, you know." According to Elijah, "Caucasian kids are in this class called AIG, which is academically gifted. Then you have Title 1 students, which are not that far away, but just a little bit smaller, and it's mostly African Americans." Kasyris explained, "When I'm in honors classes, and there's only two Black people and 20 White people." Nivea elaborated, "If I go to all my classes, you can kind of see that with looking at all the lower . . . the non-honors classes and looking at the honors classes, you can just kind of see and tell the gap."

Several of the study participants perceived that a student's economic stability played a role in the value of education. Brykeem pointed out, "[Caucasian peers] know that, with their parents, they get to go places, they can do things. But with our African Americans, they really don't see the benefit of taking education serious as White parents." Brykeem equated his White peers' ability to go places and do things with his perception of their value of education and believes African American adolescents do not have tangible reasons to believe education will benefit them. As Justus explained, "Like, 'cause the financial situation sometimes. 'Cause most of my [White] friends . . . they are smart enough, but if they don't get their scholarship, their parents . . . they'll just pay for it. 'Cause I'll go over there and they'll just. . . . It gives them a little wiggle room, kind of." This corroborated what Land et al.'s (2014) findings: that despite their success, the majority of the six successful African American male high school students in their study were dissatisfied with their home life because of the economic and social strains placed on their parents.

Sadly, none of the participants were able to describe any support specifically targeting African Americans at their respective schools. Gaddis and Lauen (2014) stated that Black students seem to gain from the attention that comes from Black subgroup-specific accountability measures; while White students, at a minimum, are not harmed and sometimes gain from it as well. The easiest way to raise test scores in any school is to make a concerted effort to improve scores of the African American population. Showing the African American population that it is valued within the school's overall culture is often a huge first step.

Researchers have sounded the alarm concerning the gap for decades. Politicians have made policy for decades specifically targeting the achievement gap, but educators have not taken action with subgroup-specific interventions in schools on any mentionable scale. This



disconnect between researchers, public policymakers, and educators when it comes to the achievement gap was corroborated by the findings of the present study. The students had virtually no impression that their school was addressing the achievement gap at all.

The students' perceptions affirmed that there is a society-wide lack of concern about the achievement gap. It is as though, since it does not affect the White population, it is not treated as an objection worth practical focus. Educators constantly collect data from their African American students and compare them to their Caucasian students, but they take no group-specific actions or implement any group-specific interventions. The academic achievement gap is the most widely studied educational problem, but the least to have research-based interventions applied. There is a gulf between research and practical application of solutions among educators. Hartney and Flavin (2014) found that Caucasian opinion in support of education reforms and subsequent teacher quality reform policymaking are significantly tied to the performance of Caucasian, but not African American, students.

There may be a fear among the dominant culture that subgroup-specific support may somehow harm White children. Gaddis and Lauen (2014) countered this notion, interjecting that they found accountability pressure reduces Black–White achievement gaps by raising mean Black achievement and does not harm mean White achievement.

Schools must not be afraid to create African American-specific programs to target the achievement gap that persists between African American adolescents and their Caucasian counterparts, but the experience of the participants in this study showed that something is holding schools back from addressing this persistent and widespread educational issue.

## **Theoretical Literature**

The theoretical framework guiding this study was Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which suggests that sociocultural learning precedes cognitive development. Vygotsky posited that social experience shapes how one thinks and interprets the world and that cognition occurs socially (Jaramillo, 1996). Students construct new knowledge as a product of their experiences.

The African American adolescents' sociocultural awareness of the academic achievement gap would precede development as it relates to the achievement gap. I believe there is a link between the persistent gap between African American students and their Caucasian counterparts and the lack of sociocultural awareness of the gap. A population of people cannot deal with an existing problem of which it is unaware.

“Vygotsky discussed how adults use language to inculcate their culture's social values and beliefs to children; he stressed that this tool is vital toward enculturation” (Jaramillo, 1996, p. 133). There exists no culture-wide conversation concerning the gap. The groups most impacted by it are the least aware of it.

How does the African American student meet the challenge of closing the deficit if the African American student is not made aware of the existence of a deficit? If cognition occurs socially, the absence of awareness, sociocultural interaction, and conversation concerning the gap may halt development in that area. Importantly, the participants in this study thought that if their African American adolescent peers were made aware of the achievement gap, they would be motivated to strive to close it.

## **Implications**

### **Theoretical Implications**

The findings of this study imply that if the gap becomes a phenomenon known to those within the African American culture, the culture will develop a solution to the problem. With the knowledge of the existence of a problem, there could be a culture-wide conversation concerning the gap. Until the sociocultural learning occurs, these findings imply there will be no cognitive development effort. When cognition occurs socially, the sociocultural interaction and conversation concerning the gap will begin.

### **Empirical Implications**

The study findings also imply that current efforts to close the achievement gap may be strengthened if the population upon which it has the most impact is intentionally included in the effort. Not only should African American adolescents be made aware of the achievement gap and African American families recruited in the effort to close it, local efforts should be district-wide. Wright and Harris (2010) suggested a district-level initiative is needed to tackle the achievement gap challenge by cultural proficiency. They found that in several different districts, “this level of commitment to leading the district to be more culturally proficient led to reducing the achievement gap in all of these districts by at least 10%” (Wright & Harris, 2010, p. 231). This district effort should contain a component for individual schools to develop subgroup-specific interventions. According to Gaddis and Lauen (2014), to close the achievement gap schools should target interventions to subgroups that are more specific than system or school-wide measures. Educators understand the phenomenon widely. It is, therefore, the responsibility of educators to develop culturally sensitive strategies to inform the African American population concerning the phenomenon in order to encourage the sociocultural learning process to begin.

## **Practical Implications**

The students' experiences of their own academic achievements gave them no indication of the subgroup's academic status in relation to the majority group. The research findings suggest that knowledge of the achievement gap may elude the African American community. If the community at large or the adolescents most affected by it are unaware, there may be a faulty sense of security regarding academic success that does not really characterize the subgroup at this time. More widespread knowledge of the achievement gap among the African American community may motivate efforts within the community to decrease the gap. African Americans must make the achievement gap an object of conversation until the gap is closed with the combined efforts of both African American families and public schools.

In my experience, African Americans parents are very sensitive to any activity that cordons off their children. To single African American children out for awareness and interventions runs the risk of being perceived negatively, unless the good intent of closing the achievement gap is made known in advance to parents. Furthermore, painful subjects like the achievement gap also entail the risk that cynical observers in the general public may use open conversation about the achievement gap as another reason to castigate African Americans for their cultural, social, and racial difficulties without regard to the disadvantages of being Black in America. Placing the conversation in the forefront of the education of African Americans, and the implementation of group specific interventions, could be seen among some African Americans as an attempt to single African Americans out negatively for the sole purpose of being made a spectacle. There is also fear of the threat to the outward appearance of success, that the data debunks, and the relative social ease and anonymity of silence. After all, the gap is not overtly experienced in any way other than markings on tests of performance and the long-

term consequences of shortfalls there; there are no public consequences. If the concept is not discussed and presented as an intentional obstacle for students to overcome, there is a certain amount of protection from exposure of facts that most are unaware of at the present time.

Therefore, I believe the study's findings suggest that students in the sixth grade and below should not be told about the academic achievement gap as they are not mature enough to handle the information well. Instead, the achievement gap should be discussed only with parents. Students in the seventh grade and up are mature enough to handle knowledge of the phenomenon. When informing parents of students from sixth grade and below of the subgroup status in the achievement gap, one-on-one, or small group settings are best. When informing students in seventh grade and above of the achievement gap, discreetly informing parents of the intentions of interventions may be done. Interventions could be accompanied by celebrations of African American culture and maybe include motivational speakers as well.

Elias et al. (2014) warned that if ethnic minority students are made aware of the long-standing gap between themselves and their White, advantaged peers, it is unreasonable to expect for them to sustain a strong commitment to learning if they feel unsafe or not valued. In addition, Elias et al. suggested that the strategies at the school-building level should create a nurturing school culture and address students' sense of meaning, purpose, voice, value, social, emotional and character competencies.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The delimitations of the study included the interviewer as instrument, which is part of the phenomenological approach to research. Depending upon my sensitivity as an instrument (Merriam, 1998), results may not be repeatable.

In addition, this research is not generalizable because of the small sample of participants. It is important to note that the African American adolescent participants whose views were reported in this research are high-achieving and are mostly in class settings with other academic achievers. Research has shown that African Americans are underrepresented in advanced courses.

The research also was limited because of the geographical limitation of the southeastern United States. Though there may be many similarities found in African American adolescents in different regions of the country, there are significant differences in regional cultures.

The study included a phenomenological approach that relied on the self-reporting of participants, with all the limitations that self-reporting is known to have. Experiences were different from one individual to the next. Also, these experiences were limited to a certain time period within the participant's life, so perceptions may be different among other students who live in the academic achievement gap at different ages and stages.

The research did include consideration of the impact of poverty on African American youth. However, the academic achievement gap between those of various SES was beyond the scope of this research.

Finally, the answers to interview questions by the adolescent participants seemed sincere and an accurate representation their perceptions, but participants often did not elaborate or go into great detail. This lack of fluency may be due to age and/or limited knowledge of the subject of the inquiry. The latter is most plausible as the research indicated the students were unaware of the phenomenon.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

According to the results of this study, there are several areas of research that would benefit the education of African American adolescents in the United States. More research is needed, for example, on the attitude of African American adolescents toward high-stakes testing in general. That mode of inquiry may help educators understand how to help African Americans adolescents approach high-stakes tests with the appropriate level of motivation. Researchers should also explore African American adolescents' perceptions of how they encounter their own culture at school. Educators would be able to create the educational environment needed for success among that population if they understand better how African American adolescents perceive that their culture is valued among educators. In general, more qualitative research should be conducted on African American adolescents concerning their school experiences as there is little research to give voice to this population group. Quantitative research on African American adolescents and their families is recommended to further understand how widespread the achievement gap phenomenon is known or unknown in the African American population in the United States.

The research indicated a gap between research and educational practice in the university setting. The achievement gap is widely studied in academia, but the achievement gap and solutions discovered to combat the problem are not widely taught to university students in education programs, even at the universities that conduct the research. New teachers leave teacher programs unprepared to deal with this widely studied and well-known problem, because there are no required courses or notable standards focusing on the academic achievement gap in teacher education programs. Future studies should be focused on universities that research the

achievement gap and whether the practices taught in their respective schools of education and teacher education programs reflect their research findings on the academic achievement gap.

Primary and secondary schools in the United States annually compare the performance of their students by race after collecting data through the administration of standardized high-stakes tests. The current practice among educators seems to place emphasis on pointing out the problem and being amazed at its persistence, but not implementing research-based strategies—some of which were discussed in earlier chapters—to solve the problem at the school and district levels. Research should be conducted to discover how and where subgroup-specific strategies are implemented in schools as efforts to close the achievement gap and how they can be implemented more widely.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of African American adolescents who live in the achievement gap. The achievement gap significantly impacts the lives of many African American students, their communities, and in many ways the United States of America. If the community at large or the adolescents most affected by it are unaware of the gap, there may be a faulty sense of security regarding academic success that does not exist for an ethnic group and which may contribute to the lag in academic performance.

According to the findings in this study, African American adolescents are generally unaware of the existence of an achievement gap. This finding seems to affirm that the term *achievement gap* holds almost no meaning for the students, parents, and other residents of communities where the achievement gap is most pronounced and who have the most at stake



(Flono, 2015). The findings also seem to affirm Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which says that sociocultural learning precedes cognitive development.

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**APPENDIX A: IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

November 21, 2017

Antonio Roberts

IRB Approval 3041.112117: Perceptions of the Achievement Gap as Experienced among Mid to High Achieving African American Adolescents in Rural Southeastern United States: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Antonio Roberts,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*

**The Graduate School**

**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY.

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**APPENDIX B: LETTER TO PASTOR TO RECRUIT CHURCH MEMBERS**

Tony Roberts, Ed.S.  
Doctoral Candidate  
Liberty University  
1971 University Blvd  
Lynchburg, VA 24515

Dear Pastor:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree. The title of my research project is Perceptions of the Achievement Gap as Experienced among Proficient to High Achieving African American Adolescents in Rural Southeastern United States: A Phenomenological Study, and the purpose of my research is to understand how African American adolescents who are achieving describe their experiences living in the academic achievement gap. I am writing to request your permission to contact members of your church to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants who are between the ages of 11 and 18 years and provide a score report showing achievement of 3, 4 or 5 on the most recent Reading or Math End Of Grade will be recruited to participate in an individual interview. The interview will last no longer than one hour and will be audio recorded. Complete 3 short journal entries concerning their experiences in the achievement gap that will take no longer than 15 minutes each. He or she may be invited to a focus group of high achieving African American adolescents. This focus group should last no longer than one hour and will be audio recorded.

Participants will be presented with parental consent and child assent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

**To ensure the collection of accurate data, please do not share the topic and purpose of the research with students. They will be informed of the research topic at the time of the interview.** I will, though, inform the parents of potential participants of the research topic and purpose while recruiting.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to ---@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Tony Roberts, Ed.S.  
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

**APPENDIX C: LETTER TO PARENT FOR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE**

Tony Roberts, Ed.S.

Doctoral Candidate

Liberty University

1971 University Blvd

Lynchburg, VA 24515

Dear parent/guardian(s):

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to understand how African American adolescents who are achieving describe their experiences living in the academic achievement gap, and I am writing to invite your child to participate in my study.

If your child is between the ages of 11 and 18 years, achieved a score of 3, 4 or 5 on the most recent Reading or Math End of Grade, and you are willing to allow your child to participate, he or she will be asked to participate in one individual interview and write 3 short journal entries. It should take approximately 1 hour for your child to complete the interview and not more than 15 minutes for each journal entry. Your child may be chosen to participate in a focus group consisting of other high achieving African American adolescents conducted on a different date but soon after the initial interview.

Your child's name and EOG score will be requested as part of his or her participation, but the information will remain confidential. For your child to participate, contact me to schedule an interview at ----- or at -----@liberty.edu.

A consent document, which contains additional information about my research, is attached.

If you choose to allow your child to participate, please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

If you choose to allow your child to participate, he or she will receive a \$10 gift card at the conclusion of the individual interview. If chosen to participate in the focus group, your child will receive an additional gift card valued at \$15. **To ensure the collection of accurate data, please do not share the topic and purpose of the research with your child. He or she will be informed of the research topic at the time of the interview.**

Sincerely,

Tony Roberts, Ed.S.  
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

## APPENDIX D: PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

Perceptions of the Achievement Gap as Experienced among Mid to High Achieving African American Adolescents in Rural Southeastern United States: A Phenomenological Study

Tony Roberts, Ed.S.

Liberty University

School of Education

Your child is invited to be in a research study on the experiences of African American adolescents who are achieving. He or she was selected as a possible participant because of his or her most recent scores on the Reading or Math End of Grade. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow him or her to be in the study.

Tony Roberts, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to understand how African American adolescents who are achieving describe their experiences living in the academic achievement gap.

**Procedures:** If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, I will ask him or her to do the following things:

1. Provide his or her most recent End of Grade score report.
2. Participate in an individual interview. The interview will last no longer than one hour and will be audio recorded.
3. Complete 3 short journal entries concerning their experiences in the achievement gap. The entries should take no longer than 15 minutes each.
4. Your child may be invited to a focus group of high achieving African American adolescents. This focus group should last no longer than one hour and will be audio recorded.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks your child would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Your child's participation in this study may result in a better understanding of



the achievement gap from the perspective of those who are most affected by it. Benefits to society include knowledge that may help educators develop strategies within schools and politicians develop policies in government that will decrease the achievement gap between African American adolescents and their white counterparts.

**Compensation:** Your child will be compensated for participating in this study. Participants will receive a \$10 gift card at the conclusion of the individual interview. If chosen to participate in the focus group, your child will receive an additional gift card valued at \$15.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify your child. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- I will conduct the interviews over the phone, by skype, or in the participant's church life center or another space deemed comfortable for participants. Students will have a multitude of options to create a space where speaking freely about their experiences is a pleasant experience like having a parent present if desired.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect his or her current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to allow your child to participate, he or she is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If your child chooses to withdraw from the study, please contact me at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should your child choose to withdraw, any data collected (apart from focus group data) will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but any contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if your child chooses to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Tony Roberts. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact me at ----- and or at -----@liberty.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Kenneth Tierce, at -----@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than me or my faculty advisor, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my child to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

The researcher has my permission to audio-record my child/student as part of his or her participation in this study.

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Signature of Minor (*high school students only*)

Date

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Signature of Parent

Date

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Signature of Investigator

Date

**APPENDIX E: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

## Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Introduce yourself to me.
2. How would your friends describe you?
3. Do you play sports; are you in any clubs or other extra-curricular activities; what are some good moments you have had with your peers and teachers?
4. Tell me a little about your family, how many siblings you have, whether you live with your mother and father.
5. Tell me about your school. What is it known for?
6. What do you like and dislike about your school?
7. How would you summarize your school experience?
8. How would you describe your academic performance compared to your White classmates?
9. On a scale from one to five, with one being unaware and five being completely aware, how aware were you before this study of the achievement gap?
10. Describe for me any conversations you've had about the achievement gap and when they occurred?
11. How did you know an achievement gap existed at your school? How was it brought to your attention?
12. Please walk me through your understanding of the academic achievement gap.
13. Can you recall any significant experiences you believe were the result of the achievement gap?
14. If so, what made them significant?
15. What does it mean to you to be in the cultural group that is lower performing in the

academic gap?

16. Where do you fit in the achievement gap?

**APPENDIX F: JOURNAL ENTRY PROMPTS****Prompt 1:**

Write about how you feel at school. What are your experiences? Do you feel they are impacted by the academic achievement gap?

**Prompt 2:**

Write about any academic events, programs, or assignments that may be specifically designed for African American students.

**Prompt 3:**

Write about why you believe the academic achievement gap exists.

**Prompt 4:**

Write about any characteristic of your school that may be the result of the achievement gap.

**Prompt 5:**

Write about the role African American adolescents have in closing the academic achievement gap.

## **APPENDIX G: ASSENT OF CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

### **What is the name of the study and who is doing the study?**

I am Tony Roberts, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, and I am conducting this study. The title of my research project is Perceptions of the Achievement Gap as Experienced among Mid to High Achieving African American Adolescents in Rural Southeastern United States: A Phenomenological Study.

### **Why are we doing this study?**

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to understand how African American adolescents who are mid to high achievers describe their experiences living in the academic achievement gap.

### **Why are we asking you to be in this study?**

You are being asked to be in this research study because you are between the ages of 11 and 18 years and have shown achievement of a 3, 4 or 5 on the most recent Reading or

Math End of Grade assessment.

### **If you agree, what will happen?**

If you choose to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a recorded, hour long interview and complete three short journal entries concerning your experiences in the achievement gap. Each journal entry should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete. You may also be invited to participate in a focus group with other high achieving African American adolescents. The focus group should last no longer than one hour and will be audio recorded.

After the individual interview, you will receive a \$10 gift card. If chosen to participate in the focus group, you will receive an additional gift card valued at \$15.

### **Do you have to be in this study?**

No, you do not have to be in this study. If you want to be in this study, then tell the researcher. If you don't want to, it's OK to say no. The researcher will not be angry. You can

say yes now and change your mind later. It's up to you.

**Do you have any questions?**

You can ask questions any time. You can ask now. You can ask later. You can talk to the researcher. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher to explain it to you again.

Signing your name below means that you want to be in the study.

---

Signature of Child

Date

Tony Roberts – -----@liberty.edu

Dr. Kenneth R. Tierce – -----@liberty.edu

Liberty University Institutional Review Board,  
1971 University Blvd, Green Hall 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515  
or email at irb@liberty.edu.

## **APPENDIX H: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Did you perceive a gap before you were told about how it existed at your school?
2. Why, from your perspective, does the gap exist?
3. What characteristics of the environment of your school reflect or assist your perception of an achievement gap among African American students and White students?
4. What social factors, if any, make you aware of an achievement gap?
5. Based on your perception of White students' academic performance, how do you describe African Americans' academic performance in comparison?
6. How do you think your teachers feel your academic performance compares to your White classmates?
7. What supplementary academic support is perceived by African American students?
8. Describe your role as a student in closing the academic achievement gap.
9. Is there something else you would like to tell me of your experience in the achievement gap?