

Opposite Gendered African American Siblings  
from Low to Middle Socioeconomic Status Families and Female Favored  
Differential Schooling Outcomes: A Phenomenological Interview Study

by

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## **Dedication**

My life has been blessed with so many individuals to whom I am indebted; my parents, siblings, children, grandchildren, and friends who are like family. However, there is one individual whose support, guidance, expertise, and contributions to this project are unparalleled.

I dedicate this dissertation to Dr. Maiyoua Vang, without whom there would be no such development. I contend that God sent her to the University of Michigan-Dearborn just for me (although I am regularly debated by others who share my sentiments). The impact of her encouragement, inspiration, and scholarship cannot be adequately communicated in these short paragraphs, but suffice it to say that it is my hope that this tribute will in some small way express the deepest extent of my gratitude and appreciation of her endeavors.

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## Abstract

African American students are experiencing less success in academic achievement than other groups, and African American males are performing less well than African American females. This study explores descriptions of the K-12 academic experiences and outcomes among opposite gendered sibling pairs who were raised in low to middle socioeconomic status (L-MSES) families situated in southeastern Michigan. This study was conducted to provide a space for the voices of African American brothers and sisters who have female favored academic achievement outcomes. Analysis of the interview data revealed that the siblings reported gendered differences in their academic experiences. The first theme that evolved in this study was that African American males are stereotyped and misunderstood in school. Two subthemes emerged and addressed the influence of both teacher-student interactions and socioeconomic status on academic experiences and outcomes. My brother is my keeper is a second theme that surfaced for just the sisters. This theme emphasized the perception that sisters had about their brothers and the brothers' perception of their role in the lives of their sisters. Results were discussed using a critical race theoretical (CRT) framework.

*Keywords:* African American academic achievement, stereotyping, SES, gender, siblings, and critical race theory (CRT).



## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Historically, it has been argued that education has been the pathway to economic, social, cultural, and political capital for many Americans (Ferguson, 2000; Jennings & Lynn, 2005; Leonardo, 2009; Watkins, 2001); however, unequal access to educational opportunities and culturally inappropriate pedagogical practices have left some populations lagging behind (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Harper & Davis, 2012; Noguera, 2003; Roderick, 2003). According to the Children's Defense Fund 2014 report, European American, Asian American, and children from high income families are progressing considerably ahead of African American, Latino, and children from low income families. Nearly 75% of children of color and economically disadvantaged children cannot read or compute at grade level (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

While these numbers are staggering for children of color and poor White children, it is even more disquieting for African Americans since they represent the highest population of poor children and are experiencing less success in academic achievement than other groups. African American students lead all other subgroups in dropping out of school (Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2013), and African American males are performing less well than African American females (Allard, 2008; Alon & Gelbgiser, 2011; Feliciano, 2012).

Several studies (Anderson, 2012; Lynn, 2006; Ogbu, 2003; Whiting, 2009; Wiggan, 2007) note measurable distinctions in educational outcomes between European American and African American student groups in the United States. European American favored racial

disparities in academic achievement have increased from 13% to 19% over the past 35 years (Anderson, 2012).

Standardized testing results revealed that the difference in outcome is comparable to testing two 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. The White child is more likely to perform at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level and the Black child is more likely to perform at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level, or one standard deviation below (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). Lynn (2006) affirmed that “It is no secret that there are great disparities in academic achievement and success between African Americans and European Americans” (p. 107), yet the debates continue about factors that contribute to this great divide.

A number of studies in the current literature discuss the Black-White achievement gap (Anderson, 2012; Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Paige & Witty, 2009); however, it is important to provide comparative data for more than two groups to contextually explain the need for a singular investigation of African American students. There are four major racial/ethnic subgroups in the United States (African American, Asian American, European American, and Latino). According to American College Testing (ACT, 2012), upon entering high school, Asian American students generally score the highest on college entrance exams and make the largest gains prior to graduation. European American students score slightly lower than Asian American students. Latino student scores are only slightly above African American students on eighth grade tests, but the gap widens over time.

African American students started with the lowest scores and showed the smallest gains, with African American females slightly outscoring males (Gewertz, 2010). The outcomes of the educational process in the U.S. have been disadvantageous to both African American males and females, yet more attention has been given to urban African American males because some have deemed their problems as systemic and inescapable (Lynn, 2006). Others have contended that

with modified educational practices, African American male students will attain higher academic outcomes (Graham & Anderson, 2008; Harper & Davis, 2012; Wiggan, 2008).

Traditionally, European American men in Western countries have earned higher levels of academic achievement than women (Smyth, 2007), but in recent years educational inequality in the United States has experienced a gender gap reversal in which females are graduating from institutions of higher education in larger numbers than males. College graduation rates are higher for European American females than European American males (Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Smyth, 2007). Within European American families, gender assignments and expectations influence educational outcomes differently across income and parent education levels.

According to Eirich (2010), brothers in high socio-economic status (HSES) European American households attain higher levels of education than their sisters, particularly when fathers have achieved higher educational levels than mothers. Conversely, in European American low to middle socioeconomic status (L-MSES) households, as well as households where mothers have earned higher degrees than fathers, academic achievement among gendered siblings is not significantly different (Eirich, 2010). Studies conducted primarily with European American siblings indicate that sex composition impacts academic performance (Tillman, 2008), parenting styles influence gendered specific academic competence (Brody, Kim, Murry, & Brown, 2005), and among twins, gender sways academic achievement (Teachman, 1997).

Taken collectively, the aforementioned sibling studies do not support definitive conclusions about a direct relationship between gender and academic achievement nor do they explore race as an intervening factor. Eirich's (2010) and Tillman's (2008) studies addressed class and or gender but did not address race fully. Brody et al.'s study addressed parenting styles and gender but did not mention race and class, and the Teachman (1997) study similarly

addressed gender but did not incorporate race or class as intervening factors. Allard (2008) and McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, and Shwed (2011) addressed the disparity between graduation rates of African American females and males; however, there is limited literature available that address sibling inconsistencies among African Americans. This study address limitations in research by exploring the factors that contributed to the female favored academic outcomes among opposite gendered African American siblings from low to middle socioeconomic status (L-MSES) families.

The five African American sibling pairs in this study were conveniently selected to probe this phenomenon that may help explain why the sisters are acquiring higher levels of academic achievement than their brothers. Situated in southeastern Michigan, the participants' central to this study were opposite gendered adult African American full biological siblings whose age differences are five years or less. The females consistently attained higher academic outcomes than their male siblings. The sisters graduated from prestigious 4-year colleges and universities while the brothers either did not attend college, attend(ed) community or vocational colleges, attend(ed) less competitive 4 year colleges or universities, or quit college before earning a degree. Herein lie the crux of the phenomenon concerning African American gender differentiated academic outcomes.

### **Statement of the Problem**

African American males are experiencing the lowest academic achievement rate among the four major racial and ethnic subgroups of learners in the U. S. (ACT, 2012; Davis, 2003; Gewertz, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2013), including their African American female counterparts (McDaniel et al., 2011; Roderick, 2003). The Schott Foundation (2008) reported, "The educational inequities in graduation rates and achievement gaps impacting Black males are

national and pervasive” (p. 4). The African American male is trailing all other student groups in the U.S. educational system.

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s (2012) report, our nation’s school systems graduate only 66% of African American students, and continue to underfund districts with the highest population of African American and other non-white students. These figures represent the lowest achievement and highest consequences for African Americans compared to all other reported U.S. subgroups. The inequities in the educational system further propagate the cyclical effect of joblessness, poverty, crime, incarceration, and the insurgence of mental health distresses among African Americans (Anyon, 2005).

These reports provide fuel for those who allege that African American males are intellectually inferior. These assertions, and others like them, further perpetuate the prevalent negative perception about African American males in U.S. society, and African American male students in U.S. schools.

Negative stereotypes of African American males have endured in the U.S. since the enslavement era and have persistently been reinforced in major societal institutions, of which schools are no exception. Derogatory terms and characterizations have been established to construct a deleterious persona of African Americans, especially males. Historically typecast as either Sambo (ignorant, buffoonish, lazy, and irresponsible) or Brute (violent, corrupt, and promiscuous), African American males have continually been depicted in the most malicious and dehumanizing ways (Bireda, 2002). Stereotypical conceptions were deliberately created to generate a negative public opinion of African Americans to justify slavery and excuse violence toward them, while maintaining a superior position in society for European Americans.

The “Brutish” stereotyping of African Americans males is so widespread in the U.S. that the label criminal predator is used as a synonym for young Black males (Welch, 2007). Throughout U.S. history, African American males have been associated with criminal activity so much so that “the familiarity many Americans have with the image of a young Black male as a violent and menacing street thug is fueled and perpetuated by typifications everywhere” (Welch, 2007, p. 276). Chaney and Robertso (2013) reported that the disproportionate incidences of police brutality against African American males may stem from the systemic structures that characterize African American males as aggressive and criminal. In their study, police justified their acts of aggression and use of deadly force on the premise that they viewed African American males as a threat, a decision influenced by race. Although most crime is actually committed by Whites (Snyder & Mulako-Wangota, 2013), studies on race and sentencing have shown that young Black males are sentenced more severely than are members of other racial or ethnic groups (Welch, 2007).

These historical negative stereotypes are systemically embedded within the mindset of the U.S. populace and continue to be reinforced through political, economic, and social systems including media: print, television, movies, and radio stations that promote songs that glorify gangster lifestyles and behaviors (Noguera 2003, 2008). Less than flattering portrayals of African American males in the media, particularly in criminal news broadcasts, may be activating pre-existing stereotypes in the U.S. society as a whole and U. S. schools in particular. Racial and gender discrimination practices that are evident in the criminal justice system are also extensive in the educational system (Bireda, 2002; Davis, 2003; NAACP, 2006; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). This study examined the influence of African

American male stereotyping in the educational system and explored the notion that Black males are misunderstood in schools.

Reflective of the larger society, African American males in school encounter racialized gendered differential treatment because of destructive stereotyping. Bireda (2002) asserted:

Students have the same status and experiences in our schools as they have in the larger society, of which the school is a microcosm. Students who belong to stigmatized groups in the larger society belong to stigmatized groups in our schools. African American males are a stigmatized group within the larger American society, and African American male students belong to a stigmatized group in most school settings (p. 91).

The overarching effects of stereotyping are anticipated and cyclical. According to Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001), “Bad impressions and bad stereotypes are quicker to form and more resistant to disconfirmation than good ones (p. 323). Stereotyping in schools lead to adverse outcomes in academic achievement, psychological development, and social behaviors (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2013). The Commission’s report stated that racialized stereotyping and profiling comes with a hefty price tag. They indicated that the results not only affect the stereotyped individuals or groups, but their families, their communities, and their society as a whole. Some of the reported consequences included: lowered self-esteem, loss of education, unemployment, disempowerment, mistrust of social systems and institutions, promotion of anti-social behaviors, and increased criminalization. They concluded that these outcomes generally resulted in a weakened social and economic system that impacted the well-being of the entire citizenry.

Bireda (2002) agreed and concluded that “Stereotyping most often produces predictable results in the form of self-fulfilling prophecies, and always leads to tension and conflict in the

classroom” (p.47). Bourdieu’s theory of habitus asserted that perceptions of others influence perceptions of self and operate collectively within social structures or fields and predetermine individual potential courses of action (Darity, 2008). When teachers make false accusations based on faulty assumptions, students respond accordingly; generally resulting in poor academic performance, suspension, expulsion, graduating with limited knowledge and skills, or dropping out.

The process toward eliminating stereotype-casting behaviors in the U.S. educational system begins with acknowledging that, as definitively as they have for centuries, the ideology of racialized temperaments is pervasive in the U.S. According to Painter 2010, “the depiction of ethnic whites as temperamentally honest and hard-working is generally pitted against an alien race of black degenerate families judged lacking those self-same virtues” (p. 379-380). Central to the stereotypical construct is the belief that African Americans are inferior to European Americans.

Bireda (2002) encouraged educators to refrain from viewing differences as deficits. She noted that educators must be sensitive to the fact that,

African American students generally must give up significant aspects of their cultural identity in order to be successful in the U.S. public school system. Independence and individual achievement, aspects of the core mainstream value of individualism, with Anglo-Saxon and European immigrant origins, is highlighted in the cultural-institutional setting of U.S. schools. Contrasting that with the collective cultural value orientation (which emphasizes interdependence) of African American”, and many non-Western population groups, may inherently generate friction (p. 18).



“A mind is a terrible thing to waste” is a slogan coined in 1971 by Forest Long and popularized by the United Negro College Fund. The irony of the catchphrase being touted by an organization that advocates for higher education for Black youth is that minds of African American students are being wasted every day in the U.S. public school system. In a July 26, 2012 press release, by executive order President Barack Obama established the White House initiative to improve educational outcomes and advance opportunities for African Americans.

According to the release, this initiative was prompted due to educational practices that promoted inequity in distribution of high quality teachers, the lack of safe schools, a mundane curriculum, imbalanced disciplinary practices, and the overrepresentation of African American students in remedial programs. The aim of this initiative was to promote and implement comprehensive programs designed to systemically impact the educational experiences of African American students, particularly males, from early learning through adult education (The White House, 2012).

The results of the initiative were projected to enhance the educational outcomes for African Americans by reducing the dropout rate and increasing college graduation rates. The driving force behind this initiative was the belief that these outcomes would lead to more productive careers and improved economic growth for African Americans, thus providing greater social well-being for all Americans (The White House, 2012). Improving the educational outcomes of African Americans would provide benefits for the country as a whole; however, until recently, improving educational outcomes for African American students had not been a priority.

Academic achievement has been associated with quality of life. Minimally, a high school diploma is essential for admission into institutions of higher education (Saunders, Davis,

Williams & Williams, 2004) as well as entry level, often minimum wage paying positions in the workforce (National Center for Educational Statistics NCES, 2012). College graduation is the principle gateway to future quality of life indicators: professional careers, higher earnings, political leadership, longer lifespan, optimal physical, mental and emotional well-being, and social exclusivities (Cornileus, 2013).

There is generally a positive correlation between educational attainment and economic opportunities. According to Jackson (2001), “In the United States, economic opportunities are by and large related to educational attainment, which is in turn, dependent on the accessibility of educational opportunities”(p.5).

This study is not intended to minimize nor negate the racial injustices experienced by African American females in schools, nor is it intended to detract in any way from the experiences of other communities that each have distinctive issues with educational inequities. Nonetheless, this study is warranted since it is well documented that African American males are disproportionately placed in special education, lead in school suspensions and expulsions, and are foremost among high school dropouts (Anderson, 2012; Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Ferguson, 2000; Gallaher & Polite, 2010; Lamb, 2011; Markussen & Sandberg, 2011; Monroe, 2005).

Some practices by schools and teachers are counterproductive to the academic achievement of certain minority populations, particularly African American males (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Harper & Davis, 2012; Kunjufu, 2012; Lynn, 2006; Noguera, 2003; Roderick, 2003). Therefore, it is important to explore African American male experiences in school for at least two reasons. First, of all student groups, African American males have the lowest academic outcomes (Holzman, 2006; Honora, 2002; McDaniel et al., 2011; Roderick, 2003). Second,

African American males are confronted with gendered racism and must navigate through U.S. systems that are specifically suppressive toward them. This reality may affect their educational experiences in ways that are atypical to other student groups, including African American females (Greene & Winters, 2006; Noguera, 2003; Ogbu, 2003; Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2010).

A goal of this research was to find factors that contributed to the seemingly apparent dissimilarities in levels of engagement, academic readiness, educational goals, and academic achievement between African American male and female siblings from L-MSES families. Interviews were conducted with adult African American full biological brothers and sisters who were raised in the same L-MSES household under the same familial and environmental conditions. This study gave voice to opposite gendered African American adult siblings from L-MSES families in southeastern Michigan who have experienced female favored differential schooling outcomes.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the factors that contributed to the female favored academic outcomes among opposite gendered African American siblings from low to middle socioeconomic status (L-MSES) families. Participants were recruited from communities that were predominately populated with L-MSES households. Participants were asked to self-report their K-12<sup>th</sup> grade socioeconomic status (SES) by declaring their qualifications of eligibility for free or reduced lunch when they were in elementary, middle, and high school. All participants in the study reported having had experiences in public K – 12 schools in southeastern Michigan.

This study's contribution addressed the female favored gendered inconsistencies relative to academic experiences and outcomes among African American adult siblings from L-MSES families, and the lack of related research that reflect the voices of African American male and female siblings.

In this study, the terms African American and Black are used interchangeably and the terms European American and White are used interchangeably. Gender was defined as male or female; siblings were defined as adult full biological brothers and sisters raised exclusively in the same L-MSES household, whose age difference is 5 years or less; African American status was based on a self-report indicating American-born with African ancestry; and inconsistencies in academic outcomes were determined by college attendance, type of college attended, and college graduation timeline. Two additional criteria were that the sisters had to have attained a higher level of academic achievement than their brothers, and participation from both siblings was required to be included in this study.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Critical race theory (CRT) is an essential framework to examine pedagogical practices in elementary, secondary, and higher education settings. CRT is, according to Lynn (2006), "a potential tool for framing more lucidly the conditions under which African Americans are educated and also for suggesting possible solutions to the perennial problems faced by this historically marginalized group" (p. 108). Lynn and Parker (2006) asserted that "CRT" has been used as a framework for examining: persistent racial inequities in education, qualitative research methods, pedagogy and practice, the school experiences of marginalized students of color, and the efficacy of race-conscious education policy" (p. 257). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995)

proposed that the impact of race and racism on educational outcomes can be explored through the lens of CRT.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) contends that racism is intentional and pervasive. Proponents of CRT maintain that racism is so permeating that most people do not see it. Racism can be compared to not being able to see the forest for the trees. CRT posits that racism is a blinding mechanism designed to obscure reality and project a false image of logic and sanity (Bell, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Similarly, Painter (2010) argues that racism is not a natural phenomenon, but one that was manufactured by the ruling powers to sustain their position of dominance and finance their economic structure.

Critical race theory (CRT) framework in education necessitates an examination of the historical roots of African American experiences in the context of the U.S. public education system to disaggregate the effects of race and racism on academic outcomes. Derrick Bell, the first tenured African American Harvard Law professor, is credited as one of the founding fathers of the critical race theory (CRT). Premised on the belief that racism is embedded into the U.S. American society, Bell (1992) proposed that racism is a permanent reality for African Americans and a CRT lens may be utilized when examining policies and practices of law, economics, and educational systems.

Bell (2004) discussed the interest convergence covenant that suggested that economic, political, and social concessions are not made for African Americans unless European Americans (particularly middle and upper class European Americans) significantly benefit from the allowances as well. Bell asserted that “Black rights are recognized and protected when and only so long as the policymakers perceive that such advances will further interests that are their

primary concern” (p. 49). Bell (1992) championed the cause of CRT to give voice to “the stories of people on the bottom” (p. 144) to reveal how race and racism are likely to be an ongoing part of current U.S. systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

A brief review of the history of the United States affirms that racism in public education is systemic and on-going and has been preserved by means of: slavery, prohibition of educating African Americans, segregated schools, inequitable allocations of school funding, and unbalanced distribution of quality teachers (Lynn, 2006; Watkins, 2001). Analogous to Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) assertion, a review of the current Children’s Defense Fund (2014) report indicated that there remains a strong association between race and inequities in the educational system in the United States.

A central ideology of critical race theory, CRT employs counter-storytelling to oppose the single story and dispel accepted myths about African American males that permeate the U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). DeCuir and Dixson (2004) describe counter-storytelling as “a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogue that perpetuate racial stereotypes. The use of counter-stories allows for the challenging of privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority, therefore serving as a means to give voice to marginalized groups” (p. 27).

There is a substantiated need to develop educational programs that are targeted for marginalized student populations. Research-based programs that are designed to address the needs of disenfranchised students may be implemented to increase school success rates. Therefore, it is neither the purpose nor the plan of this study to merely use CRT as a tool to analyze, frame, and expose educational inequities; rather to effect change (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As Freire (2009) posited, true education leads to praxis. Freire declared that the concept of praxis requires dialogue, reflection, and action. Lynn (2006) stated that CRT not only

addresses the concerns “inherent in racial order but also the kinds of responses that can bring about positive change” (p. 115).

When educational research is framed in CRT, according to Lynn (2006), it “begins to create a discourse that articulates the ways in which teachers of color can initiate the process of ending racial subordination” (p. 115). Dixson and Rousseau (2005) declared that “CRT mandates that social activism be a part of any CRT project. To that end, the stories must move us to action...” (p. 13). Woodson (1933/2008) stated that “Real education is meant to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better” (p.24). A goal of this study was investigation, dialogue, reflection, and action: praxis. This study, framed within the critical race theory investigated factors regulating the impact of systemic oppression in school communities on L-MSES African American brothers and sisters’ academic experiences and outcomes.

### **Research Questions**

Research studies show that African American females are outperforming African American males in academic achievement (Allard, 2008; McDaniel et al., 2011; Roderick, 2003). By exploring descriptions of academic experiences of African American adult siblings from L-MSES families, this study investigated how male and female siblings from L-MSES households matriculated through K-12 schools in southeastern Michigan.

This study was guided by the central question: What is the meaning of female favored gendered inconsistencies in academic outcomes among African American adult siblings from low to middle socioeconomic status (L-MSES) families in southeastern Michigan? To address the central question, the following questions were explored: (1) How do African American adult male siblings from L-MSES families who have experienced female favored differential

educational outcomes describe their academic experiences and outcomes? (2) How do African American adult female siblings from L-MSES families who have experienced female favored differential educational outcomes describe their academic experiences and outcomes? and (3) How does growing up in a L-MSES African American family affect adult brothers and sisters, specifically as it relates to female favored differential academic experiences and outcomes?

### **Delimitations**

This study was delimited to full biological male and female adult siblings who grew up in the same households in communities located in southeastern Michigan. Participation in this study was delimited to siblings who have a 5 year or less age difference. The female siblings in this study surpassed the male siblings in academic achievement determined by whether or not they went to college, the type of college that they attended such as community college versus university, whether or not they completed college, and how long it took to graduate from college. The participants in this study were from low to middle socioeconomic status households during their K-12 matriculation. In each sibling pair, both brother and sister were required to participate in the interview process to be eligible for inclusion in this study's findings. These delimitations strengthen this study by minimizing possible variances, other than gender, which may influence the dissimilarities in academic outcomes between each sibling in the pair.

Full biological siblings were selected to minimize genetic variances and differences in kinship to parents. Five year or less age span difference was to ensure similarities in familial and educational conditions, i.e. financial status of household, community environment, family dynamics, and school staffing. Female favored academic achievement was selected to help explore factors that were specific to Black male underachievement. Low to middle socioeconomic status households were selected to explore the influences related to SES.



## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the factors that contributed to the female favored academic outcomes among opposite gendered African American siblings from low to middle socioeconomic status (L-MSES) families. This study examined the educational inequities that low to middle socioeconomic African American students are confronted with in school. These disadvantages must be understood within the cyclical relationship between discriminatory education and unemployment or underemployment, which impacts generation after generation of marginalized populations. The literature review included topics related to: Race and racism, race and U.S. education, race and academic achievement, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES). Social justice scholars have concluded that the lack of academic achievement among African Americans, particularly males, is inseparably interrelated to larger social obstructions (Anyon, 2005; Bell, 2004; Collins, 2009; Ferguson, 2000; Kozol 2005; Noguera, 2008; Painter, 2010; Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2010). This study was designed to examine how these factors intersect and systemically effect academic experiences and outcomes of African American students, particularly males.

### **Race and Racism in the U.S.**

Race is an illusion when scrutinized by science and history unmediated by social structures (Bell, 1992; Collins, 2009; Painter, 2010). Yet, racism is real. It is the mother of divisiveness and historically has birthed disenfranchisement. According to Collins (2009, p. 44), “Racism is not simply a system of moral failure that produces prejudiced white individuals”. Collins concurred with Freire’s (1970) assertion that “Racism...is a system of power” (p.44).

Whiteness and Blackness are both social concepts that can be assigned, reassigned, and altered within social contexts (Collins, 2009). She provided an example of being ascribed Whiteness when she wore a suit to a faculty function and received the acclaim of her White colleagues versus being labeled socially Black when she walked the campus grounds dressed in casual attire and appeared invisible to those same individuals. Collins shared those examples to help demonstrate “how the power to define race lies in the context and not necessarily in the person” (p. 44).

Similar to Collins, Ferguson (2000) asserted that “Race is a system for organizing social difference” and is used “as a device for reproducing inequality in contemporary United States” (p. 17). Painter (2010) concurred that race is constructed and has changed over time to include formerly excluded groups, such as the Irish, when they met “American” standards for inclusion (p. 378). She asserted, “Early racial thinkers deemed race a permanent marker for innate superiority or inferiority” (p. 390)...yet in biological terms, race holds no scientific validity” (p. 391). It was designed and continues to operate as a lens through which people develop perspectives, determine social interactions, distinguish identities, and distribute power in society, as well as in school (Ferguson, 2000). Quoting the former head of Celera Genomics, J. Craig Venter, Painter said:

Race is a social concept, not a scientific one. We all evolved in the last 100,000 years from the same small number of tribes that migrated out of Africa and colonized the world...Each person shares 99.99 percent of the genetic material of every other human being. In terms of variation, people from the same race can be more different than people from different races. And in the genetic sense, all people---and all Americans---are African descended (p. 391).

The primary methods for disseminating racial inequalities, according to Ferguson (2000), are institutional practices used in schools to protect the status quo. These practices include implementing discriminatory disciplinary policies to fuel the criminalization of African American children, overrepresentation of African American children in special or remedial education programs to convey an inferiority message, and the districting of African American children in schools that are substandard in curricular, instructional, and financial resources. This study analyzed racism in education as a “system of power that serves as a template to think through other systems” (Collins, 2009, p. 44) specifically, gender and class.

### **African Americans and Education in the U.S.**

From its inception, the U.S. public education system has inhibited the educational development of African Americans and other marginalized groups (Woodson, 1933). Lynn (2006) posited, Africans were brought to America to provide cut-rate sweat equity for an agriculturally dependent economy, education was never the objective. Woodson (1919) exclaimed that African Americans were “brought from the African wilds to constitute the laboring class of a pioneering society in the new world, the heathen slaves had to be trained to meet the needs of their environment” (p.1).

Slave owners understood the value of teaching some slaves the fundamentals of the English language, and other slaves were trained in skill areas required to maintain farm equipment and the like, but the common opinion was that education for African Americans was not to be permitted (Woodson, 1933/2008). Training, only as it was linked to utility, was the guiding principle. The current U.S. educational system has continued to reproduce social inequality for students of African descent.

According to DeCuir and Dixson (2004), “Racism is prevalent in all aspects of society, with school not being an exception....Because of the legacy of racism, schooling is problematic for African American students” (p.26). Watkins (2001) said, “The dynamics of power, control, racial subservience, and class conflict shape and construct education, particularly the curriculum, politically and ideologically” (p.10). Jennings and Lynn (2005) posited that “Racism and education are tightly interwoven in a manner that is complex, pervasive, and constantly evolving within and across a variety of social contexts” (p. 26). Societal perceptions of the inferiority of African Americans and other marginalized groups have been perpetuated in public education from its onset. Jennings and Lynn (2005) discussed the practice of hegemony, a term first coined by Antonio Gramsci (1971), used "to describe the complex process that allows dominant groups to establish and maintain control of subordinates by using specific ideologies and particular forms of authority that are reproduced via social and institutional practices” (p. 16).

Critical scholars note that a supremacist ideology often marked the early educational experiences of African Americans and other historically marginalized groups. Eurocentric philosophies and strategies of learning required the children of African descent to supplant and devalue their own culture and cultural inclinations in favor of the dominant (prevailing) ethos (Bireda, 2002). Lynn (2006) argued that “Schooling extended the arm of the slave master...it was the vehicle through which whites could continue to transmit Eurocentric values and morals to the oppressed...it unfortunately made it necessary for Blacks to commit deleterious forms of cultural suicide” (p. 118).

Schooling was the conduit that was designed to advance the de-Africanization process and maintain the status quo. According to Woodson (1919), the notion to provide schooling for African Americans was vehemently challenged; however, those who supported the initiative

were limited to the “masters who desired to increase the economic efficiency of their labor supply”; “sympathetic persons who wished to help the oppressed”; and “missionaries who... taught slaves the English language that they might learn the principles of the Christian religion” (p. 2).

Even with limited opportunities to learn, African Americans exhibited a rapid mental development and thus began to use education as a stepping stone to higher attainments. Apple (2009) stated that “education has been one of the most important sites where social movements and activists identities are formed within communities of color” (p. 655). The prospect of educating African Americans and other marginalized groups was met with massive opposition. Anti-slavery revolts swayed the majority of the people of the South to conclude, according to Woodson (1919), that to maintain slavery the African Americans “should be kept in the lowest state of ignorance and degradation” (p. 9). Watkins (2001) exclaimed that “In fact, education was anathema to the interests of keepers of chattel slaves” (p. 12). Leonardo (2009) reported the Georgia rule of 1829, the Alabama Act of 1832, and the Missouri law of 1847 which prohibited anyone from teaching Negroes the fundamentals of literacy.

Those who disregarded these mandates were faced with legal ramifications up to and including incarceration. Several other states were not as brazen in their exclusion of African Americans and other marginalized groups in the educational process; however, they used language in their state education policies that articulated a majority only rule.

Jackson (2001) stated that “The United States is a country with the ideology of universal education...financed through public funding,..In most states, attendance is compulsory until children reach the age of sixteen” (p.1). This ideology, according to Jackson, is “based upon the premise that a democratic society must have educated citizenry to be productive and make

knowledgeable decisions about issues affecting the country” (p. 1). Historically, people of African descent were not to be participants in the democratic processes that the universal education ideology imposed. In the chronology of African American Education, Jackson (2001) detailed numerous trends from 1661 – 1870 to disallow teaching African Americans as well as other marginalized groups. Woodson (1933/2008) contended:

Starting out after the Civil War, the opponents of freedom and social justice decided to work out a program which would enslave the Negroes’ mind inasmuch as the freedom of body had to be conceded. It was well understood that if by the teaching of history the white man could be further assured of his superiority and the Negro could be made to feel that he had always been a failure...the freedman, then, would still be a slave. If you can control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions....If you make a man feel inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself....you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one. (pp. 61 – 62)

The lines of inequities in the U.S. public education system were clearly delineated during decades of separate and unequal treatment of African American and other marginalized groups and European American students. Touted as a historic and revolutionary victory for educational equality, Strong-Leek (2007) described the result of the *Brown v. Board* (1954) decision to racially integrate U.S. public education as deficient since “African Americans were bussed into hostile White environments, while societal perceptions of their ‘innate’ inferiority, criminality, and excessive sexual behaviors were never addressed” (p. 854). To support her deficient education position, she described the dichotomous educational arenas of African American students before and after integration laws were established.

Strong-Leek (2007) reported that African American students were transported from familiar, supportive, intellectually stimulating schools in their Black neighborhood to unreceptive institutions in unfamiliar territories that propagated disconnected information, squelching their desire to learn. These newly integrated schools were undergirded with an agenda to foster among the African American student an aspiration to conform to the status quo rather than to analytically investigate ideas and develop cognition.

In one of the limited studies that have given voice to African American youth, high school students' in Foster's (1995) study reported that African American male students were treated far worse than anyone else in school. One student in his study said that she thought the school "put all of the Black boys under a microscope" because they expected these students to be engaging in criminal activities (p.63). African American students in the Foster study reported more problems than other student groups with establishing and maintaining positive relationships with the predominantly European American school staff.

More than 50% of the African American high school students that they interviewed perceived that because of their race or ethnicity, their teachers did not offer assistance, showed favoritism toward other student groups, and had lower expectations for their academic achievement than other students. The students identified racism as the culprit that attributed to their teachers' negative perceptions about them.

White students who demonstrated characteristics such as assertiveness and independence were perceived as confident while Black students displaying those traits were viewed as problematic or threatening. Academic expectations for White and Black students were different. The students of color believed their teachers were surprised when they excelled in rigorous courses. Additionally, the African American students felt that they did not receive the

recognition for doing well academically that European American students experienced. They reported feeling angry, frustrated, distrustful, and sometimes suppressed.

African American males may be misunderstood in schools if they are stereotyped as intellectually inferior, socially maladjusted, aggressive, and enraged (Cornileus, 2013).

Administrators and teachers that view African American male students through a narrow lens, which communicates a single story, are more likely to engage in racialized management and fail to regard the individuality of each student (Bireda, 2002).

Foster (1995) found that despite their particularized characteristics and accomplishments, African American male students were often grouped as students who were most likely to be disciplined, less likely to be encouraged, and more often overlooked for Advanced Placement (AP) or honors classes than all other groups, including African American females.

This practice is persistent as more recently, Pringle, Lyons, & Booker's (2010) study corroborated Foster's findings. They reported that albeit having proven academic performances and confirmatory teacher recommendations, African American male students encountered high school counselors that either dissuaded them from enrolling or failed to provide adequate information about honors or AP classes. One African American male student reported that before he started his senior year, he shared with his counselor his desire to take an AP course. He recounted his feelings and reaction to their conversation:

She replied: 'I just don't think you're ready for all that workload'. That really hurt me...The counselor did not base her answer on anything, even after I told her to pull up my record and get some of my teachers' comments about my attitude towards class and what I do...I'm a good student (p. 38).



Integration initiatives failed to abolish the inequitable educational practices experienced by African American and other students of color. Inequities continue to prevail in the U.S. educational system. Leonardo (2009) attested that the educational outcomes of African American students are persistently negatively impacted due to racial maltreatment.

Similarly, Woodson (1919) declared that “There had always been at work certain reactionary forces which impeded the intellectual progress of the colored people” (p. 151). Jackson (2001) chronicled federal and state initiatives and practices dating from 1896 through 1998 that obstructed educational attainment of African Americans such as: *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896); enormous endowments funding schools that excluded African Americans; massive termination of black teachers due to school integration practices; refusal to integrate state universities; tracking practices; White flight from urban to suburban communities; presidential order to reduce federal education funds; drastic decline in enrollment of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs); federal court reversing public school district orders to desegregate; and state laws disallowing affirmative action.

Additionally, Woodson (1919) stated, “The instances of Negroes struggling to obtain an education read like the beautiful romances of a people in a heroic age” (p. 206). Forbidden love in romance and forbidden love in acquiring liberating knowledge are equally exhilarating and equally dangerous. Consequently, Woodson (1919) insisted that “Many citizens opposed educating Negroes on the ground that their mental improvement was inconsistent with their position as persons held for service. For this reason there was never put forward any systematic effort to elevate the slaves”(p. 151).

Kim and Taylor (2008) maintained that schools are primarily designed to ensure that the social order established by society’s hierarchy is not disrupted. Watkins (2001) referred to this

compromising ideology of education as one that “dictated that Blacks accept the world the way it was” (p. 23). Accordingly, Strong-Leek (2007) declared that “Generations of social, political, economic and personal hardships have conditioned many African Americans to believe that they, themselves, are indeed inferior to others” (p. 859).

The U. S. history of African American education’s role in this phenomenon is summed up by Woodson’s (1933/2008) profound declaration that in more than a few cases “the more ‘education’ the Negro gets the worse off he is. He has just had so much longer to learn to decry and despise himself”(p.77). Woodson (1919) declared that historically, “There had always been at work certain reactionary forces which impeded the intellectual progress of the colored people” (p. 151). People of African descent were not entitled to nor expected to engage in the democratic processes that necessitated an educated populace; therefore, education was never the objective for African Americans or other marginalized groups.

For decades, the lines of inequities were clearly delineated by separate and unequal educational facilities, curricula, and treatment between African American and European American students. The practices that African American and students from other marginalized groups experience in the U.S. public education system today, closely mirror practices that have been historically familiar to them.

Urban, majority African American schools are typically housed in dilapidated and unsanitary facilities (Anderson, 2012) that are characterized by overcrowded classrooms, underpaid and inexperienced often transient instructional leaders (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), inferior curricula (Anyon, 1997), and outdated equipment (Kozol, 2005).

Students who experience education in these conditions are underperforming academically and are prone to dropout. African American students, particularly males from L-MSES families,

are disproportionately placed in remedial academic programs, experience more frequent and longer terms of suspension and higher rates of expulsions (Losen & Gillespie, 2012), and are consistently on the bottom rung of the academic achievement ladder (Ferguson, 2000; Roderick, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

The historical roots of African American experiences in the U.S. public education system warranted an examination to the effects of race and racism on academic experiences and outcomes.

### **African Americans and Academic Achievement**

Academic achievement gaps exist across racial lines in the United States (Anderson, 2012; Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Lynn, 2006; Noguera & Wing, 2006). African American students lack equal access to highly qualified teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), are taught from a deficient curriculum (Cohen & Nee, 2000; ), experience harsh disciplinary actions (Carter, Fine, & Russell, 2014; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace & Bachman, 2008), are disproportionately placed in special education programs (Ferguson, 2000), score below other subgroups on standardized test and have lower high school grade point averages (ACT, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2013), and experience high dropout rates (Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2010; Rumberger, 2011).

The aforementioned reports suggested that African American schools are not equivalent to predominately European American schools, African American students are not experiencing equitable academic outcomes, and African Americans are not enjoying the economic opportunities, gains, or privileges as other groups. Predominately minority schools are reproducing inequality with cyclic effects (Dee, 2005), and reveal two sets of belief systems or attitudes that students hold about education and opportunity: abstract and concrete.

Abstract beliefs are generally held by European American children who associate schooling with upward mobility and success (Ogbu, 2003). European American students generally have tangible examples in their families and communities to validate this correlation. African American children may have observed or perceived that educational credentials do not provide the same outcomes in employment, wages, or social advantages for Blacks as they do for Whites (Anyon, 2005; Noguera, 2008; Ogbu, 2003). Education does not address the macroeconomic problems associated with the lack of available employment in urban cities that generally have a high concentration of African American residents nor does it address the lack of transportation (public or private) to outlying suburban, generally European American, cities where entry-level, blue-collar industrial jobs are located (Anyon, 2005).

Abstract and concrete belief systems about the benefits of education are further propagated as efforts to equalize access to quality schools have been thwarted. The Supreme Court has consistently rolled back the desegregation mandates established by *Brown v. Board of Education* (1955) by maintaining that the laws were temporary and are no longer binding. According to Orfield (1999), “Racial segregation is steadily increasing in the nation's public schools” (p. 48). Dee (2005) supported Orfield’s assertion and added that “The large and persistent achievement gaps separating minority and nonminority students are arguably the most important educational problem in the United States” (p. 158). Racial segregation and the persistent educational achievement gap between European American and African American students are not by accident, but rather by design (Apple, 2009).

In an equitable educational system, no one student group would fare below any others, yet in the current design of the educational system, African American males are the most negatively affected student group. Therefore, the interrelationship between the expanding

achievement gap, the highly segregated racial composition of schools, and the negative impact of the educational process on African American males warrants further examination (Noguera, 2008).

### **African American Males and Academic Achievement**

There is a growing female advantage in academic achievement in the United States (NCES, 2013; Smyth, 2007). Currently, women are graduating from college in larger numbers than men (Alon & Gelbgiser, 2011; Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006). Riegle-Crumb (2011) reported that in 2004, females represented about 57% of bachelor degree earning students in higher education programs. According to Buchmann and DiPrete (2006), this development for European Americans is a “striking reversal of a gender gap in higher education that once favored men” (p. 515). Down from 65% in the 1960’s, college graduation rates for men have been declining since the early 1980’s.

The current trend of women outnumbering men in attaining college degrees exist across all racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. today, but it is not a new phenomenon among African Americans from L-MSES families. According to Cross (1999), the female-oriented college graduation pattern does not constitute a reversal for African Americans but rather a continuation of a historically pervasive gender gap in academic outcomes between African American males and females. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Ed (2006) reported that the female-favored bachelor degree earning gap between black women and black men has been steadily increasing for at least the past 20 years.

African American males are significantly underrepresented in higher education programs (Cohen & Nee, 2000). American colleges are likely to have twice as many African American females as African American males on campus (Frierson, Pearson, & Wyche, 2009). Dating

back as far as 1954 when the majority of African American students attended historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Cross (1999) reported that according to the U. S. Office of Education, females accounted for 57.8% of the HBCUs enrollment. The African American gender gap continued to increase each year for the past two decades. Explanations for the African American females surpassing African American males in academic achievements are varied, according to Cross (1999), but “evidence suggests that racial discrimination was the major culprit” (p. 7).

According to Haddix (2010), the U.S educational system is designed to control rather than educate African American males. He argued:

Instead of figuring out how to best educate African American males, the greater emphasis is on how to control them and socialize them for the educational system to the prison system pipeline... Without explicit attention to how the issues surrounding the education of African American males are framed and complicated, we risk reinscribing normative and universally accepted definitions of what it means to be African American and male, to be “public enemy #1”. Is it that African American boys are failing in our schools or that our schools are failing African American boys? These are two different questions that imply different units of inquiry. The problem with the former frame (or the risk) is that it places the onus on African American boys (the individual) to achieve and fails to disrupt and challenge the structures (macro) that affect the experiences of African American males in our schools (p. 343)

Historically, African American men have been denied equal opportunities and equal access in employment and have not viewed education as a viable means to support themselves or their families (Cornileus, 2013). Discrimination against African American men in the workplace

is not a new phenomenon. Cornileus (2013) cited the Harvard Law Review (1991) that reported African American males experience discrimination that is “peculiar to their history and social position” (p. 446). She contended that employers were more willing to extend job offers to African American women than African American men due to cultural differences. The Harvard Law Review (1991) stated:

There are several possible ways to explain the discrimination against black men. Differences in cultural styles often lead employers to conclude that black men have attitudes and personal characteristics that conflict with a predominantly white social atmosphere. Many black men—although certainly not all—are more verbally direct, expressive, and assertive than white men, who provide the standard against which black male behavior is measured. (cited in Cornileus, 2013, p. 446).

Similar to employer perceptions of African American males which may be skewed because of cultural differences, school administrators and teachers may mischaracterize African American males due to common stereotypes that are ascribed to them. In many cases, African American males are taught by European American females who may lack knowledge about or experience with diverse cultures (Aaronson, Barrow, & Sander, 2007; Bireda, 2002).

One explanation for some of the cultural clashes between teacher and student (Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009), may be predicated on the association of African American males and criminal activity (Welch, 2007). African Americans, particularly males, are often the face of crime in the media in the United States. Welch (2007) reported that “It is likely that the foremost contributor to the formation of the public’s association between Blacks and criminality is the sheer number of Blacks represented in crime statistics and the criminal justice system” (p. 277).

The U.S. criminal justice system is characteristic of a society that promotes an anti-Black maleness disposition, suggestive of “a system hard-wired for punitive racism” (Stuntz, 2008, p. 1969). The general population in the U.S. is comprised of 13% African Americans, yet Black males make up nearly half of the prison population, as “black men are locked up at nearly seven times the rate of their white counterparts” (p. 1969). These statistics help corroborate Welch’s (2007) findings which stated that 54% of the Whites in her study perceived Black males as more aggressive, more likely to use drugs, and more likely to engage in criminal activity than other racial groups. Accordingly, Chiricos, Welch, and Gertz (2004) indicated that the association between Black males and crime is so ingrained in the U.S. psyche that the general public believes that African American males are responsible for a greater percentage of violent crimes in the U.S. than official statistics indicate. They asserted that in general, crime and Black male are synonymous terms.

The criminalization of African American males in U.S. society is evident by their disproportionate imprisonment. Many African American males, have experienced being stopped by police and or have been arrested before reaching young adulthood (Snyder & Mulako-Wangota, 2013). The overrepresentation of African American males in the judicial system is so pervasive in the U.S. that political leaders Eric Holder, U.S. Attorney General, along with President Barack Obama, are advocating for policies to reduce unfair sentencing practices that account for the unbalanced incarceration rates of Black men and youth.

Similarly, the criminalization of African American males in U.S. schools may be expressed in terms of disparity in school disciplinary practices (Bouie, 2014). High academic failure and excessive dropout rates of African Americans have been linked to disparate school discipline practices that continue to exist and contribute to achievement gaps, according to the



Children's Defense Fund (2014) report. During the 2009 – 2010 school year, national data indicated that African American children received out-of-school suspension three times more often, and were almost three-and-a-half times more likely to be corporally punished than European American children. Students who routinely experience negative teacher-student interactions perform less well academically (Buka, 2013).

Suspensions and expulsion are exclusionary practices that remove African American students from the educational process and hinder their opportunities for high level academic achievement, thus excluding them from college and privileged positions in the workforce. Chiricos et al., (2004) stated that the politics of exclusion intensifies the racialized illusion that allows people groups to see themselves as superior and demonize others as “wicked, stupid, and criminal” (p.379). Harsh disciplinary practices, out-of-school suspension, and expulsions are more likely to be experienced by African American males than other groups (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Ferguson, 2000). Racialized and gendered inequities in school disciplinary practices are troubling and pandemic (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2013; Wright, Weekes-Bernard, & McGlaughlin, 2000). Studies in Canada and Great Britain have reported similar findings.

The disproportionate numbers of boys of African descent experiencing punitive or exclusionary treatment (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Wallace et al., 2008) in school is not confined solely to the United States. Wright, Weekes-Bernard, and McGlaughlin (2000) reported that in schools in some areas of Great Britain, African-Caribbean male students are 4 -5 times more likely to face exclusion from school than their European peers. Wright et al. (2000) stated that Black students are likely to be singled-out, criticized, and disciplined for the same behaviors that are generally overlooked when practiced by White students. Their report concluded that there may be conflict among European teachers and African-Caribbean students due to complex

differences in expectations, assumptions, and preconceived misconceptions; particularly the view of some European teachers that many African-Caribbean students are prone to reject authority. Teacher perceptions influence the unequal disciplinary outcomes among children of color and other groups.

Studies that have examined the effects of prejudicial disciplinary actions and school suspension on academic achievement have noted that African American children are suspended more often and for larger periods of time than European American children (NAACP, 2006). This practice has been ongoing and begins early in the educational process. African American pre-schoolers received 48% of the suspensions in a national study, although they only account for 18% of the population (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

School suspensions and expulsions are linked to poor academic achievement for all student groups. Students of all racial backgrounds who were suspended scored lower on end of the year standardized tests than their peers who were not suspended (Carter, Fine, & Russell, 2014). Since African American males are suspended from K-12 educational settings in disproportionate numbers to other student groups, they are more likely to be suspended from opportunities to go to college than other student groups, including African American females.

Underachievement is a tangible and significant barrier to gaining access to higher education (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). African American male students encountered the highest number of school suspensions, forfeited the greatest amount of learning time, and conversely, experienced record levels of under-achievement. Only one suspension upon entering high school tends to increase the risk of dropping out of school (Bouie, 2014), multiple suspensions almost guarantee it. The time out of school is generally not remediated with school homework assignment but is time off task, too often encouraging anti-social behaviors through forced

associations with others who are suspended or are no longer attending school. Finding alternative educational programs can be a daunting and often futile task that ends in compounded frustration. Completing high school can become doubtful and ambitions to pursue higher education can be shattered.

There are recurrent racial and gender inequities in school discipline procedures where African American students, particularly males, receive the highest number of disciplinary referrals and the most severe means of punishment. Carter, Fine, and Russell (2014) reported African American male school suspension rates are nearly three and a half times higher than other subgroups. The practice of excluding African American males from the educational process decreases their opportunities for acquiring high level academic achievement and increases their risk of experiencing negative outcomes. Carter et al. contended:

Frequent use of disciplinary removal from school is associated with a range of negative student outcomes, including lower academic achievement, increased risk of dropout, and increased contact with the juvenile justice system (p. 1).

School suspension and expulsion practices experienced disproportionately by African American male students can be compared to issuing a prison sentence (Losen & Gillespie, 2012), since the majority of males in penitentiaries do not have a high school diploma (Snyder & Mulako-Wangota, 2013).

African American females academically outperforming African American males has been attributed to the predominately European American female instructed K-12 pedagogical system (Kunjufu, 2005). Again, cultural differences are often identified to explain why African American females seem preferred over African American males in school.

The Black male students are often misclassified as intellectually inferior and behaviorally challenged (Roderick, 2003) by teachers and administrators who may misjudge their cultural language, dress, and mannerism as inappropriate, nonconforming, and insolent (Noguera, 2003). Freire (1970/2009) connected the low academic achievement rates of African American males to behaviors associated with demoralized groups. He asserted that “self-depreciation is a characteristic of the oppressed...So often they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything...that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness” (p. 63). Kunjufu (2005) asserted:

Numerous studies by Wilbur Brookover, Ron Edmonds and Antoine Garibaldi indicate that some teachers lower their expectations based on the race, income, gender and appearance of the child. For Black boys, the combination of being African American, male, low-income, and poorly dressed puts them “at risk”. (p. 47)

Destructive labeling, discriminatory suspension and expulsion practices, poor academic performance and high dropout rates have become all too familiar outcomes for African American males. Greene and Winters’ (2006) study found that 59 percent of African-American females and 48 percent of African-American males earned a high school diploma (a difference of 11 percentage points). Mickelson and Greene (2006) found African American achievement to be gendered. They further asserted that “The race and gender-gap in Black students’ academic performance begins to appear during middle school” (p. 34), generally a time of transition and self-discovery. Noguera (2003) cited Hilliard (1991) in his assertion that Black males are marginalized, stigmatized, categorized as academically inferior, and labelled behaviorally problematic in schools when they are very young. Kunjufu (2005) asserted that the decline in academic performance of Black boys begins sometime during 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

In school experiences may account for the gendered disparity between achievement levels; however, some explain the differences in attained levels of academic achievement among African American males and females using an old adage that is often heard in the African American community: African American mothers raise their daughters and love their sons. According to Brown, Linver, Evans, and DeGennaro (2009), “There is both theoretical and empirical evidence to support the idea that boys and girls are reared differently by their caregivers” (p. 217). They suggested that African American boys and girls may experience different educational outcomes because parental disciplinary strategies, family support structures, and monitoring behaviors are inconsistent between the sexes. Adolescent males in the African American community are not generally as closely supervised by their parent or parents as females. They typically are not required to be home to complete chores, provide care for younger siblings, or report their whereabouts like their female siblings.

Additionally, some researchers suggest that an anti-achievement ethic has been adopted among African American male students (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 2003; Ogbu, 2004) and may also account for the gender gap in academic achievement. African American students who use standard English in conversation, earn high academic marks, and enroll in advanced placement (AP) classes in high school are sometimes labeled by their African American peers as “acting white” (Fordham, 1996, p. 22).

The “burden of acting white” ideology posits that African American students (particularly males) may conceal their academic potential to avoid rejection by their African American peers (Ogbu, 2004, p. 2). According to Fordham and Ogbu (1986) African American students endure experiences in school that are inextricably tied to gender.

The explanation for the female advantage in academic achievement among African Americans remains unclear. To provide another perspective for consideration, this study explored the disparity in academic achievement among African American brothers and sisters, particularly siblings from low to middle socioeconomic status families. Bireda (2002) indicated that “Poor African American males are placed in triple jeopardy of being victims of negative perceptions, low expectations, and poor relationships with teachers” (.p.77). The intersectionality between race, gender, and SES and their effect on academic outcomes is so intricately woven that it is necessary to examine each component independently as well as collectively.

### **Socioeconomic Status (SES) and Academic Achievement**

Socioeconomic status (SES) is determined by a person’s or a family’s ability to have control over or access to prestige, money, or power (Sirin, 2005). A child’s SES is generally associated with parent educational level, occupational position, and income. Comprehensive academic models of SES have been created that highly define each classification of SES; however, in this study three categories of SES will be utilized: low SES, middle SES, and high SES. Students with low SES classifications have parents who are unemployed, underemployed, minimally educated, or blue-collar workers with income between below poverty level through \$30,000 per year, middle SES households are represented by middle management and college educated occupations within the \$30 - \$75,000 income range, and high SES will be characterized by upper management or professionals with graduate degrees with incomes at or above \$75,000 annually (Thompson and Hickey, 2005).

The U.S. Department of Education (2013) report revealed that African American children are the poorest of all U.S. subgroups. According to Anyon (2005), “low SES children attend

systematically lower-quality schools than their more advantaged counterparts” (p. 66).

Kincheloe and Steinberg (2007) stated, “As school operates to privilege the privileged and marginalize the marginalized, it provides so-called scientific proof of the superiority of the middle and upper classes” (p. 28).

Kozol (1991) acknowledged the inequities in school funding and financing and objected to the concept of privilege for the rich at the expense of the poor. Within the CRT perspective, the concept of privilege can be racialized to mean schools are designed to benefit predominately European Americans at the expense of predominately African Americans and other poor minority subgroups, particularly Latinos.

Children start school with different levels of speech, information, and abilities. Family socioeconomic status (SES) predictably impacts child development. Children from disadvantaged families enroll in school with restricted language development, minimal knowledge, and fewer skills than children from more affluent households and the gap widens with time (Potter & Roksa, 2013). The academic achievement gap is further impacted as the schooling process continues, and children from middle and higher SES families are continually exposed to more academically rich information, activities, and professional individuals than the children from lower SES or working poor families.

Lareau (2011) noted distinctions between child development practices of lower and upper class households. He reported that higher income families created opportunities for intellectual exploration, thus stimulating intellectual advancement. Lower income families generally relied upon formative development through natural engagements and social structures i.e. schools, to promote intellectual development. Middle and upper SES parents stimulate intellectual development by engaging their children in empirical educational pursuits or programs. They

teach them how to analytically process information or think for themselves, thus making a concerted effort to cultivate their minds, often referred to as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Lower SES and poverty stricken families rely on natural growth (what occurs inherently without intervention) or school training (Bodovski & Farkas, 2008; Potter & Roksa, 2013).

Social class, advanced by theorists Karl Marx (*Das Kapital*, 2014; SparkNotes Editors, 2005) and Max Weber (2009) refers to the grouping of people into social categories based generally on occupation, income, education, mannerisms, and property. Academic privilege is associated with class distinctions, as middle and upper SES students are endowed with larger percentages of financial resources to impact school outcomes, while low SES or impoverished children receive a minimalistic educational parcel (Kozol, 2005).

Social class is categorized in various degrees, generally in six levels (Coleman, 1983; Rossiter, 2012; Sivadas, 1997). The six classifications are upper upper class or those with inherited wealth and prestige and the lower upper class comprised of those with newly acquired wealth due to corporate leadership or professional occupations. The affluent professional class is designed to generate new ideas and help dictate orders to the middle and working classes. Their schooling emphasizes creativity, innovation, and problem-solving (Anyon, 2005). Their advanced degrees set them apart to demonstrate to the lower classes the material possessions they should aspire for; however, the executive elite leaders are the reigning class. They make the rules and set the parameters for all other groups. Their ultimate goal is to maintain the “status” quo and get rich off of the labor of the lower classes.

The next three class levels are the upper middle or middle management workers, middle middle or average pay white collar workers, and the lower middle or blue collar employees. The upper and middle middle classes are almost indistinguishable from the lower middle or working



class except they are to serve as a mirage of what can be, but never is. They are needed to purchase goods and services and function as shop-keepers, supervisors, and technical skilled workers. Their college degrees will usually land in them in a high paying job. Middle class students go to school to remember facts and history, to gain knowledge (Anyon, 2005).

The working class or average pay blue collar employees are utilized to fulfil task related to manual labor and military service. Their function is to desire inexpensive goods and serve as a reminder to the middle class of their potential plight. The working class is satisfied with minimal or vocational education to get a job. Working class students go to school to know stuff, to complete worksheets, and answer questions (Anyon, 2005).

The lowest income earners may or may not be welfare recipients, but their living standard is impoverished or just above poverty. The working poor are faced with unsteady employment, receive the lowest wages, and are assigned the most undesirable jobs. The sixth and lowest class receives most of their income from government assistance or illegal activities. They are more often than not dropouts and a high percentage of them end up in the penal system.

According to Kozol (2005), social class' impact on education is unmistakable. He asserted that encompassed in the word school are two vastly different kinds of agendas. Children benefit or suffer based on their SES. Children from high SES families are educated to rule and generate ideas to propagate economic growth; while children from low SES families are trained to follow directions and perform miniscule operations at the command of the governing group.

In Haberman's (1991) publication, *The Pedagogy of Poverty Versus Good Teaching*, he contrasted urban and suburban teaching practices and curriculum. His characterization of urban teaching practices primarily included: giving information, making assignments, reviewing assignments, giving tests, settling disputes, and punishing noncompliance. He categorized these

teaching behaviors as pedagogy of poverty. Good teaching, on the other hand, was more often practiced in suburban schools when teachers involved students in planning, explaining, constructing, thinking about or applying ideas, and engaging in real-life experiences.

Socioeconomic status impacts curriculum selection and design (Anyon, 2005), physical appearances, equipment and supplies as well as teacher quality (Kozol, 2005). Haycock (2008), similarly reported:

For decades, educators, educators-in-training and the public more broadly have been relentlessly fed the same message about achievement among poor and minority students: “Because of poverty and other neighborhood conditions, these students enter school behind other students. As they progress through the grades, the deficits accumulate, leaving them further and further behind other students.”

Haycock discussed the teacher’s role in academic achievement as a critical one. Inequity in teacher distribution is a critical problem and should be of utmost concern to parents and communities with high populations of minority or low SES students because these populations are systematically taught by teachers with minimal content knowledge, less experience, and poor performance on teacher entrance exams (Kozol, 2005). Disparities exist in access to quality teachers between high poverty (55% or more students qualify for free or reduced meals and low poverty (15% or fewer students qualify for free or reduced meals) schools. Students in high poverty schools are getting shortchanged when it comes to access to better quality teachers. Teachers with weaker credentials are disproportionately teaching low-income and minority students (Haycock, 1998).

Research by Kain and Singleton (1996) asserted that the inequitable distribution of quality teachers across SES levels is not only a result of availability of school finances. Race

was determined as a mediating factor, as their data analysis revealed that poor European American children have a higher probability of acquiring well-qualified teachers than poor African American children. While there is credence to that assertion, it is equally important to analyze the systemic practices in the U.S. economic structure that facilitate academic failure for some population groups, because, as Painter (2010) contends, “the face of poor, segregated inner cities remains black” (p. 396). Anyon (2005) agreed and concluded:

Low-achieving urban schools are not the consequence of failed education policy, or urban family dynamics. Rather they are a logical consequence of the U. S. macroeconomy and federal and regional policies and practices that support it. Teachers, principals, and urban students are not the culprits. An unjust economy and the policies through which it is maintained create barriers to educational success that no teacher or principal practice, no standardized test, and no “zero tolerance” policy can surmount. Macroeconomic mandates trump urban educational policy and school reform (p. 2).

African American and Latino students are generally at the lower end of the U.S. economic ladder and experience the greatest adverse effects of poverty in education (Anyon, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Often restricted to predominately minority urban schools (Kozol, 2005), these minority subgroups are denied equal opportunities to participate on the U.S. economic playing field. Social class impacts education. Education impacts everything: employment, income, life-style, relationships, well-being, and perceived self-worth. This study examined factors that influenced academic outcomes among opposite gendered siblings within L-MSES households.

### **Siblings and Academic Achievement**

Limited research has been conducted to probe educational equality between brother and sisters. Eirich (2010) investigated pre-1970 data to “examine differences in educational attainment tied to gender within the same families” (p. 2). His findings reported that gendered differences in educational attainment (favoring the male siblings) only surfaced among high SES families. Eirich’s (2010) report challenged the gender egalitarianism theory by uncovering data that found that households headed by fathers who had more education than mothers were more likely to produce sons with more education than daughters. Obsolete data and the exclusion of African American families from the research present significant limitations for Eirich’s (2010) study.

Tillman (2008) investigated college attendance and educational expectations for siblings in blended family households. She found that youth from full biological sibling households earned higher grade point averages, had higher college attendance rates, and higher educational expectations than youth from half and step-sibling households. African American siblings were not included in her study.

Teachman (1997) used data on twins to examine influences on cognitive achievement and academic performance. His findings concluded that “there is considerable shared influence on cognitive achievement” (p. 363) despite gender primarily due to shared genetics; but academic performance was significantly impacted by gender, primarily due to socialization within and outside of the family. Again, data from significant numbers of African American twins were not examined.

Butcher and Case (1994) conducted a study to examine how gender composition among siblings influenced educational outcomes between 1920 and 1965. During that era, education

was primarily restricted to European American males; therefore, it is not surprising that their findings suggested that parents provided more investment dollars educating their sons. A significant limitation of that study is that their sample is dated and restricted to European Americans. Allard (2008) acknowledged that “the African American family is a historically and culturally unique identity and should not be approximated to the trends that are seen in European American families” (p. 124).

Kaestner (1997) revisited the Butcher and Case (1994) study and found that for European American students, gender insignificantly impacted educational outcomes; however, among African Americans, growing up with a sister or multiple sisters was a factor in achieving greater levels of educational attainment. There is limited empirical data to support or refute Kaestner’s (1997) findings. Brody et al. (2005) conducted a study that included African American siblings, but their focus was on parenting styles, peer acceptance, and academic competence. These factors are outside of the scope of academic experiences and outcomes.

The lack of scholarly publications, based on an on-going review of current literature, suggest that there has not been much discussion related to the impact of African American sibling sex composition on academic achievement. Dumais (2002) suggested that future research concerning siblings, gender, race and academic achievement is warranted. This study explored the intersectionality of race, gender, and SES on academic experiences and outcomes among African American brothers and sisters from L-MSES families.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

#### **Research Paradigm**

The philosophical assumptions related to the study were exploratory and inductive. The qualitative research approach explored complex and sensitive issues affecting African American siblings from L-MSES families. It offered an opportunity to achieve a deep understanding of what male and female adults think about their academic experiences and outcomes. Qualitative research is favored over quantitative approaches when very detailed information is preferred. Creswell (2009) asserted that qualitative research supports the plan to engage in research that will aid in understanding and, “identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture” (p. 176).

#### **Research Strategy**

Creswell (2009) affirmed that the phenomenological strategy is appropriately used to help understand the “lived experiences...as described by the participants” (p. 13). This study was designed to create a venue for the often silenced voices of African American opposite gendered siblings from L-MSES families in southeastern Michigan to be heard. According to Pompili (2010), “Phenomenology is a philosophical discipline originated by Edmund Husserl” (p. 239) that “studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view” (p. 240). A phenomenological framework allows a researcher to focus on experiences rather than objects using scientific guiding principles and provide individuals a setting in which to give meaning to their daily social interactions; to offer insight into their lived experiences (Giorgi, 2009; Pietersma, 2000; Reeves, Albert, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008). This study provided African American male and female adult siblings from L-MSES families in

southeastern Michigan an opportunity to share their gendered differential academic experiences and make meaning of their female favored academic outcomes from their perspective, in their own words. Hearing the participants' voice is an essential tenet of the CRT framework utilized in this study.

### **Voice**

Dixson and Rousseau (2005) asserted that “the essence of ‘voice’—the assertion and acknowledgement of the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of colour as sources of knowledge” (p.10) is a guiding principle of CRT. They further maintained that “CRT scholars believe and utilize personal narratives and stories as valid forms of ‘evidence’ and thereby challenge a ‘numbers only’ approach to documenting inequity or discrimination...” (p. 11). Dixson and Rousseau (2005) further argued that establishing a platform for individual storytelling of students who are otherwise not heard, provides a “counterstory – a means to counteract or challenge the dominant story...thus allowing students to provide their own perspectives of their educational experiences”(p. 11). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggested that “The ‘voice’ component...provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step on the road to justice” (p.58).

Dixson and Rousseau (2005) concluded that CRT in education considers the use of personal narratives and stories of teachers, students, parents and community stakeholders as reliable indicators that can be utilized to examine inequities in educational policies and practices. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) “contended that the voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the educational system” (p. 58). Strong-Leek (2007) recaptured Woodson’s (1933/1999) argument that “Black people must not be taught to see themselves through the lens of those who sought/seek to destroy them but through a new lens, not obstructed by mainstream

culture” (p. 859). CRT in education may be the vehicle that will transport traditionally muted and marginalized voices to the masses.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My experience working with predominantly African American urban high school students from L-MSES households enhanced my awareness of and sensitivity to the multifarious challenges and disadvantages experienced by students of color. I am particularly troubled by the lack of academic achievement among African American males from L-MSES households. I often find myself developing mentorship programs or creating informal settings to try to “get into their heads” and devise ways to address issues that impede their academic achievement.

This study allowed me the privilege of sharing the voices of opposite gendered African American siblings from L-MSES families, who have experienced female favored gendered inconsistencies in academic experiences and outcomes, with a wider audience. My goal was to advocate for culturally appropriate educational strategies for African American youth who have encountered schooling difficulties, particularly males from L-MSES families, and thus may be more likely to opt out of the educational process. I realize that it is their voice and not my own that I am to accentuate. Every effort was made through member-checking and peer examination to minimize communicating my personal perspective, and allow the voices of African American siblings from L-MSES families to be heard. Their academic experiences and outcomes were viewed and presented through their lens.

Conklin (2007) surmised that the phenomenological practice of reflexivity should lead researchers to attempt “to discount and diminish his or her own voice, thereby giving greater voice to the subject” (p. 282) and thereby increasing our knowledge. Framed within a critical race theoretical perspective, this study employed a phenomenological method to explore the



lived educational experiences of middle to working class siblings, with policy implications related to K – 12 educational practices for African American youth, particularly males from L-MSES households.

### **Sample and Site Selection**

Participants in this study were African American full biological adult siblings of opposite genders from L-MSES families who experienced female favored academic outcomes. The age difference between siblings was 5 years or less. A convenience sample of adult African American brothers and sisters from L-MSES families was identified from communities located in southeastern Michigan. Postings to recruit participants for the study were placed on the community board in a local library and a community facility that houses several civic organizations. One sibling pair, who were former students of the researcher, was contacted by phone. Two sibling pairs were recommended from local civic or religious organizations, and two sibling pairs volunteered because of word of mouth notification from other participating siblings.

Interviewing adult sibling pairs added credence to this study in that educational outcomes were more clearly delineated in adulthood. Outcomes were actualized, not merely projected. Interviews were held in the homes of the participants or at sites that provided seclusion and convenience. The interview site goal was to provide privacy in an atmosphere of comfort and engagement. To further construct an affable setting, snacks were supplied by the researcher.

In this phenomenological study, five sets of opposite gendered full biological African American adult siblings, (n = 5 males and n = 5 females) from L-MSES families in southeastern Michigan were interviewed. The opposite gendered African American siblings consisted of brother and sister adult pairs where each sister possessed a higher level of educational attainment

than her brother. This modest number of participants provided rich descriptions that meticulously and methodically explored the siblings' perceptions of their academic experiences and outcomes. A tabled description of each participant is provided in the written report.

### **Data Collection**

One (3 participants) or two (7 participants) 60 minute semi-structured in-depth audio-taped interviews were conducted with participants by the principal investigator. Brief notes were taken to chronicle body language or other visually significant details that become evident during the interviewing process. Consent to audio-recording was granted prior to the start of the interview. All participants agreed to be audio-recorded and note-taking techniques were implemented to capture visual nuances.

The in-depth semi-structured interview format and timeline allowed participants an opportunity to share extensive narratives. Creswell (2009) posited that an advantage of interviewing is that, "Participants can provide historical information" (p. 179). The main features of the open-ended interviews were to discuss: (1) the participant's experiences during elementary, middle, and high school; (2) the impact of their experiences on their academic outcomes after high school and; (3) the meanings they attach to their academic experiences and outcomes. The goal of the interviews was to offer African American brothers and sisters from L-MSES families in southeastern Michigan an opportunity to describe their gendered differential academic experiences and make meaning of their female favored gendered disparities in academic outcomes.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Interview transcriptions were manually transcribed. Audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim. Marshall and Rossman's (2011) seven phase process for manually

analyzing qualitative data was utilized. Organizing the data was an important first step in data analysis. This practice entailed logging data as an ongoing process that provided the who, what, when, and where details pertaining to each interview. Engagement in the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts provided an opportunity to get to know the data on an intimate level. Each interview was hand-coded without the aid of software which immersed me in the events of the participants, thus allowing me to experience the phenomenon. Based on the interview data and written interview notes, codes and patterns were identified. Participant responses were initially color-coded by sibling pair and by gender. Then color codes were added according to the participants' negative and positive lived experiences in elementary, middle, and high school. According to Saldana (2009), coding in qualitative research is "most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative...attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). Categories, themes, and clusters were generated using mapping strategies to systematize patterns expressed by participants that focused on specific details relating to negative and positive gendered experiences.

Member checking or allowing participants to comment on the accuracy of the findings was implemented after transcription but prior to writing the report. I engaged in peer debriefing by requesting a colleague to review my notes for hints of my own biases or personal worldview that may be reflected above the study participants. Finally, I disclosed my biases, as it was impossible to fully remove myself from the research experience or findings.

### **Anticipated Ethical Issues**

According to Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2000), "The difficulties inherent in qualitative research can be alleviated by awareness and use of well-established ethical principles, specifically autonomy, beneficence, and justice" (p. 95). Autonomy ensures the participants

understand their volunteer rights and protection of anonymity, beneficence ensures that the study will promote good and avoid harm, and justice ensures avoiding exploitation and abuse of participants. These ethical considerations were implemented throughout this study.

Securing IRB approval was acquired prior to engaging in any form of participant involvement in conducting my study. As Creswell (2009) emphasizes, I “respect the rights, needs, values, and desires” (p. 198) of the participants in my study. I obtained written informed consent from all participants and I ensured that they understand the study and all of its tenets, as well as have written information about how to contact my faculty advisor, if deemed necessary. I advised all participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or negative repercussions. I used pseudonyms for all participant names. I secured all documents, recordings, and other study-specific information in a locked cabinet in the office of my home. I ensured all participants of their right to review, edit, and approve all personal transcriptions and written interpretations concerning them, prior to my data write up and final report. The pseudonyms and age, gender, education, and SES demographics are presented for each sibling pair in Table I. Each sibling pair is listed together. Also included is a detailed profile of each individual participant.

**Table I***Demographics of Sibling Pairs*

Name	Age	Gender	Education	K-12 SES
Sincere	26	Female	B.S. Social Work	Low
Aaron	27	Male	Some college less than 40 credit hours	Low
Felecia	23	Female	B.A. Journalism and Communications	Middle
Xavier	22	Male	Some community college less than 40 credit hours	Middle
Shonna	42	Female	MBA	Middle
Michael	37	Male	Vocational Certificate	Middle
Shari	32	Female	MBA	Low
Richard	34	Male	H.S. Diploma/no college	Low
Gyrlene	28	Female	M.A. Counseling	Low
Mark	25	Male	H.S. Diploma/no college	Low

**Participant Profiles**

My deepest appreciation is to the participants in this study. They have privileged us with their generous accounts of their academic experiences and outcomes, and have provided this study with rich illustrations that help inform our thinking about the educational processes for these African American students in their prospective southeastern Michigan communities. All names presented in this study are pseudonyms that were either participant selected or researcher assigned.

**Sincere.** The youngest of three siblings, is one year younger than her brother Aaron. She stated that her family was situated a small urban community in southeastern Michigan. Her mother (completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade) was head of household and received government assistance for housing and food. Sincere attended urban public schools K-11<sup>th</sup> grades. She described herself as outgoing, a “people person”. Sincere reported that in elementary school she was very smart but

her behavior was “challenging”. She recalled getting into trouble for disrupting class and being “rebellious”; yet maintained honor roll status, won spelling bees, and received numerous awards for outstanding academic performance. Sincere reported that her middle school years were difficult. She recounted being “overly concerned” about fitting in with her peers, routinely engaging in fights, and getting poor grades in school. Sincere stated that her high school experiences were more destructive than middle school, and she self-enrolled in night school during the second semester of her 11<sup>th</sup> grade year because she had not earned enough credits to graduate with her class. Soon after earning her GED, Sincere had two small children. She reported depending on government assistance for housing and food and “taking a break from life” to concentrate on raising her daughter and son. When her children were 9 and 10 years old, Sincere used her government education grant to enroll in college. She earned a Bachelor’s of Science Degree in Social Work.

**Aaron.** The second of three siblings and the only male child in the family, Aaron is the brother of Sincere. He attended urban public schools K – 12, and reported having fun, having lots of friends, and getting “good grades”. Aaron stated that he had positive relationships with his teachers, was popular with his peers, and had a reputation for being an “all-around good kid”. Aaron said that beginning in middle school (progressing with more intensity in high school), the overall environments in the school buildings were not conducive for learning. According to Aaron, “students had to concentrate on keeping yourself safe.” He reported that there were “daily” incidences of students fighting and class outbursts, but teachers typically did not get involved with student management. Aaron said he learned to survive in the environment by focusing on school assignments and having superficial relationships with peers who were involved in gangs, selling drugs, and “partying”. Aaron reported graduating from high school

and going out-of-state to a historically Black college and university. He withdrew from college during the second term of his second year due to lack of financial resources. He returned home and worked two jobs to provide for his basic necessities and pay down his debts. Aaron has a high school diploma and 37 college credit hours. He stated that he cannot re-enroll in college or receive his college transcript because of more than \$5,000 in unpaid student loans.

**Felecia.** The eldest of two siblings, is one year older than her brother Xavier. She reported that their family lived in a suburban community in southeastern Michigan in a middle SES household that comprised their father and mother (both college graduates), she and Xavier. Felecia recounted being an exceptionally smart student early on and maintained “at the top of my class” status throughout K-12. Her early beginnings were in Montessori school, Pre-K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, after which she was enrolled in a suburban public school system that was predominately European but “very diverse”. Felecia stated that she vivacious and always loved learning. She said she was “extremely” involved in school organizations, enjoyed great relationships with teachers, and was voted “most likely to succeed” by her high school classmates. Felecia earned a Bachelor’s of Arts Degree from a “highly selective” predominately white, research based institution located in the Midwest. She doubled majored in Journalism and Communications and was immensely involved in student government, diversity relations organizations, media, and theatre.

**Xavier.** One of two siblings, he is one year younger than his sister Felecia. He attended Montessori school from Pre-K through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, when he was enrolled in a suburban public school system. Xavier recalled being an “average”, but very quiet student. He reported that he did not like school as much as his sister did, and would get in trouble with his parents for not “taking care of business”. In his 10<sup>th</sup> grade year, Xavier’s parents enrolled him in an urban

public school in a community where his parents attended school. He recalled the assignments in his new school were easier, but boring. He said he liked building things, experimenting, and project-based school work. Xavier recounted having a lot of friends who like himself, could spend hours playing video games, but was disinterested in school books. Xavier went to a four year college for one semester, but is now working and takes a few classes at a time at a local community college where he has earned approximately 37 credit hours. Xavier reported that he is struggling to stay focused in college, but will continue until he gets a degree and can get a good paying job.

**Shonna.** The eldest of three siblings, and is five years older than her brother Michael. She reported that her middle SES household was located in an urban community. Her family members included her two siblings, her father (GED) and mother (college graduate). Shonna recalled attending the urban public elementary school in her community until she was in fifth grade. She stated that in both the public and parochial school systems that she attended, all of her teachers seemed really interested in helping her learn; however, the work was harder and the teachers were “more demanding” when she went to parochial school. Shonna remained enrolled in Catholic schools until she graduated 12<sup>th</sup> grade and enrolled in a major university. Shonna has earned both a Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree in Business Administration.

**Michael.** Younger than both of his sisters’, experienced an opposite school enrollment pattern than they. Both sisters attended the urban public elementary school in their community and later transferred into parochial schools to complete elementary, middle and high school. Michael, on the other hand, attended parochial schools from Pre K- 7<sup>th</sup> grade and was withdrawn to enroll in the urban public middle and high schools (8<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades) in his community. Michael recalled being astonished by the “different” school cultures and wanted to return to the



parochial school environment wherein he was familiar and comfortable. He communicated that his personality converted from active to passive because he did not want to risk saying or doing “the wrong thing” to the wrong people. Michael graduated from the urban high school, went to a local for-profit institution and earned a vocational certificate in computer repair.

**Shari.** The youngest of five siblings, is one year younger than her brother Richard. She reported that their low SES household was located in the public housing sector of an urban community. Permanent residents in the household were her mother (some college), along with her four siblings (1 sister and 4 brothers). Her father (high school diploma) was a regular figure in the family but did not always reside in the household. Shari recounted being ahead of the other children in class because she learned to read along with her older siblings prior to going to Kindergarten. She loved books and would often choose reading over going outside to play. She recalled especially enjoying participating in the Black History projects, programs, and events. Since her family’s religion did not permit her to celebrate holidays, she often felt excluded and isolated during the other observances. Shari was more expressive about her brothers’ academic experiences than her own. She stated that for them, the “educational process was flawed”. She gave multiple examples that contrasted her brother’s ability and his academic outcomes. Shari graduated from a competitive predominately white institution and has earned Bachelor’s and Master’s Degrees in Business Administration.

**Richard.** The third of five siblings, he and his twin brother (deceased) were born 16 months before his sister Shari. Richard attended the urban public school system in his community throughout his K-12 matriculation, with occasional interruptions due to suspensions, expulsions, and re-assignments. Richard described his elementary academic performance as good, but reported that he was quiet and teachers seemed to pay more attention to the more vocal

students. He indicated that sometimes he needed teachers to explain information a different way before he could understand it. Richard shared that he was not a bad student, but had “a lot going on”. He stated that he could not try out for the high school basketball team (because he got into trouble), he left that school. Eventually, Richard was transferred to an out-of-state self-paced alternative school to complete high school because he “got in trouble”. There he earned his high school diploma and said he was satisfied because most people didn’t need a diploma to get a job.

**Gyrlene.** The third born of her siblings and is three years older than her brother Mark. Of the four siblings in the family, Gyrlene is the only female. She reported that their low SES household family was located in an urban community. Gyrlene and her brother Mark attended the neighborhood urban schools throughout K-12. Both parents (high school graduates) resided in the home. While she and Mark are full biological siblings, her two older brothers had a different dad than they. Gyrlene stated that her older brothers had a difficult time dealing with how her dad treated their mother and the family was generally in conflict. Gyrlene stated that school was her place of refuge, where she could have peace from being caught in the middle of turmoil at home. She recounted being very active in school organizations and attended almost every event to avoid going home. Gyrlene reported that she believed that an education (going to college) was her passport to a better life, “a better world”, so she always pushed herself academically to be able to “go away to school someday”. Gyrlene has earned her Bachelor’s and Master’s Degrees from a historically Black college and university in the South.

**Mark.** The last born of four children in his family, Gyrlene is his sister. Mark reported that school was fun, like a big playground in elementary and a place for socialization in high school. Middle school, according to Mark, was not as pleasant because he was “bullied about his

size because I was big back then”. He stated that he got used to it and just focused on getting good grades. Mark recalled that the saddest point in his K-12 experience was when one of his older brothers’ was murdered. Mark recounted, “He was my role model; that was my hero right there”. Mark said he eventually used his brother’s death as motivation to get good grades and finish school. Mark said he enjoyed being on the honor roll and believes he came graduated from high school with a good education. He said he has a job, a car, and can take care of his new son. Mark reported that he is “doing good” with his high school diploma, but his sister really pushed herself and “she’s doing great”.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the factors that contributed to the female favored academic outcomes among opposite gendered African American siblings from low to middle socioeconomic status (L-MSES) families. The central question that guided this study was: What is the meaning of the female favored gendered inconsistencies in academic outcomes among African American adult siblings from L-MSES families in southeastern Michigan? The in-depth semi-structured interviews allowed the five purposively selected opposite gendered adult sibling pairs an opportunity to describe, in their own voices, their K-12 experiences and ascribe meaning to their academic outcomes.

Data from the interviews were analyzed and coded into themes. The findings that emerged from this study revealed that African American brothers and sisters reported gendered differences in their experiences in school. A theme that evolved in this study was that African American males are stereotyped and misunderstood in school. The data from the sisters, in particular, repeatedly divulged the assertion that their brothers were educationally profiled for being black and being male. The first of two subthemes conveyed that experiences with teachers were different for the brothers than they were for the sisters. A second subtheme communicated that socioeconomic status influenced student academic experiences and outcomes. Another theme that frequently appeared was that sisters regarded their brothers as their advocate and their keeper.

Educational attainment is important for all aspiring members of our society. Many view it as a pathway toward personal success. The African American females in this study reported

that they embraced this belief system. They expressed their tendency to be self-driven and goal-oriented, highly attentive and participatory in class, completed homework assignments, and had aspirations to earn honor roll status. They stated they planned to attend college immediately after high school graduation and reported having had high academic grade point averages, college qualifying American College Testing (ACT) scores, and received college acceptance letters during their senior year that provided tangible evidence that they were on the path to imminent college matriculation.

In contrast, the male siblings reported being bored by the educational process, were easily distracted from learning, failed to complete homework assignments, and required more academic and behavioral service interventions. Their high school transcripts indicated that they, unlike their female siblings, generally lacked the grade point averages to attend competitive colleges and universities, and in some cases scarcely had the necessary credit hours to satisfy high school graduation requirements. These conflicting descriptions demanded a critical accounting of the conditions that gave rise to the differing narratives.

According to four of the five sisters in this study, their brothers were stereotyped and misunderstood in the schools that they attended, yet they were deemed their sister's keepers at home and in the community. The overarching outlook of the African American sisters was that their brothers were "smart and bighearted"; but were otherwise typecast and misconstrued in school. The male and female participants in this study agreed that the boys were treated differently. They discussed the positive influence of encouraging teachers and the negative influence of discouraging teachers, as well as the effect that socioeconomic status had on their choices of the types of schools they attended, school environment, school curriculum, and the opportunity for college admission.

### **African American Males Are Stereotyped and Misunderstood in School**

The African American sisters in this study discussed the strong cognitive ability of their brothers and several African American males that they knew in general. They concurred that intellect was not the reason for the female favored educational outcomes in their families. The sisters in this study routinely contended that their brothers were smart, resourceful, and self-sacrificing. Gyrlene's comment captured the essence of the assertions made by the African American sisters in this study. She said:

African American males are misunderstood, because they are stereotyped one way, but they are actually really smart. I remember this boy didn't come to class, barely did homework, would fall asleep in class, and if the teacher asked him a question, he could answer it on cue. I would be mad and amazed at the same time because he wasn't the only one.

Gyrlene's assertion was reinforced by other sisters in the study. Felecia, for example, is a recent graduate of a "highly selective" predominantly white institution (PWI). Only 15.3 percent of the applicants to her university are accepted each year, ranking the prestigious research institution among the best in the nation. Felecia reported that in her opinion, "When you are a Black male, people see you as a threat because there is a stereotype of anger and aggressiveness. I think that's because our media and our society label people." She explained:

Black males that I've come across are less willing to try to educate people around them about who they actually are, like, actually I'm really smart, actually I'm not about to rob you, actually I'm a good person. Because they have already been blatantly discriminated against they are less willing to be, well, they are harder against society and less forgiving

to other people who may or may not know, or just be ignorant about who they are and how they are.

She stated that despite their proven intellectual competencies, African American male students at her university were still “victimized” and were subjected to racial profiling practices on campus.

Felecia stated:

Even now, on campus at my PWI, Black male students get profiled for all of the crimes on campus and in the community, so they get stopped by the police and that kind of thing. It happens a lot.

Felecia shared her views about the mischaracterization of African American males, while Shari surmised that the urban legends set the Black males up for failure. She concluded that the glamorization of the street life, drugs, and gang activity portrayed in rap videos deceives people about Black males and their ability to succeed in school and life. Shari stated that common stereotypical views about the Black male not only shape how they are viewed in school but also affect how Black males perceive themselves by “messaging with their minds”. She voiced a perspective that is contrary to the single story about the academic failure of the Black male student. To accentuate her position, Shari reminisced about several school experiences concerning African American male students who eventually dropped out of high school. Shari stated:

What’s really mind-blowing about it, it wasn’t like these students were bad students academically, they were well-accomplished, they were smart. Like, they could skip school four days of that week, come in on Friday take a test and get a better grade than me, and I studied the whole week. They were prosperous educationally but their surrounding environment just consumed them.

Stereotyped and misunderstood is a major theme that persisted among a number of the African American sisters in this study about their brothers. They reported that the educational systems that they attended did not view their brothers as individuals who had various skills, talents, and abilities and were capable of scholarly attainment. Rather they were perceived through a narrow stereotypical lens that is often portrayed in society. Some of the sisters' in this study reported that while they themselves were typically viewed as honor roll students, eager learners, and goal-oriented; their brothers were deemed academically incompetent, lazy, aggressive, socially maladjusted, and self-indulgent. Both the brothers and sisters in this study articulated that teacher perceptions about their students affected teacher behaviors and expectations, which in turn influenced student academic experiences and outcomes.

**Siblings Recalled Their Experiences with Teachers.** Participants in this study described experiences with teachers that encouraged them to reach their highest potential of academic achievement, as well as teacher experiences that discouraged them and may have negatively impacted their academic outcomes. Elementary, middle, and high school experiences reported by the brother-sister pairs in this study indicated that the female participants' interactions with their teachers were generally more positive than the male participants' interactions with teachers. The African American brothers and sisters in this study had descriptive memories of their teachers. They reflected about their personal teacher experiences, as well as voiced their thoughts about their sibling's experiences with teachers.

***Shari and Richard's assertions.*** Shari articulated that her brother's educational development was stagnated and obstructed during the academic schooling process. She voiced her thoughts about the critical role of teachers in a student's academic success or failure. She noted that in the case of her brother, Richard, he was in trouble in school a lot. She observed that



teachers who were inclusive and nurturing tended to bring out the academic prowess in him, contrasted with teachers who were “authoritative”, “exerted punishment rather than discipline”, “exercised power rather than built character”, and operated school or their “classroom like an institution as opposed to a learning environment”. Shari gave examples of her view of punishment rather than discipline and exercising power rather than building character. She stated that discipline was welcomed when it was accompanied by conversations or practices that created teachable moments, modeled corrective behaviors, and instilled a desire to conform to standards of acceptable behavior. Punishment was either “vengeful” or was imparted with an attitude of “one-up ship” and generally lacked opportunities for reform. Shari tearfully expressed her remembrance of Richard’s transition from the urban neighborhood middle school to an alternative educational program for “troubled” students. She recalled:

My brother, who is smarter than me, was expelled from regular school when he was in middle school. He was being antagonized by a teacher and when the teacher made a derogatory comment about my dad, my brother hit the teacher. Mind you, this was the same kid that won the 4<sup>th</sup> grade spelling bee.

Shari’s brother Richard’s unpleasant school memories began early in elementary school. Responding to questions about elementary school experiences, Richard recalled getting paddled in Kindergarten for getting out of his seat to use the bathroom without permission. He reported that he raised his hand, but the teacher did not notice him until he was going back to his seat. He shared, “I remember getting paddlings in school. It happened periodically to a lot of kids, mainly the boys.” The participants shared that paddling, as a stand-alone, was viewed as a method of control and punishment, rather than discipline and character builder.

*Michael's memory of his teachers.* Michael lived in an urban community but attended private school from K-7<sup>th</sup> grade. He reported that although he knew a few of the public school children who lived on his block, he had not interacted with many others due to his relatively sheltered up-bringing. Upon entering his neighborhood urban public school system, Michael recounted:

I was virtually a new kid in school, and the teachers, it was a bit of prejudice against me from the teachers because I came from a Catholic school. I experienced a lot of emotional challenges that year. They seemed to make it their mission to ensure that I did not think I was better than their students. My classmates were not the problems, I got along well with the students, it was the teachers. I experienced some challenges with one teacher in particular. She just gave me a very hard time, very hard time. She pretty much just wanted to dispose of me.

Michael continued:

She was wrong about me, she didn't take the time to see what the problem was; she just misdiagnosed me and tossed me to the side. There was a lot of politics going on and it was disheartening because you're talking about a child's life. You wrongfully put somebody in special education; that could just totally deter their life in a different way.

When he was asked to compare his overall K-12 teacher interactions to his sister Shonna's,

Michael responded:

I have two older sisters and I definitely don't think they had the challenges from a teacher that I experienced. Now they may very well have had a teacher they didn't like; but as far as having a teacher they felt had a vendetta against them, I seriously doubt that they experienced that.

Michael maintained that his teacher interactions were in clear contrast to his sisters. He stated that girls were not treated as harshly as boys were in school. He recalled that female students were often warned about misbehaving, but boys were punished on the spot. Michael's report is corroborated by Sincere's account of her personal school experiences.

Sincere is the only African American female sibling in this study that described her school behavior as "challenging." She reported being "rebellious" and described behaviors that are generally associated with insubordination and being disruptively loquacious in class. Sincere stated that teachers in her school were regularly confronted with her misbehavior, yet encouraged her through corrective disciplinary measures. She detailed disciplinary practices with her 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. Sincere said:

I was a challenging child and she was one of the teachers that went through the challenges with me, but at the end I always knew that she cared because she would chastise me and then pull me to the side and talk to me and ask me "why are you behaving this way, what's going on with you?" She was more interested in me and not just the behavior. She would take the extra time and sometimes keep me after school to talk to me, just take the extra time and nurture me.

A common response among the brothers in this study emphasized that generally they perceived that teachers were more favorably interactive with female students than with male students. Some narratives from the brothers in this study described some teachers who didn't like them, did not engage with them, or did not explain information thoroughly to them. These negative experiences were more often voiced from the brothers than their sisters. Xavier's account is an example of the brothers' reports. He stated:

My 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher was my least favorite because of a lack of interaction with me; she had it with other students, but not with me. I was 7 or 8 years old and I remember wondering to myself, why doesn't she like me?

Mark stated that the teachers seemed to pay more attention to the girls because they were more vocal and attentive students. When asked to describe what generally happened in most of his urban middle and high school classrooms, he chuckled, "The girls are in front paying attention to the teacher and the boys are in the back daydreaming about girls and basketball".

Similar to Mark's assertion, Aaron's recollection of teacher-student engagement suggested that girls were the academic focal point in the classroom and boys were either being disciplined or ignored. Aaron asserted that most often in his classes, the girls were focused on learning the information that the teacher was explaining and the boy were more interested in sports and real life. He recalled, "Most of the teachers in school didn't pay much attention to the kids who were not interested in learning. They really didn't focus on students who were causing distractions."

The importance of how teachers perceived and treated their students was a common subtheme among the African American brother and sister pairs in this study. Helpful teachers were ascribed characteristics such as: caring, nurturing, thoughtful, helpful, and attentive. Hurtful teachers, on the other hand, were described as: mean, strict, unpleasant, impatient, partial, and disregarding. Four of the five African American brothers in this study stated that they preferred teachers who were nurturing and engaging. Teachers who were hands-on and employed up-close and personal instructional practices were favored over teachers with more detached techniques. The fifth brother accentuated fun and humor over nurture, but all five

brothers preferred being up and about or “doing” activities rather than sitting down and merely “listening” to information.

Richard described teacher methods that proved less effective for him. He said, “We didn’t have much explanation. It was just do your work, turn it in.” As he reflected on his overall K-12<sup>th</sup> grade experience Richard stated, “A lot of the boys were overlooked and some of us had potential that was not brought out. There was not enough effort invested into the unpolished diamonds in the rough.”

Although the brothers in this study generally reported fewer positive interactions with teachers than did their sisters, both groups concurred that encouraging teachers affirmed, but discouraging teachers deprived. Encouraging teachers disciplined, and discouraging teachers punished. Encouraging teachers measured success by where a student ended in relationship to where they started, yet discouraging teachers assessed student achievement by comparing one student’s progress to others.

The brothers and sisters in this study commonly described teachers’ with affirming behaviors as “caring”, “nurturing”, “relational”, and “inclusive”. Aaron summarized the perspective of the participants when he attested, “I had better grades in the classes where teachers were more nurturing and understanding.” Aaron and others associated nurturing and understanding qualities with teacher behaviors that included engaging in one-on-one academic and/or social instruction, getting to know student’s personal involvements or enjoyments, getting to know students’ parents and interacting with them outside of school, and ensuring that all students participated each day and were celebrated for who they were, not just for what they achieved.

Effective teachers, according to the brother and sister pairs in this study, demonstrated a disposition of caring for their students. Michael recalled, “Great teachers you could tell it wasn’t just a job to them. You could tell they cared about the students, they cared about their craft, their profession, and they were real nurturing.” Caring and nurturing teachers were described as “taking extra time with students” and “getting to know students outside of school”. They also used language that described adapting lesson plans and pacing to accommodate various student learning modalities, and having “high expectations for student learning”.

Encouraging teachers in this study were commended not only for their ability to diversify lesson plans to accommodate various learning modalities, but were highly regarded for their demonstration of commitment by going above and beyond to help students achieve at their highest potential, their dedication to inclusive practices by creating classroom environments that embraced multiculturalism, and their skill at ensuring that lessons were relevant, practical, and connected to real life experiences. Michael remembered one of his favorite teachers and recalled performing better academically in her class than he did a year earlier in a teacher’s class who he perceived less favorably. He shared:

I really enjoyed 4<sup>th</sup> grade because I had a very good teacher. She was great! It wasn’t just a job to her. She seemed very caring about her students. I never sensed any favoritism or anything of that nature and she just got the most out of her students. I would say that was a very, very prosperous and rewarding school year.

Michael’s views concerning the importance of the role of teachers were shared by Richard. Richard reported that he was an average student who needed an extra nudge to perform within his academic potential. He related that some teacher interactions prompted him to withdraw from the academic process; however, teachers who exhibited encouraging behaviors seemed to

impel him to strive to reach for more. Encouraging teacher behaviors mattered to both the brothers and sisters in this study. Richard recounted:

Even when you made mistakes or didn't do as well as you were supposed to; you weren't being torn down but you were kind of having that reassurance that 'oh, you're better than this, you can do better than this'. It was a nurturing type of dialogue between student and teacher. You didn't feel awful, you felt like, okay I can do better and I know I can because I believe it myself but also because this teacher believes in me.

Each of the sisters in this study recalled that her academic performance was exceptional because of the personalized instruction that she received from her teachers. Shonna communicated:

My favorite teacher wasn't just like a teacher, like "okay I'm here to teach you guys" then 2:30 hit, "okay you guys can leave, you're not my problem anymore." She was really like, she wanted to get to know you as a person, so it was on a personal level; she wanted to be involved in our childhood experiences. I feel like she really just engraved her personality in me.

Favorite teachers were not necessarily associated with being easy or requiring minimal effort. Felecia reported her love of being challenged. She said that she was always at the top of her class and was vocal about wanting more work, harder work, advanced work. She welcomed teachers who set high standards and expected excellence from her. She said that strong teachers had high expectations and delivered instructions using methods that involved high engagement. When reminiscing about one of her teacher experiences, Felecia informed, "She reminded me of people in my family, always making sure I was on my toes. She was like an aunt. I remember that from early on, having a teacher that was really invested in me."

Like Felicia, high expectations coupled with high empathy were qualities that Michael said he appreciated also. He reported that he respected teachers who required students to redo assignments that did not measure up to standards set for them. Additionally, he spoke at length about the necessity for effective classroom organization and student management procedures and associated them equally to high academic achievement. He shared that he personally performed well with teachers who were unrelenting. Michael shared an example of a teacher who practiced disciplinary rather than punishment methodologies:

My 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher was my all-time favorite because she demanded the best, not half-hearted effort. She was the most challenging. She was more of a disciplinarian than the other teachers. I think as children, we act like we don't want the discipline, but we do want it; I think she got the most out of us because of that. She was gonna hold you accountable, she was gonna call you out when you were doing wrong; but she was also gonna lift you up and pat you on the back when you did well.

Other study participants emphasized the importance of personal relationships with teachers. Sincere linked her brother's (Aaron) reputable behavior with his positive teacher relationships. She remembered, "My brother was a good kid. So a lot of his teachers, you know, when he graduated a lot of his teachers were at his open house."

Having teachers who were involved in students' affairs outside of school was important to Sincere, additionally Mark emphasized the value of personal relationships beyond the teacher-student pair to the teacher-family composition. He said that it was advantageous for him that his teacher and his parent interacted outside of the school premises. He reminisced about his 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher, "She got real cool with my mom, so they were like almost friends, so she treated me nice, never treated me differently than anybody else". Further probing revealed that Mark



“learned differently from other students” (he did not specify how) and required additional academic support such as tutoring and longer periods to complete assignments. Mark stated that “being treated like the other kids” was very important to him.

The participants in this study communicated that teachers’ are influential. The five female participants also expressed the important role that female teachers and female administrators played in shaping their goals and outcomes. Sincere stated, “Even when I was off track, I knew I wanted more in life. I looked around at all of the successful Black women in our school and...I just knew I could do better”. They reported that the college educated gendered positive role models in the schools encouraged them to aspire for similar positions of prominence and prestige. They suggested that more positive African American male role models are needed in the schools as teachers, administrators, or volunteer mentors. Gyrlene stated, “The boys should have positive role models in schools, no matter if its teachers or professional men from the community, you know, sharp, professional Black men in the building all the time, somebody positive they can look up to”.

The participants in this study stated that teachers were important because they influenced academic success or failure. Teachers developed lesson plans to address the varying degrees of intellectual ability in the classroom. Teachers established relationships with students and their families that inspired students to perform at their highest academic level. However, there are other factors that impact student achievement that teachers do not determine. Teachers do not determine the socioeconomic status of the students in their schools, nor do they regulate policies that dictate school standards. Teachers do not control how money is allocated to or within their schools, they do not determine the tax base that supports the school, nor do they define how money is distributed within their school system. While how teachers’ perceive their students and

interact with them based on those perceptions matter, the second subtheme underscored the importance of money in the quest for academic achievement.

**Socioeconomic Status Determines Choices, Environment, Curriculum, and College Access.** The brothers and sisters in this study thematically described the role that money plays on academic achievement. Two of the five sibling pairs discussed the benefits and privileges encountered in private (or parochial) schools that were often not experienced in the public schools they attended. The sibling pair that attended both a suburban public school and an urban public school discussed teacher-student ratio, school equipment, and academic rigor differences between the urban and suburban schools they attended. The sibling pair that lived in public housing shared that within the predominately African American public school system that they attended, most of the students that lived in public housing were slotted into non-college preparatory curricular pathways; yet, the majority of students that lived in single family dwellings were positioned in classes that prepared them for college. Within this subtheme are three findings: you can only attend your school of choice if you have money, money affects school culture, and money is a key to unlock the gate to higher education.

*You can only attend your school of choice if you have money.* Parents' ability to pay determined where the African American sibling pairs in this study went to school. While all of the sibling pairs had experiences in a public school system, two of the sibling pairs also experienced private education as well. They stated that private school offered advantages that were not encountered in the public schools they attended. Felecia recounted:

I liked Montessori school better because you could work on your own pace and not wait for other students. If you finished your work they would give you more challenging work, but in public school everybody pretty much had to do the same thing.

Similarly, Shonna agreed that there were differences between the two school systems she attended. She recalled, “The curriculum was different from public school to private. Private school was more advanced.” Shonna and her brother Michael recalled that the school work was “more challenging, but fun” in the private schools they attended. They described assignments in private school that were project-oriented and discovery-based versus “look in the book and find the answers” approach used in the urban public schools they attended.

As a youth, Michael experienced firsthand the relationship between school choice and money. Michael attended parochial school from K – 7<sup>th</sup> grade; however, his two older sisters attended public school K-4<sup>th</sup> and parochial school in grades 5 – 12. Michael recalled, “My parents took me out after 7<sup>th</sup> grade because they were paying for my tuition and both of my sisters at the same time. It might have been a lot on them to bear financially.” He continued:

It wasn't until I got to public school that I communicated to them that I didn't like the school and I wanted to go back to where I was going to school previously. They left me in public school because they couldn't afford it, but believe me when I tell you; it was different! If I had stayed in private school I think I would have achieved at a higher level because the teachers would have demanded so. Teacher expectations were higher in the private school than they were in the Black public school.

As with Michael, another participant understands the relationship between money and access to certain schools. Aaron indicated that he works two jobs now so that his son does not have to experience the educational predicaments that he associated with the predominately African American urban public schools that he attended. He reasoned:

Everything about my elementary, middle, and high schools would prevent me from sending my child there. The curriculum was weak, the learning was weak, and the

environment was not conducive for anybody to learn in, by any stretch of the imagination.

In contrast to the advantages experienced in private school, the participants in this study described distresses in urban public schools that were not encountered in suburban or private schools that they attended. The sibling pairs in this study stated that money was an important ingredient in academic achievement because school systems that were better financed had safer environments, stronger curriculums, and higher numbers of college attendees.

***Money affects school culture and the curriculum.*** To first open the discussion of how school culture and curriculum varied across different schooling options, whether private, suburban public, or urban public, two critical accounts are shared. The first comes from Michael, brother of Shonna. Both Michael and Shonna attended parochial schools and urban public schools. The second account comes from the sibling pair of Felecia and Xavier. While both siblings attended private and suburban public schools, Xavier also attended an urban public high school. These sibling groups' critical accounts, followed by other participants' comments, illustrate the dissimilarities in school culture that existed between the public and private schools and between the urban and suburban public schools they attended.

*Michael was moved from a parochial school to an urban middle school.* Michael remembered how the change in school culture from the parochial K-8<sup>th</sup> grade school to the urban middle school impacted his behavior: socially and academically. He maintained:

You go to this school and you would see brawls! It was like vicious fights, frequent fights. I went from being outgoing and involved to being withdrawn, quiet, and reserved; more of an observer, watcher, listener. Total contrast, my behavior change was like

going into survival mode because I didn't want to say the wrong thing. Academically I guess I was withdrawn too, such a change in environment.

Michael recalled his revelation about the urban public school when he transferred to his neighborhood school from Catholic school in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He described the school hall monitors and the walkie-talkies they used to communicate. He maintained that the tone and instructions, "Go here, do that!" resonated with him like prison guards. He said it was unlike anything he had experienced in private school. Michael remarked:

They had a room called ISS, which is really like solitary confinement in the penitentiary system. That's what I associated it with, at 13 years old it was that parallel. These kids are getting prepped for prison.

Aaron too reported that urban schools operated like pipelines to prison. He said that African American male students have been classified and explicitly foretold in school that they are bound for jail. He reported having heard expressions by school employees like, "Boy they got a jail cell with your name on it", or what he termed a common phrase used by school staff, "in 5 years you are going to be in lockup... 6 feet wide or 6 feet under".

Michael captured the overall responses of the participants that attended both a private school and an urban public school when he said:

In Catholic school, everybody was pretty much on the same level financially. I would say that socioeconomics absolutely impacted the student behaviors because we were just exposed to more positive things and they were exposed to more negative things. There was a lot of anger, a lot of hostility. I could not connect to that because I was a happy kid, and I don't think a lot of those kids were happy.

Like Michael, Mark affirmed that his urban public school experiences were stressful at times. Although he stated that he was a good student, he recalled having to “watch his back” and carefully choose his associates. He stated that it was important to be “known” in school and in the community, but it was equally as important to keep only passing interactions with certain individuals. He said:

High school was a little more dangerous than middle school, each level it seemed like it got a little rougher. That’s just always the other thing you have to deal with trying to get an education; sometimes that could hinder you from learning as much as you need to because you are trying to keep yourself safe.

*Felecia transitioned from private to suburban public school, while her brother Xavier experienced private, suburban public, and urban public school systems.* Felecia went from a private school to a suburban public school. She recalled her suburban school experience and said, “I remember everybody, all of us being smart and happy kids and we liked learning.” Felecia stated that she and her suburban public schoolmates were academically competitive. They all wanted to get scholarships and go to a big university. Felecia reported that they all ended up meeting or exceeding their college goal and are actively involved in leadership on various “highly selective” campuses. She recounted:

My friend group, we were all very involved and very, very smart; we were all in honor classes together. I think it was a big thing for me and attributed to my academic success, having people who were of the same mindset as I was.

Felecia also remembers a different scenario for her brother Xavier. Felecia recalled:

My brother got in trouble and changed schools in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. He had a lot of friends, but his friends were competitive in different ways from mine. They were more so

competitive with video games 'cause that's the stuff they liked to do. In his new school he had more free time on his hands. We had the same classes, but his were easier than mine.

Felecia disclosed that during high school her brother dis-enrolled from their neighborhood suburban high school and registered in an outlying urban high school. Although their classes had the same titles, Felecia stated that her assignments were more "in-depth" than his.

Xavier traveled by car 15 miles each day to attend the urban public high school. He discussed his thoughts about moving from a highly diverse but predominately White school to a school that was predominately Black. He reported that his views about the urban school were neutral. He said it wasn't "too bad or too good." He said his grades were fair because he was not challenged and did not try his best on his assignments. He explained:

High school was plain, nothing really happened, nothing special. If they did work that I was interested in, or something I could relate to or something. If they probably taught us something that I like and we had to do a project and present it. I like building stuff, seeing how things work, and experimenting. I liked school, but I didn't like doing the work. It was boring.

Felecia agreed. She said concerning her brother Xavier, "He gets bored because he's super smart and if you're not challenging him, he gets bored." Other participants echoed what was surfaced in these critical accounts. For example, Richard's remembrances of his experiences in urban public school mirrored Xavier's "boring" account. A student of urban public schools throughout his K-12 experience, Richard recalled spending vast amounts of time during the school year to practice and prepare for the state test. He said his teachers would spend days and weeks talking about how important it was to get good results. Richard reported:

I think if they put that kind of concerted effort into educating us throughout each school year those 4 years we were there, as they put on passing the MEAP test, WOW! What that finished product could have been by the time we graduated, as far as educated students. They put all that energy into those scores that they should have been putting into us; that was a disservice.

Like Xavier and Richard, when asked to paint a picture of his urban public school environment and experiences, Aaron responded:

No high level learning took place, it was a school in the ghetto and they gonna' do what they have to do to get by and get that check. There were certain teachers that would make an effort to teach you, if you showed initiative, but they were few and far between.

Gyrlene's summarization of the schools in the urban community where she grew up coincides with Aaron's. She concluded:

Schools in black neighborhoods lack resources. They always get the left overs, getting the bottom of the barrel, like teachers who don't care, teachers that are babysitting rather than educating. Schools in the black neighborhoods have people making decisions for them that have already given up on students.

The brothers and sisters in this study conveyed distinctions in educational experiences between private and public school, differences between urban and suburban school, as well as discrepancies within schools that hinged on socioeconomic status.

***Money is a key to unlock the gate to higher education.*** The participants in this study communicated that money was a determining factor in academic expectations and outcomes. Siblings Shari and Richard discussed student class scheduling dissimilarities within a predominately African American public school system between students who resided in public



housing and students who did not. Shari remembered being transitioned at five years old from the afternoon to the morning class because her reading was unpredictably advanced. She chronicled the following statement:

We started getting tracked in kindergarten, public housing kids went in the afternoon, homeowner kids went in the morning. Fast forward to middle school, those same morning kids were now in Honors Section 10 (for the kids that are going to college); while excluded from college prep, the public housing kids were already experiencing teenage pregnancies, incidences of homicide among themselves, and exposure to things not experienced first-hand by the kids in Honors.

Shari continued:

So I think early on, I mean I can think about the people that I grew up with; many of whom are still living in public housing now, many of whom are grandparents now, or dead, or in jail; for them I can bet that a lot of that started early on with what type of experiences they may have had as early as elementary school.

Of particular note was that the brothers and sisters in this study discussed the financial barriers that hindered the African American males in this study from attending or in some cases completing college. Although his sister Shari was college-bound, Richard said he knew that his parents could not afford to send him to college too, so he adjusted his plan accordingly. He stated:

I wouldn't mind going to college, but I knew we didn't have the money for me to go so I didn't see the purpose in trying to go. So I thought I could be a musician and go into the studio and make money.

Richard's situation was not unique for the males from the L-MSES families in this study. Sincere's brother Aaron was enrolled in college but had to leave the campus during his second year because of financial constraints. She said he tried to transfer to community college but was prevented from enrolling because of the debt incurred at the previous school. She said that she and her brother were without parental support after high school and struggled to acquire the basic necessities: shelter, food, and clothing. She explained:

He couldn't just go to school without working, so he actually came home to try to take care of himself because he had no family to support him, so that took emphasis off school. He always worked two jobs, my brother worked very hard.

Aaron said that he had the grades, the test scores, and the motivation to graduate from college, but had a barrier that was bigger than all three, "money, period." One of the three low SES household African American brothers in this study attended college. Both of the middle SES household brothers attended college, but none of the brothers earned 4 year degrees to date. According to the siblings in the low SES income families in this study, when decisions were made about who would go to college, generally the sisters were privileged with the opportunity, often at the brothers' insistence.

### **My Brother is My Keeper**

The sisters in this study often discussed the advantages of having a brother. No matter the birth order, the sisters perceived their African American brothers as confidantes, advocates, and providers. Sisters shared stories about how their brothers would use humor to lighten heavy situations, how their brothers would take the blame (and sometimes the punishment) for things the sisters had done, and how their brothers would "give the shirt off their back" to help a family member or friend in need.

They viewed their brothers as individuals who were easy to talk to, who had their back, and who they could count on when in a crunch. Felecia stated that she could share the “deep secrets of her heart” with Xavier because he would never interrupt her or judge her, but he would always help her view issues from different angles. Gyrlene recalled Mark’s intervention when she was invited to attend the senior prom during her junior year. Initially her parents objected to the idea, but allowed her to go upon Mark’s approval of the senior who invited her. Shari recalled Richard “spit-shining” the family car and dressing in all black to be their “chauffeur” when her boyfriend could not secure a limousine for his military ball.

Even when making decisions that influenced lifelong outcomes i.e. (who will attend private school and who will attend college), the sisters acknowledged the sacrifices that their brothers willingly made on their behalf. Due to financial limitations, two of the three low socioeconomic status families in this study were unable to send both their sons and daughters to college. One of the two middle socioeconomic status families did not have the financial means to send both their son and daughters to private middle and high school. Among the sibling pairs in this study, when choices were made, generally the female was afforded the privilege of private school and college matriculation. As she reflected on the African American males in her family and in her community in general, Shonna explained:

African American males don’t go to school because it’s always the males who are the ones to help out in the family, and sometimes the family can be falling apart, so they are not able to be in school. There are a lot of guys like that.

Mark stated that he had aspirations to attend college. His goal was to follow in the footsteps of his older sister, Gyrlene, and enroll in a four year university after high school graduation. He reported that during his senior year in high school, their mother became ill and

did not work for seven months. Mark took on a full time job afterschool and weekends to pay for his senior class expenses and help with some of the household bills. He said that his grades suffered but he felt he made the right decision. He stated that it felt “real good” to pay his mom’s car note and keep the “repo man off the block”.

Richard echoed the responses of the African American brothers and substantiated the sisters’ assertions about their brothers’ selflessness. He said:

I believe that boys are brought up to go to work and help their families, so once they get out of school, they have to go to work. They may not have the money to get sent to college, but if you got sisters, you would want them to go to college.

Richard explained that he wanted his sister to go to college and meet her husband there because “if she finds her husband in college, he will be a better type of person”.

The African American brothers in this study stated that desiring higher academic achievement outcomes for their sisters than themselves was nothing to marvel. Richard remembered hearing his dad say, “I want my girls to get a good education, ‘cause I know my boys will make it”. Aaron described it as “the macho thing to do”. He stated that “in my hood, the boys are taught to ‘man up’ and deal with the “cards you’re dealt”. Xavier said putting his sister’s need ahead of his own is natural. He said that if both he and his sister could not go to college right away, he would want her to go first because it would give her a better chance and he would go to work. Then after he got some money, maybe he would go to college later. When asked if his family sat down and discussed issues like this, he said he did not recall having a conversation about it, but said that “it’s like opening the door and saying ‘ladies first’”.

## Summary

The African American opposite gendered adult sibling pairs in this study stated that school experiences were different for male and female students. Four of the five sisters contended that their brothers did not achieve at the level of their academic potential because they were stereotyped and misunderstood in school. The overarching outlook of the sisters is that their brothers are smart, but are otherwise typecast and misconstrued in society as a whole and in schools in particular. Generally, the female students related more positive interactions with their teachers than the males. The participants in this study discussed the influence of encouraging teachers and discouraging teachers and the effect the money has on school choices, school culture and curriculum, and college attendance. Additionally, the sisters frequently discussed their brothers' self-sacrificing actions and described them as their champions and keepers.

Informed by critical race theory (CRT), the finding and critical discussion of the results of this study concerning the major theme, accompanying subthemes, and minor theme will be reported in the following chapter. Implications based on the findings and proposed recommendations for future research, along with concluding thoughts will also be presented.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion**

*“The drums of Africa still beat in my heart.*

*They will not let me rest while there is a single Negro boy or girl  
without a chance to prove his worth...we have a powerful potential in our youth,  
and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices  
so that we may direct their power toward good ends.”*

*Mary McLeod Bethune*

### **Discussion**

This chapter begins by reviewing the purpose of this study and summarizing the methodology and findings. The results of this study were addressed in light of the research questions. Recommendations are offered for school policy makers, administrators, teachers, and parents. This chapter concludes with limitations within this study and suggestions for future research.

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the factors that contributed to the female favored academic outcomes among opposite gendered African American siblings from low to middle socioeconomic status (L-MSES) families. Full biological brother and sister pairs were sought to answer questions pertaining to their K-12 educational experiences to examine inconsistencies in the female favored gendered academic outcomes.

This study was designed to create as many similarities among the opposite gendered sibling pairs as possible. It was important to this study that the brothers and sisters had the same parents, lived in the same household in the same community, attended the same schools, and

experienced the same L-MSES status lifestyle. Low to middle socioeconomic status households were selected because female favored academic outcomes may or may not be as customary in upper middle to high socioeconomic status African American families.

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with opposite gendered African American sibling pairs who voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. Open-ended questions were designed to explore the participants' perceptions and perspectives about their elementary, middle school, and high school experiences. The audio-taped interviews were manually transcribed.

Data analysis procedures were applied and resulted in the finding that the African American brothers and sisters in this study reported gendered differences in their school experiences. The first theme emerged as four of the five sisters in this study reported that their brothers were stereotyped and misunderstood in the schools that they attended. Coding of the data led to the surfacing of two subthemes within the first theme.

The first subtheme conveyed that experiences with teachers were less positive for the brothers than they were for the sisters. The second subtheme reported that socioeconomic status influenced the academic experiences and outcomes of the participants in this study. The first theme and the two sub-thematic findings addressed research questions one and two as identified in chapter one:

- (1) How do African American adult male siblings from L-MSES families who have female favored academic outcomes describe their academic experiences and outcomes?

- (2) How do African American adult female siblings from L-MSES families who have female favored academic outcomes describe their academic experiences and outcomes?

A second theme developed as the sisters routinely expressed their brothers' tendencies to disregard their own needs to benefit their families. These sisters characterized their brothers as their keeper and addresses family dynamics that impact male and female sibling interactions and decision-making. This thematic finding addressed research question three:

- (3) How does growing up in a L-MSES African American family affect adult brother and sisters, specifically as it relates to female favored differential academic experiences and outcomes?

While the focus of this study centers on the racialized and gendered educational inequities that negatively affected the academic outcomes of African American brothers, this study is not intended to discount nor dismiss the inequitable educational practices and systems that adversely affect African American sisters, or other marginalized groups.

This study was conducted within a critical race theoretical (CRT) framework, which was utilized to guide the discussion that was grounded in the following three beliefs: racism continually constructs inequities in the U.S., racism is woven within the fabric of U.S. systems, and utilizing a CRT perspective to examine and understand school dynamics within the U.S. will facilitate identification of racial mechanisms that may be operating in U.S. schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

### **African American Males are Stereotyped and Misunderstood in School**

The African American opposite gendered sibling pairs in this study shared many educational similarities, as well as some distinctive differences. Shonna stated, "Me and my



brother are one year apart and were one grade apart. We had the same school, same teachers, same classes but different experiences.” Like Shonna, four out of five sisters that participated in this study maintained that there were experiences in school that were unique to their brothers’ because they were male and because they were Black.

The highest academic achievement of each of the African American brothers in this study is either a high school diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. Each of the sisters in this study have earned college degrees, and in three of the five cases, post graduate degrees. Overall, both positive and negative interactions with teachers were experienced by both the brothers and sisters; however, the participants reported that the brothers in this study encountered more frequent and far-reaching negative experiences in school than their sisters. The sisters attributed the negative experiences and lower academic outcomes of their brothers to preconceived misconceptions about them as African American males.

**Misunderstood Experiences with Teachers.** Michael reported being targeted by his 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, a European American female, for placement in special education. He recalled his experience of having to engage his parents in his battle to avoid the stigmatization associated with remedial educational programs. Michael, at the insistence of his parents and his aunt (who was a special education consultant in another school district), was allowed to demonstrate his intellectual ability through a series of test-taking measures. He stated, “I had to prove that I was mentally equipped to be in a regular class with regular students. Nothing was wrong with me”.

Michael’s experience parallels Bireda’s (2000) assertion that African American males have been stereotyped in school as a group that is slow to learn and Ferguson’s (2000) finding that there is an overrepresentation of Blacks males in special education programs. Teachers that view Black male students through this narrow stereotypical lens may make false assumptions

about their cognitive ability. Operating within a stereotypical perspective may cause teachers to overlook other variables that attribute to low academic performance, such as in Michael's case, anxiety related to attending a new school.

Michael had transferred into his neighborhood predominately Black urban 6<sup>th</sup> -8<sup>th</sup> grade school after having spent his Pre-K through 7<sup>th</sup> grade years in a middle-class, multicultural but predominately White parochial school. He shared that he elected to be "very low key" in academics as well as social engagement as he learned to adapt to his new environment. Michael's strategy to slowly acculturate into his new surroundings was misunderstood. He was perceived through the narrow lens of Black males are slow to learn, rather than as an intelligent new student in school who analytically assessed his circumstances and devised a strategic plan to efficaciously navigate uncharted territory. The second year in Michael's urban school, he was back on track academically after having connected well socially with his peers. Positive experiences with teachers were important factors in academic outcomes according to the sibling pairs in this study.

Felecia enjoyed more positive experiences in school with teachers than her brother Xavier. She recalled frequently receiving accolades from her teachers but expressed concern that some of her brother's experiences with teachers may have been influenced by the stereotypical view that Black males are cognitively underdeveloped. Xavier did not master concepts through auditory methodologies as well as he did with kinesthetic strategies. Unlike his sister, Xavier struggled in school and received poor grades because he needed information communicated more interactively than most class settings permitted.

Felecia stated that he would get "frustrated", "easily distracted", "bored" and "he got to the point where he didn't like school". She reported, "My brother fell through the cracks, I think

because teachers did not work with him, not knowing what type of student he is. When we got to high school, you know, more students, more responsibilities, more papers to check and teachers don't realistically have the time to learn every student... Teachers weren't very patient with him, they just assumed he couldn't do it".

This finding corroborates with Kunjufu's (2012) assertion that Black male students are misjudged as intellectually inferior because their learning styles often necessitate time for observation, deliberation, and hands-on manipulation. In this study, Xavier reported, "I like experimenting with things and building things... I probably would have liked school more, and got better grades, if they did more things in school that I like". Felecia frequently mentioned that her brother is "super smart" and stated several times, "he's smarter than me". When asked why she thought their academic outcomes were dissimilar she said, " We not only learn differently, but I am more vocal, if I need help I'll ask for it... he's a little more shy about it... if he doesn't get it, he feels a certain type of way about it, and he shuts down. He's not going to tell you that he needs X, Y, and Z, so he can achieve A... especially if he feels you have already developed an opinion about his ability. He's not going to try to prove you wrong even if you're sitting there calling him dumb, he's not going to show you otherwise until he wants to".

The participants in this study felt that teachers may stereotypically view Black male students as cognitively delayed when their learning modalities do not align well with the school structure. Xavier stated that teachers that viewed him through this single story overlooked his creativity, his ability to draw, his curiosity and skill in mechanical operations. Xavier stated that he felt that he would have performed better academically if he had opportunities to engage in assignments that tapped into his interest in art and mechanics. The participants stated that

teachers should be aware of their students' interests and involvements outside of the classroom to better link students' abilities to academic assignments.

A second stereotype that African American males encounter in schools is that they present behavioral challenges more often than other student groups. Four of the five brothers in this study reported being suspended and receiving disciplinary referrals overwhelmingly more often than their sisters. Mark recalled that his parents were more involved in the educational process for him than his sister. He stated, "They were less involved for her because she was a good student, but because I was in trouble more, they were at school more for me".

The findings in this study support Carter, Fine, and Russell's (2014) report that Blacks males are issued disproportionate disciplinary referrals in school. Teachers and administrators that embrace the stereotypical message that African American male students are hard to manage may fail to consider extenuating factors that may influence inappropriate school behaviors. Mark was in the principal's office, more often than not, when he was defending himself against bullying behaviors by his peers. Because Mark was heavier than most other students, he was often the target for ridicule and harassment. Mark admitted being in "a lot of fights" but he believed that if he stood up for himself, the bullies would leave him alone. Teachers that are influenced by negative stereotypical assumptions that Black males are prone to violence may not consider other factors that may influence Mark's decision-making.

Mark stated that he felt that teachers and administrators misunderstood him and labeled him a trouble-maker when he was actually a victim. Perceiving black male students through the single lens of likely to engage in aggressive behavior distracted the staff from addressing the daily turmoil that Mark experienced being picked on in school. Mark carried the triple burden of being falsely categorized by school officials, being punished, and being tormented by his peers.

Similarly Richard, another participant in this study, exclaimed that his school punishments were more frequent and severe than he thought was necessary. He reported that as early as kindergarten corporal punishment was not an unusual practice for the African American students “mainly the boys” in his urban school. His remembrance aligned with Jerome, Hamre, and Pianta’s (2009), findings that some subgroups of kindergarten children, primarily Black male students, experienced teacher conflicts with European American female teachers.

Richard shared personal disciplinary stories as well as accounts of his twin brother and other African American male students throughout elementary, middle, and high school. In one example he remembered, “My teacher just wouldn’t listen to me, she had already made up her mind that I stole this boy’s money. The boy’s mother called the school and told the office to tell him that he left his field trip money at home, but she had already paddled me and made me miss recess”.

Mark and Richard reported that they felt that some of their experiences with teachers may have been predicated on erroneous beliefs about African American male students. Their experiences align with Bireda’s (2002) assertion that negative stereotypical beliefs can be harmful because they are “generally accepted as truth, they are not questioned, and they remain a part of the core belief structure” (p.38). The participants stated that teachers and school personnel who negatively view African American males may tend to prejudge their actions and motives. As expressed in Richard’s previous example, the participants felt that teachers hastily jumped to conclusions about their guilt or innocence in situations and created barriers rather than build bridges.

These misjudgments generally lead to increased acting out by African American male students, thus further perpetuating the stereotypical presuppositions. Mark stated that he felt like

he was in a “no win situation, like being between a rock and a hard place”. Richard lost respect for his teacher and no longer trusted her. He stated that he was more hurt than angered by his teacher’s accusation and punishment. He created ways to strike back as a means of protecting himself emotionally. Richard said he never really liked that teacher much after that and “I made it my business to let her know”.

The siblings in this study reported that establishing positive teacher-student relationships was critical to academic success. They stated that social relationships are important, and that includes relationships with teachers as well as peers. They stressed that teacher behaviors when interacting with students were important and that teacher perceptions of students were critical to student learning outcomes. This finding coincides with Bireda’s (2002) assertion that “African American students have a high need to connect with the teacher, and to feel that the teacher accepts, respects, and cares about them as an individual” (p. 19). The importance of the effect of teacher-student relationships on academic achievement cannot be underestimated for all student groups; however, the participants in this study expressed particular concern for African American male students because they reported that they felt that they were often prejudged and stigmatized.

Historically pervasive stereotypical perspectives hinder positive perceptions about African American male students and impede the development of healthy teacher-student relationships. Negative stereotypes are so ubiquitous that they are sometimes unacknowledged. Teachers and school officials may be unaware of their tendencies to make decisions on faulty assumptions. They must be given opportunities and tools to help them unearth their prejudicial biases through self-evaluations and awareness exercises. This must be followed by

conscientious efforts to implement strategies to develop culturally effective teacher-student engagement.

Generally speaking, students from all racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds prefer teachers who are encouraging and affirming. Students perform better academically and behaviorally for teachers they like (and like them); however, in this study, all students did not have equal opportunities for establishing such positive interactions. These findings are in line with Bireda's (2002) assertion that stigmatized student groups do not have the same interactions with their teachers as other students. Teachers' perceptions of students and teacher-student demographics may dictate, initiate, or disallow affirmative teacher-student encounters.

According to the participants in this study, the brothers experienced more direct incidences of preconceived misconceptions about their cognitive ability, a greater number of disciplinary referrals, and attained lower academic achievement than their sisters. The findings in this study coincide with Chiricos et al.'s (2004) assertion that negative stereotypical perspectives influence how teachers interact with African American male students and often lead to adverse consequences that elicit academic failure, excessive punishment, and educational disengagement.

***Discouraging teacher behaviors.*** Michael recalled having had an elementary teacher that "ignored" him, a middle school teacher that "wanted to destroy him", and a high school teacher that "misjudged" him. The participants in this study reported that they each experienced teachers that they termed "bad", "ineffective", "discouraging", or "hurtful", but according to the participants, the brothers experienced negative teacher-student interactions more often than the sisters.

Teachers that exhibited non-affirming behaviors tended to be described by the participants as “disconnected”, “partial”, or “inflexible”, particularly towards Black males. These teachers generally were described as unconcerned about building relationships with all students. They typically had favorites that received their attention, individualized instruction, and affection. They were rigid and unbending in their policies and procedures with some students, but made exceptions for their favorite few. They were quick to judge and punish, but slow to congratulate or reward. They catered to the bright kids and often left the stragglers struggling. This study’s participants defined bright kids as those that closely assimilated to European American standards of speech, dress, and mannerisms. The participants described the teachers with discouraging behaviors as verbally confrontational and used their position to publicly flex their authoritative muscles. The teachers that had non-affirming behaviors in this study exhibited anti-Black male dispositions, according to the participants.

The sibling pairs in this study had a dichotomous view of teachers. They referred to them as either “good or bad”, “effective or ineffective”, “encouragers or discouragers”, “helpful or hurtful”. The good, effective, encouraging, and helpful teachers, according to the brother and sister pairs in this study, demonstrated a disposition of caring for their students evidenced by their efforts to build teacher-student relationships and provide support for student success inside and outside of the classroom. Caring and nurturing teachers were described as taking extra time with students, getting to know students outside of the school environment, adapting lesson plans and pacing to accommodate various student learning modalities, and having high expectations for student growth. Teachers with high expectations required students to repeat assignments that they had not mastered, re-do projects that did not represent their best effort, and introduced new concepts in ways that were challenging, interactive, and fun.



*Encouraging teacher behaviors.* Both brothers and sisters reported having had teachers that were “nurturing” and “affirming”. Aaron reported, “I did better in class when I liked the teacher” and Xavier agreed when recalling one of his favorite teachers, “We really liked her because she was firm, but fair...she just seemed to get the most out of us”. Sincere reported that despite her “rebellious and disruptive behavior” she maintained honor roll status because her teacher took time to help her work through her problems. This finding supports the notion in Buka’s (2013) report that positive teacher-student relationships heighten academic performance.

The teachers that were described as encouraging acted in ways that showed they were not significantly impacted by the historical misconceptions about African American students, particularly males. They dispelled these myths by having lunch with students, attending their athletic events, visiting with their families, and sometimes taking them into their social circles through family outings and holiday visits. Aaron stated that several of his teachers would frequent the restaurant where he worked. He said, “If they saw me work the late shift, they would give me an extra day to turn in my assignment”. Mark stated that his teacher and his mom “got real cool” and “she would make sure that my mom had all of the supplies that I needed to complete special projects”. Xavier mentioned being excited to see his teacher at his basketball games because he would give him “high fives” upon entering class the following day. He said, “Mr. Williams would cop my moves from the game to demonstrate a point in class”.

Through these non-academic encounters, the teachers that were described as encouragers gained insight into their students’ individual competencies and capitalized on this knowledge in the classroom. This finding corroborates with Noguera’s (2003) and Duncan-Andrade’s (2007) assertions that African American male students excel when pedagogical strategies relate to their real world experiences. The teachers that were described as affirmative did not have a single

lens through which to gauge their students. The teachers that were described as nurturing saw Aaron as an entrepreneur. They acknowledged his extraordinary customer service skills, his perseverance to wake up on time for school after working the night shift, and his ability to manage his time well. They saw Xavier as a mechanical engineer or a graphic artist. They offered flexible assessment options that allowed Xavier an opportunity to create visual presentations to accentuate his artistic talent rather than an exclusively oral presentation or written examination.

Teachers that were described as encouraging viewed each student as an individual and acknowledged, celebrated, and developed lesson plans around their unique proclivities. Teachers with these affirmative characteristic behaviors represented different races and genders. The participants in this study did not assess their teachers' effectiveness based on ethnicity or gender, rather on their efforts to establish positive relationships with all students, and their efforts to help all students succeed in class and in life.

Although both brothers and sisters reported having had some positive teacher-student relationships, the findings in this study indicated that the African American sisters' engagements with teachers were more affirmative than their brothers'. Similar to Jerome et al.'s (2008) report, in general, female students encountered more encouraging or close relationships with teachers and male students received more disciplinary encounters. Gendered differences were reported in the brothers and sisters experiences with teachers.

Each of the five African American sisters reported positive experiences with teachers, and only one of five sisters indicated having had frequent disciplinary referrals. Conversely, four of the five brothers reported being paddled, assigned to in-school suspension, received out-of-school suspension, transferred to different (sometimes alternative) schools because they were in

trouble, or were expelled from school. The brothers and sisters in this study thematically voiced concerns about the prejudicial treatment that the males experienced in school, its influence on their academic outcomes, and the lifelong and far-reaching implications of negative school experiences that African American male students frequently encounter.

The participants in this study stated that they recalled the memory of negative experiences with teachers with more clarity and emotion than the positive ones. This finding coincides with Baumeister et al.'s (2001) report that affirmed that negative experiences have a greater impact on a person than the same type of positive experiences. They further concluded that it takes many positive experiences to counteract one negative experience because "bad things will produce larger, more consistent, more multifaceted, or more lasting effects than good things" (p. 325). While the brothers admitted that they had more positive experiences in school than negative ones, they also agreed that the negative experiences had greater and more far-reaching consequences.

Richard stated that his decision to "walk out of the classroom" when he had a disagreement with a teacher resulted in him not being able to try out for the high school basketball team. He stated that he felt that that decision was unfair because he left the room to "cool off" and avoid an escalating situation. Richard was so disappointed about not being able to play for the school's team that he transferred to a different high school mid-term and did not earn full credits for his courses. Mark concurred that one negative experience destroyed his opportunity to go on an out-of-state trip with his class, and the rippling effect of Aaron's one "small" negative experience prevented him from acquiring honor roll status during his senior year.

These negative experiences may be linked to faulty assumptions about African American males that predicate harsh punishment in school. Although the brothers owned up to their misdoings, they felt that the punishment did not fit the crime or that the extenuating circumstances as in Aaron's case, his previous 12 years of stellar behaviors, were not considered in the disciplinary decision-making process.

The brothers in this study encountered more negative experiences in school than their sisters and attained lower levels of academic achievement. The negative perception of Black males by teachers and administrators may not be intentional. According to the participants, some negative experiences were encountered by teachers who were generally "caring", but had isolated incidences in which they were not culturally sensitive in their choice of language or action. The siblings stated that they were forgiving in these cases; however, the finding aligns with Bireda's (2002) assertion that prejudicial biases are so deeply embedded in the U.S. psyche that we may be unaware of it. Honest self-examination, continual behavior monitoring, along with conscientious efforts to replace negative thoughts with positive ones are first steps toward minimizing stereotypical beliefs and attitudes and changing behaviors toward Black males in our schools.

The brothers and sisters in this study reported that the females enjoyed more positive relationships with their teachers than the males. They attributed this difference to teacher perceptions that seemed to be influenced by a stereotypical ideology about African American males. In this study participants reported that being Black and male (and in many cases poor) were mediating factors that shaped teacher-student relationships.

**Socioeconomic Status Affect Academic Experiences and Outcomes.**

The participants in this study reported that the schools in the Black community were impoverished. The brother and sister pairs that attended schools in low socioeconomic status (LSES) communities generally described their schools, similarly to Anyon (1997), as ghetto, meaning substandard, ill-equipped, low functioning, and aesthetically unattractive. Conversely, siblings that attended private or suburban public schools described them more approvingly. They often spoke of brightly painted walls that showcased exceptional student work, science and computer labs enhanced with state of the art equipment, well-stocked libraries, and athletic facilities that rival colleges and universities.

However, this study's participants reported that the most profound differences between urban and suburban or private educational establishments were in staffing and school emphasis. There were distinct differences in teacher expectations, teacher turnover rates, teacher quality, teacher practices, and curriculum content.

The African American siblings in this study that attended urban schools reported limited academic progress in a large percentage of their core subject courses due to low teacher expectations. Michael stated that he probably would have had greater academic outcomes if he had stayed in the parochial school system because "the teachers would have demanded it".

Additionally, the siblings in urban schools reported that they were less than adequately prepared for higher education because of the high incidences of teacher turnover. Gyrlene said, "I was totally lost when I got to college. I had never seen the type of math that my professors assumed I knew...in high school we had five subs in my second semester of Algebra II". Substitute teachers in long-term assignments were normative in urban schools but rare in the private or suburban schools, according to the participants. Their assertions were aligned with

Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff (2013) findings that the impact of teacher turnover on academic achievement is negative and significant, and particularly detrimental to students in predominately minority and low-performing schools.

A second difference reported by participants that attended both urban and suburban or private schools was the schools' emphasis. They reported that urban schools emphasized controlling student behavior or discipline, suburban and private schools emphasized academic achievement. Examples of these differences reported by the participants were evidenced by hallway displays, teacher focus, and school goals. The siblings stated that urban schools displayed posters that accentuated conduct, while suburban and private schools displayed academic information or academic achievements. Participants reported that urban teachers focused on classroom management, suburban schools focused on classroom instruction. They stated that urban school goals were to maintain order, suburban school goals were to excel academically. Aaron recalled attending a student exchange program between schools from different SES communities. He reported, "You could tell the difference when the bus pulled into the parking lot. It just felt different, you felt free".

The participants in this study stated, similarly to Kozol (2003), that they felt there were disparities between educational opportunities and experiences based on students' SES. School inequities in this study were directly associated with the parents' education, parents' occupation, and household income levels reported by the participants. The two middle SES income level sibling pairs attended private or suburban public schools, and the three low SES income level sibling pairs attend urban public schools.

Low expectations, minimally qualified teachers, and boring curriculum content were characteristic of the predominately African American urban public schools that they attended,

according to four out of five male participants in this study. This finding is in line with Haberman's (1991) assertion that characterized urban school pedagogy of poverty educational practices. Xavier got into trouble at school in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and transferred from a suburban to an urban high school. He stated that the coursework in the urban school was "repetitive" and "boring". His sister Felecia, who remained in the suburban high school, reported that the subject titles were the same at both schools, but her books were more comprehensive and Xavier's assignments were less rigorous.

Felecia finished high school one year before Xavier. She was a merit scholar recipient at a prestigious university and stated that she was well prepared for the challenging college course-load. She tested out of freshman English and Math upon enrollment. She stated, "I was blessed to receive an exceptional education before going to college". Xavier enrolled in community college after high school graduation and says he feels he made the right choice because the workload is suitable for his level of learning.

Xavier is the only study participant that experienced private, suburban, and urban schools. He indicated that he was overall satisfied with his academic outcomes, but wished he had done more to prepare for higher education. Of the three sibling pairs that attended urban schools, five participants were dissatisfied with their academic development. They expressed a desire for the opportunity to attend schools that better prepared them to compete with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Shari said, "I was an all "A" student throughout K-12, but I lacked skills that "C" students from better districts had". Aaron vowed never to send his son to the urban schools that he attended and works two jobs to maintain his residence in a suburban school community. He stated that he felt "robbed of a real education" in the urban schools and wanted more for his son than he had an opportunity to receive.

Another dynamic was voiced by the participants who attended the predominately African American urban public schools. Students reported that they were not only “short changed” by the lack of resources and substandard educational practices, but they were further categorized and stigmatized according to their socioeconomic status. Distinctions were made between students that lived in public housing and students who did not. Shari recalled the preferential treatment and assignment to college preparatory classes that the “better off” students enjoyed. Because they were residents in the public housing community, Shari’s parents had to overcome structural barriers to ensure that she was not overlooked or intentionally left out of programs and services that were reserved for college bound students, students who lived in the section of the community where the single family ranch-style brick houses are located.

The findings in this study align with Noguera’s (2003) assertion that inequities in teacher expectations, turnover rate, teacher quality, instructional practices, and curriculum content are not occurring by happenstance. They are designed to maintain the status quo and are systemically implemented throughout the educational process.

### **My Brother is My Keeper**

The majority of the African American sisters in this study reported that their brothers provided them with safety, guidance, finances, encouragement, and opportunities for educational advancement to accomplish their goals. This thematic finding emerged from the sisters as they alluded to: My brother is my protector, counselor, supporter, cheerleader... my keeper.

Teachers, counselors, and administrators influenced by negative stereotypic beliefs about African American male students may view them as academically incompetent, behaviorally unmanageable, disinterested in the educational process, and destined for failure; however, the participants in this study, particularly the sisters, reported counter-stories about their brothers.



The counter-stories in this study provided a perspective that is not often communicated. These counter-stories accentuated the African American males' intellectual ability as conveyed by Felecia when she stated, "My brother is smarter than me, hands down. At the end of the day, he's smarter than me". These counter-stories articulated the brothers' willingness to sacrifice for the sake of their sisters and their families. Richard communicated, "I believe the boys are brought up to go to work and help out the family...but if you got sisters, you would want them to go to college".

Counter-stories, similar to the ones conveyed by the participants in this study, may be utilized to benefit teachers and administrators who negatively view African American male students through a lens perpetuated by stereotypical portrayals and urban myths. Dispelling misperceptions may be a first step toward establishing teacher-student relationships that are affirming for Black males.

Ironically, most of the sisters in this study reported in their counter-stories that their brothers were their keepers. They contended that their brothers were instrumental in keeping them safe from danger and violence in school and in the community, keeping the family from economic peril, and keeping them encouraged to strive for excellence in their academic achievements and career aspirations. While such sibling behaviors may be practiced across ethnic backgrounds, the participants in this study reported that unlike other groups, they felt that African American males are more often characterized as thugs than keepers.

One sister reported being afforded the privilege to attend a private high school while her brother remained enrolled in public school. Shonna and Michael, were both enrolled in parochial school. Their father, a blue-collar factory worker, was laid off for an extended amount of time when his plant closed. Their mother, a certified public school teacher, became the sole financial

provider. A decision was made to allow the girls to remain in private school and enroll Michael (the youngest of the three) in the neighborhood urban middle school. Michael never balked about or questioned his parents' decision, because the family assumed that because he was a male "he could handle" the urban school setting better than his sisters.

Similarly, Shari reported that their family "knew early on" that college could not be an option for everyone in the household. Of the four siblings, both girls went to college and the twin brothers abandoned their opportunity when they failed to get athletic scholarships. Richard and his brother were good in sports, especially basketball, and planned to utilize their athleticism as a ticket to college. Their prospects were solid until they "got into trouble" and were denied the opportunity to play basketball in their junior year of high school. Shortly thereafter, Richard's twin brother was killed. Richard's dream faded along with his aspiration to complete the educational process, but he continued to support his sisters' efforts. When one of his sisters' (who did not participate in this study) became an unwed mother in college, Richard moved into her campus apartment to become the baby's caregiver. This act of selflessness allowed his sister the opportunity to remain in school and concentrate on completing her degree. Other counter-stories included narratives about their brothers' random acts of kindness, their advice about potential boyfriends, and their critique concerning appropriate and inappropriate fashion trends.

The brothers, regardless of birth-order, perceived that their primary role was to protect their sister(s). They reported that, in their communities (LSES and MSES), it is not uncommon for boys (from birth) to be referred to as "Man or little man". Along with the title, inferences are communicated in their homes and in their neighborhoods about what manhood entails. They expressed terms such as "protector", "provider", "care-giver", "sacrifice for".

Each male participant, without exception, shared this perspective. Several examples were shared to clarify their meanings. Richard stated, “Our neighborhood can be dangerous, especially at night in the summertime. My sister knew that if I saw her outside after the street lights came on or hangin’ out with a knucklehead, she’d rather answer to Momma than me...I always knew she had a great future ahead and I wasn’t going to take a chance of her losing it”.

Aaron recalled his sister Sincere frequently being the target of “jealous girls because she was light-skinned and had good hair”. He said, “I was not a fighter per se, but I could talk a person into or out of just about anything”. Aaron stated that Sincere would not start fights but she would not back down from a fight either. Without her consent, Aaron covertly used his oratory ability to mediate and negotiate peace treaties on Sincere’s behalf. Mark too remained silent about working full-time during his senior year of high school to help with the family’s expenses. Gyrlene was attending a 4 year university in Atlanta, Georgia at the time of their mother’s illness. Mark did not want to “burden” or “distract” Gyrlene with “unnecessary details” and shouldered the family crisis alone.

When a participating brother was asked to what extent would he sacrifice for his sister, Richard replied, “My life, I would sacrifice my life for my sister”. He supported that statement with the following example:

There was a group home for people with mental illnesses near our house when we were kids. Shari and I were cutting through a shortcut path to buy candy at the liquor store. A wild man with a butcher knife (or a machete or something) was running straight toward us and the police were running behind him. I told Shari to stand right behind me and not to move. Thank God, he ran right past us ‘cause if he was going to cut anybody that day, it was going to be me.

Each of the brothers in this study conveyed pride and joy in their sisters' accomplishments and expressed no remorse concerning their personal outcomes or the outcomes of their sisters. They were eager to discuss their sisters' academic achievements and boasted about their sisters' careers and possessions. The brothers' generally voiced the belief that they knew that they themselves would "make it", whether through "manual labor", "on the job training", in the "factory", "building trades", "auto mechanics", "lawn care services", "door-to-door or telemarketing", "retail sales", "customer service", "fast food", "technology", or other means. It was important to the brothers that their sisters went to college and enjoyed a more leisurely type of success. As one brother summarized the sentiments of the others, Richard stated, "I'm doing okay, but I wanted my sister to go to college and meet her husband there...I just want her to have a good life".

The African American sisters' saw their brothers not as they are often stereotyped in the media and in society as "thugs", but as heroes who sheltered them from some of the harsh realities of growing up African American (and in most cases poor) in the U.S.. The sisters' extended appreciation to their brothers and acknowledged their brothers' role and support in attaining their female-favored academic outcomes. In short, they thanked them.

### **Recommendations**

*"Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete?*

*Proving nature's law is wrong it learned to walk without having feet. Funny it seems,*

*but by keeping its dreams, it learned to breathe fresh air.*

*Long live the rose that grew from concrete when no one else ever cared".*

*The Rose That Grew From Concrete by Tupac Shakur*

Sincere and her brother Aaron, participants in this study, reported that they were from a small sheltered household and fondly remembered school as their first and only outlet to engage with other people. From early social engagements in schools, children begin to develop a sense of self and a sense of others. Their self-perceptions are strongly based on their interactions and relationships with their teachers.

Experiences in school not only impact how children learn, but also how children see themselves and their place in society. According to the participants in this study, student achievement outcomes hinged on teacher-student relationships, which hinged on teacher-student perceptions of each other, which hinged on race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

The recommendation section of this study is intended to provide personal and professional empowerment to teachers, administrators, policy-makers, parents, and all stakeholders in the educational community.

The African American siblings in this study reported that the academic achievement of Black male students was impeded because they were negatively stereotyped and misunderstood in schools. They asserted that positive experiences with teachers were paramount to increased learning outcomes. However, negative perceptions were barriers to positive experiences.

The process to eliminate negative stereotypical beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors begins with acknowledging that embedded within U.S. systems and structures are deep-rooted mischaracterizations of African American males. These historically perpetuated perceptions are so pervasive that no one is immune from its influence. The participants in this study asserted that school employees across ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic status backgrounds were susceptible to harboring these false assumptions and sometimes unknowingly or unintentionally operated within these suppositions.

The siblings in this study reported that they felt it would be beneficial for educational leaders to be aware of the influence of stereotypical assumptions. Awareness could be stimulated by courageous conversations about anti-Black male messages that impact our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors toward them. These conversations are most meaningful when accompanied by awareness exercises and activities that promote self-examination about beliefs and biases, self-monitoring of thoughts and attitudes, and self-corrective measures to change behaviors.

Participants in this study asserted that negative stereotypes are dispelled when teachers get to know their students as individuals. It is recommended that policymakers and administrators schedule time in the school day for teachers to develop relationships with students and encourage teachers to participate in after-school activities. The siblings in this study suggested that teachers take the initiative to engage in one-on-one or small group encounters with African American male students. Recommendations included eating lunch together, supporting their activities, attending their events, and showing interest in their individuality. Getting to know students means acknowledging their uniqueness, appreciating their customs, and listening to their voices. Immersion into the lives, experiences, and communities of African American males will lessen the chances of misunderstanding them.

Additionally, the sibling pairs in this study reported that socioeconomic status influenced learning outcomes. The pedagogy of poverty is diminished when replaced by rigorous academic content, stimulating instructional practices, and positive teacher-student relationships. Urban schools that focus on academic achievement rather than student discipline are operated by educational leaders that create environments that emphasize engaging minds rather than

controlling bodies. The findings in this study affirmed that developing trusting teacher-student relationships with all students decrease disciplinary problems and increase learning outcomes.

The sisters in this study gave counter-stories about their African American brothers. These stories accentuated the caring, supportive, and self-sacrificing qualities that their brothers possessed. The participants in this study stated that recurrent positive messages about African Americans, particularly males will help dissipate the preconceived misconceptions, dispel urban myths, and diminish barriers that hinder the development of positive teacher-student relationships.

This study reported that it takes multiple positive messages to eradicate one negative message; therefore, it is important for parents, community stakeholders, and schools to create structures and systems to counteract the negative messages about African American males. Positive messages can be acquired by studying the history of people of African descent. This history does not begin with slavery. It begins with royalty, ingenuity, and headship. African American males and educators alike should be inundated with messages and images that accentuate the significant contributions that people of color have made (and continue to make) to the U.S. and the world-at-large.

The participants suggested that positive messages can be propagated by developing school-community mentoring partnerships that link African American male students with African American men from various professions such as medicine, law, science, engineering, banking and finance, business entrepreneurs, classical music, and so on. Job shadowing and internships will allow African American male students opportunities to interact with and emulate constructive role models, further disseminating positive messages. These positive messages are needed to counter the negative messages that systemically permeate social, economic, and

political structures throughout the U.S. and are perpetuated across the airways of local and national broadcasting networks.

### **Limitations**

This study was specifically designed to explore the experiences and make meaning of the outcomes for this study group of five sibling pairs (n=10) and was not conducted to generalize outcomes beyond this population. This limitation was intentional to allow for extensive interviewing and follow-up interviewing as needed. A second limitation is the absence of the experiences, perceptions, and commentaries of teachers and school administrators. Although this study was designed to hear the voices of the African American participants, examining self-reports from teachers and administrators about how negative stereotype-casting may influence their interactions with African American males would provide another layer of data to explore this phenomenon. A third limitation was the lack of time and opportunity to explore more of the participants' responses fully: specifically how the perception of negative stereotyping impacted the self-esteem and decision-making practices of the male participants. A final limitation was the narrow focus of how school related experiences affect academic outcomes to the exclusion of out-of-school influences that may also impact academic achievement.

### **Future Research**

This study of African American opposite gendered siblings is relatively unique in that few studies have explored the nuances of this group. Similar studies with larger populations of participants are warranted. Expanding the interviews to hear the teachers' and administrators' perspectives would provide another dimension of inquiry, in addition to interviewing parents to provide a balanced discussion is warranted. The participants were not asked to report their thoughts about how gendered parenting styles, monitoring, disciplinary practices, perceptions,



and educational expectations may impact educational outcomes. Gendered similarities and differences relating to community roles, expectations, perceptions, and interactions were not examined. Questions concerning the impact of out-of-school experiences remain unexplored.

A counter perspective from African American opposite gendered sibling pairs with male favored academic outcomes is necessitated. Both African American males and females are lagging behind other students group. To narrow the achievement gap, it is equally important to understand and address the factors that hinder African American females from high levels of academic success. Future research to examine how the types of negative and positive experiences and the frequencies of those experiences may impact academic outcomes is warranted to help us understand how to offset negative and accentuate positive school experiences for African American students.

Other studies exploring academic experiences and outcomes among opposite gendered siblings such as: African American siblings in other urban communities, African American siblings from high socioeconomic status families, as well as European American, Latino, and Asian American siblings from low to middle SES families and high SES families are warranted. Understanding factors that influence academic outcomes for any student group will better prepare us to ensure academic success for all student groups.

### **Conclusion**

This research study entailed conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with African American opposite gendered adult siblings from low to middle socioeconomic status (L-MSES) families to better understand from their perspective how their racialized gendered differential academic experiences may have influenced their female favored academic outcomes.

Giving voice to the African American brothers from L-MSES families who have not experienced as much success in the educational system as their sisters was paramount. This research study's purpose was to explore the factors that contributed to the female favored academic outcomes among opposite gendered African American siblings from low to middle socioeconomic status (L-MSES) families.

It is important to have inclusive conversations about how to improve the academic achievement outcomes and develop academic initiatives for underperforming African American youth, particularly males from L-MSES families. Exploring how gendered differential academic experiences may affect academic outcomes may help educational leaders advocate for policies and operationalize programs that aim to enhance the academic gains of both African American males, females, and other marginalized student groups.

Challenging the structures that affect the experiences of African American males in our schools mandate that administrators must be committed to make the decision to ensure that all children are recipients of positive teacher-student interactions, quality teaching, and stimulating curriculum. The siblings in this study suggested that teachers should be aware of the importance of building affirming relationships with all of their students. This can be accomplished by creating opportunities for one-on-one interactions during the school day, participating in after-school programs, or attending out of school events. The participants suggested that educational best practices that incorporate students' individuality, strengths, and interests would enhance academic outcomes. It is a benefit to our society when all members are fully equipped for academic and personal success. A mind is a wonderful thing to cultivate!

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### **Appendix 1: Consent Form**

My name is Fleda Fleming, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. I am conducting interviews as a part of my dissertation study which will explore the educational experiences of opposite gendered full biological African American siblings.

During this study, you will be asked to answer some questions about your elementary, middle, and high schools educational experiences, expectations, and outcomes. There will be three separate interviews that are designed to each be approximately one hour in length. However, please feel free to expand on the topic or talk about related ideas. Also, if there are any questions you would rather not answer or that you do not feel comfortable answering, please say so and we will stop the interview or move on to the next question, whichever you prefer.

All the information will be kept confidential. Neither your name nor any identifying information will be input on the interview form or used with my written report. I will keep the data in a secure place and will be the only person who has access to the files. At the end of your interview, you will receive a \$10 gift card. Upon completion of this project, all data will be destroyed or stored in a secure location.

**Participant's Agreement:**

I am aware that my participation in this interview is voluntary. I understand the intent and purpose of this research. If, for any reason, at any time, I wish to stop the interview, I may do so without having to give an explanation.

I have the right to review, comment on, and/or withdraw information at any time. I understand if I say anything that I believe may incriminate myself, the interviewer will immediately rewind the tape and record over the potentially incriminating information. The interviewer will then ask me if I would like to continue the interview.

If I have any questions about this study, I am free to contact the student researcher (Fleda Fleming, email: [ffleming@umich.edu](mailto:ffleming@umich.edu), phone: 313-779-2933) or the faculty adviser (Dr. Maiyoua Vang, email: [vangm@umich.edu](mailto:vangm@umich.edu), phone: 313-593-4889). I have been offered a copy of this consent form that I may keep for my own reference.

I have read the above form and, with the understanding that I can withdraw at any time and for whatever reason, I consent to participate in today's audio-recorded interview.

---

Participant's signature

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Date

Maiyoua Vang, Ed.D., doctoral adviser, University of Michigan-Dearborn

## **Appendix 2: Recruitment Notice**

### **Interested in talking about your educational experiences?**

My name is Fleda Fleming, and I am a University of Michigan-Dearborn doctoral student interested in asking African American (full biological) brother and sister pairs about their experiences in elementary, middle, and high school. My research is about gender and academic achievement.

**(BOTH BROTHER AND SISTER PARTICIPATION IS REQUIRED FOR THIS STUDY)**

*Contact information* - If you are interested in participating in this study, please provide Fleda Fleming (313) 779-2933 with your contact information or email me at [ffleming@umich.edu](mailto:ffleming@umich.edu).

**DATES and LOCATIONS will be determined based on participant availability and preference.**

**Appendix 3: Demographic Form**

Interview Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Demographic Questions: (Place an 'X' on the line that applies)**

**Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female

**Age Range:** \_\_\_\_\_ 18- 23  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 24- 29  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 30- 35  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 36 - 41  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 42 – 47

Please circle the highest grade you completed in high school: 9<sup>th</sup> 10<sup>th</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> 12<sup>th</sup>

Please indicate your college status:

Never attended \_\_\_\_\_  
 Attended but did not graduate \_\_\_\_\_ College name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Currently attending \_\_\_\_\_ College name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Graduated college \_\_\_\_\_ College name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Degree(s) earned: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's highest grade completed:

Father \_\_\_\_\_ Mother: \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity:

\_\_\_\_\_ African-American/Black  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other (Specific racial/ethnic classification)

Did you qualify for free or reduced lunch during K-12<sup>th</sup> grades? Yes or No

**Tape-Recorded Audio:** \_\_\_\_\_ Each interview will be audio-recorded using a tape recorder.

**Appendix 4: Interview Questions**

- 1) When you think about elementary school, what immediately comes to mind?
  
- 2) When you think about your favorite teacher, does anyone in particular come to mind?
  - a. Will you share 3 – 4 things that made him/her so special?
  - b. How do you think your favorite teacher would describe you in elementary school?
  - c. How would he/she describe your academic performance?
  - d. Ethnicity/age range
  
- 3) When you think about your least favorite teacher, does anyone in particular come to mind?
  - a. Will you share 3 – 4 things that made her/him so undesirable?
  - b. How do you think your least favorite teacher would describe you in elementary school?
  - c. How would he/she describe your academic performance?
  - d. Ethnicity/age range
  - e. Was your academic performance the same or different for your favorite and your least favorite teachers?
  
- 4) How do you think your brothers/sisters elementary school experiences might be similar to yours?
  - a. How do you think your brothers/sisters elementary school experiences might be dissimilar from yours?
  
- 5) When you were in elementary school, what did you think you wanted to be when you grew up?
  - a. Can you tell me why you wanted to pursue that career field?
  - b. When did you change your mind about your career choice?

- c. Why did you change your mind about your career choice?
  
- 6) How would you describe yourself in middle school?
  - a. How would you describe your academic performance?
  
- 7) How would you describe the physical building at your middle school?
  
- 8) How would you describe what happened in most classrooms?
  
- 9) Do you think other students from your middle school would expect you to be where you are in life today?
  - a. Why do you think that?
  - b. Are you where you expected to be in life today?
  - c. What do you think had the greatest influence on where you are in life today?
  
- 10) What do you think your middle school teachers remember most about you?
  
- 11) How do you think your brothers/sisters middle school experiences might be similar to yours?
  - a. How do you think your brothers/sisters middle school experiences might be dissimilar from yours?
  
- 12) When you think of your high school experience, what immediately comes to mind?
  
- 13) If you received one free “do-over”, is there anything you would change about your high school experience?
  
- 14) How would you describe your overall academic experiences compared to your brother/sister? How would you describe your overall academic achievement compared to your brother/sister?

15) What do you remember about your parent's involvement during your elementary, middle and high school years? Was it the same for your brother or sister?

16) What factors do you think make the greatest impact on academic achievement?

- a. Do you think those factors are the same for males and females?
- b. Why do you think that?

17) What factors do you think make the greatest impact on academic underperformance?

- a. Do you think those factors are the same for males and females?
- b. Why do you think that?

18) What role, if any, did your peers play in your academic achievement?

Brother/sister/community/parents?

19) **Show data:** Why do you think that African American females are outperforming African American males in academic achievement?

20) Are there any additional questions, concerns, or insight that you would like to share?

Thank you for your time and your responses. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.