New Visions of Collective Achievement
The Cross-Generational Schooling Experiences of African American Males
Darrell Cleveland Hucks
Keene State College, New Hampshire, USA

New Visions of Collective Achievement: The Cross-Generational Schooling Experiences of African American Males takes you on a journey into the lives of three families of African American males, each with an elementary-aged boy. Bear witness to each boy's observations and insights on his current schooling experiences, also hear what older males in his family have to say regarding their schooling experiences. Employing qualitative methodology to include their frequently unheard voices in educational research, this book endeavors to move toward correcting this oversight. New Visions of Collective Achievement graciously offers each of us, as stakeholders, a most precious gift: a theoretical and practical framework to effect real, meaningful, and long-lasting change if we are courageous enough to take heed.

“This refreshingly clear and focused book presents a comprehensive discussion on the schooling experiences of African American males across generations. This invaluable resource should be required reading for all educators who work with this population to show the value of education in the African American community.”

— Chance W. Lewis, Ph.D.
Carol Grotnes Belk Distinguished Professor of Urban Education, UNC Charlotte

“New Visions of Collective Achievement provides educators with an important insight into the ways Black males experience their education across time. Through groundbreaking research presented in the voices of three generations of Black males, this book commands attention and calls for multiple stakeholders in our schools and communities to work together to cultivate and advance the social and academic well-being of Black males.”

— Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English Education, Teachers College, Columbia University

“New Visions encapsulates the spirit of African American males who are separated by generations, yet bound by a collective struggle against social injustice and a desire for success. Dr. Hucks invokes a reverence for historical oppression, an awareness of present day opportunities and barriers, and a visionary path for future generations of Black men.”

— Ivory A. Toldson, Ph.D.
Editor-in-Chief, The Journal of Negro Education; Associate Professor, Counseling Psychology Program, Howard University

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The Cross-Generational Schooling Experiences of African American Males

Foreword by Suzanne C. Carothers

Darrell Cleveland Hucks
Keene State College, New Hampshire, USA
To Charetia Delores Hucks and Walter Cleveland Hucks, my parents, for their undying love on Earth and from Heaven.
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FOREWORD

What initiates the journey to a research problem … the search, an inquiry into wanting to know more, a thirst to find an explanation about that which is often in plain sight but too often, overlooked because it is assumed to be “well that’s just how it is?

I believe that authentic research questions come from an authentic place of caring, the trying to figure out “the why” of a situation, the inclusion of the voices of those in the situation, and, seeing the situation in its total context as a way to make meaning about a moment of behavior. Statistical data can offer insights into the numbers of what we see and a breakout of who displays the behavior. To thoughtfully respond to “the why” of many of the phenomena of human behavior we see, if we really want to understand “the why” of the behavior, talking with those who have the behavior is critical. Qualitative research becomes an important inquiry tool in seeking those answers. Or as John Szwed once wrote, “No amount of clinical study of alcoholics, for example, will establish how alcohol functions in the social setting in which it is consumed. In the same way, census data, no matter how accurate, will never tell us how a family functions – who is responsible for what, who teaches children what, and the like.” To learn these things requires interacting and talking with people about what matters to them.

With these thoughts in mind, I am remained of a bus ride that I once took which has implications for the origin/conception of research problems and the book you are about to read.

As I boarded the 104 Bus in New York City one spring afternoon going uptown on Broadway, I sat across from an adult and a child. Both were African American. Both were stylishly dressed. Both wore their hair in dreadlocks. Watching their interaction as we road together on this uptown bus, caused me to conclude that this was a mother and son. The boy appeared to be about eight or nine-years-old. Dressed in red jeans and an orange and black hoody on which there was writing and a dollar ($) symbol, this young boy smiled as he talked to his mother. She, in turn, was responsive to him – not only through the gestures in what she said, but the way in which she looked at him – the expressions on her face. Her eyes invited his words. After several blocks of stops as others entered and left the bus, the boy child lay his head on his mother’s shoulder and quietly drifted off into sleep. His arm was linked into his mom’s arm and his hoody covered his head as he slept peacefully. Slowly the bus made its way uptown. More stops along Broadway as we traveled. When the mom pressed the buzzer, she gently nudged her son saying, “Our stop is next.” As his sleeping eyes opened, he awakened. Together, they left the bus.

Seeing this mother and boy child together set my mind in motion which led me to this book. As I looked at this innocent Black male child now, I wondered, in five, 10, or 15 years from now, what will be his trajectory? How will he see
himself? How will others see him? This warm and tender moment of an innocent child that I have witnessed on this city bus is likely to be lost on a society that only knows Black boys as statistics, problems, and those to be feared. I questioned, when researchers set out to collect data on this child, what will constitute the data they collect? What will motivate their interest in him? What will they seek to know about his context? Will he have a voice in the story, the narrative that will be told about him? What is the story researchers will seek to tell about the trajectory of this Black male child?

The bus ride further encouraged me to think about journeys we take in life – where they start, what happens to them on the way, what becomes their destination? The book that follows is a story of a journey – a journey that began long before Hucks had taken a research methodology course in his doctoral program; long before he would become a teacher; before he would be a teacher educator; and, a professor in the academy. Much to the contrary, the research that informed this book is an outgrowth of a lived experience occurring during a childhood moment. It is a desire to understand that moment of behavior, to make meaning out of a witnessed contradiction observed in daily living. Children witness much in life that more often raises questions than offers honest explanations. Such was true in Hucks’ case. As a child, he was an avid reader and good student in school. So when he once overheard his father struggle reading a passage from the Bible, at first he thought he was playing. As he listened longer, it became clear to him that his father was having difficulty reading. Even as a child, Hucks wondered how his father, whom he had experienced as a smart, capable man who taught him so many things, could have trouble reading? This unanswered question lingered with Hucks as he moved his life forward. No doubt, we are part of all of that which has come before us – a collective of experiences, places, events, and occurrences that shape, affect, and influence our direction.

*New Visions of Collective Achievement: The Cross-Generational Schooling Experiences of African American Males* is a book that has established a research problem which addresses an authentic question. It is the story of three generations of the schooling experiences of Black males. It is driven by an inquiry, a thirst to find an explanation about that which is in plain sight but often overlooked. It uses an initial moment of contradiction as a springboard, a starting place for additional questions and need to understand the broader context affecting the behaviors seen. It welcomes the voices of those whose lives are more often aggregated in statistical research findings, allowing them to speak ably for themselves. It is respectful of the stories that others tell about their lives. It bridges a gap between what some theories say about the behaviors of African American boys by offering new theoretical possibilities which have implications for practice. Thus, the book offers guidance for our work with African American boys in and beyond school.
FOREWORD

As I revisit my bus ride on Broadway from the lens of New Visions of Collective Achievement: The Cross-Generational Schooling Experiences of African American Males, having observed the young Black male child who innocently slept on his mother’s shoulder, I am hopeful that the lessons learned from the this book will protect, strengthen and guide this young child’s trajectory into adulthood.

NOTE


Suzanne C. Carothers, Ph.D.
New York University
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family, friends, and former students and their families. You have helped me to uncover the pieces of this work; you are my educational legacy—you are with me each time I enter the classroom.
When I was a young boy growing up in the South Bronx in the 1970s, the men in my family were like gods. They were deep thinkers, serious providers, and great protectors, and I watched them in awe. There was my Uncle Booker T., a smart and funny man who knew how to fix rusty cars with his strong hands. There was Uncle Elvin, a former military man who used to make sure that I never missed out on learning something new, be it how to play cards or how to pick out a good apple. And there was Granddaddy Jack, a hard-working man with a thick Southern accent, who always taught me that I could learn more by listening than by talking.

Most important of all was my father, Walter Cleveland Hucks, a robust, warm-hearted man who grew up poor in rural North Carolina in the 1940s. He moved to Harlem when he was eighteen and soon after met and married my mother, Charetia. I admired him enormously and we were always the best of friends. For me, the biggest treat with my father was riding around on summer days in the freight truck that he drove for a living. As he navigated his way through the busy streets of New York City, I was continually amazed at how he never once got lost.

Even with all that we did together and shared, I knew little about the details of my father’s life as a child. What, for instance, was growing up like for him? What were his childhood dreams? When I sat next to him in that freight truck, I would tell him of my elementary school adventures and misadventures. He would laugh or look serious, depending on what I said. As I spoke, I was always hungry to know about what his experiences in school had been, but he never shared them with me. And when I would ask him outright, he was always somewhat evasive. He mentioned experiencing occasional problems with bullies, dealing with a few tough teachers, and having to walk long distances to and from school, but that was the extent of what he shared.

It wasn’t until years later, when I was in high school that I learned my father couldn’t read very well. I remember the day clearly. He was at home preparing to recite a passage from the Bible for an upcoming service in our church. I overheard him practicing in the next room. I listened as he slowly stumbled and faltered through the simplest of words. At first I thought he was joking, but I soon realized he wasn’t. My father struggled to decode, much like a child learning to read. I didn’t ask him about this at the time.

The enormity of the moment sent my mind into a tailspin. My father had proven to me countless times in the past how smart he was. He was a solid caregiver who knew how to save money. His intelligence was so clearly apparent to me. I remember
CHAPTER I

how we would spend hours watching nature documentaries on TV. With ease, he would explain many of the concepts and ideas, which I myself always struggled with as a child. How was it possible that he couldn’t read well? Had he not finished school? A few months later, my mother privately told me that while my father had indeed graduated from high school, he had continued to read at a grade-school level his entire life. I could only imagine the limitations this must have caused for him.

In the many years since then, I have tried to understand the relationship between my father’s educational journey and my own. I was successful in school. I was a good student. I excelled at reading, social studies, and language arts. I went on to college and graduate school. My father obviously was not as successful educationally or academically. The same could be said for many of the African American males in my neighborhood. When I was growing up, I knew several young teenage boys who were turned off from education. I remember the boys with whom I played at the playground.

Historically, African American males bear the weight of timeless atrocities, experiencing a painful history of discrimination that continues to influence their marginalization in society. African American males are the least employed, the most imprisoned, and oftentimes, the most oppressed people in America (Davis, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992; Noguera, 2003a; Ogbu, 1974). According to data from the United States Census Bureau (2010), 49.5% of African American males between grades 6 and 12 were suspended in 2007, while the National Center for Education Statistics (Aud, Fox, & KewelRamani, 2010) reported that in that same year, 12% of African American males ages 16 to 24 years old dropped out of high school. The U.S. Department of Justice (2009) has documented that over 40% of the American prison population consists of African American men. Statistics such as these clearly indicate a cause for better solutions to the challenges African American males face in schools and society.

In today’s educational context of the “Achievement Gap” and “Disproportionality in Special Education,” as well as the so-called “Crisis with Black Males” (Jackson & Moore, 2006; Pluviose, 2008; Watson, 2006), there is a longstanding debate about the engagement of and investment in African American boys in school (Noguera, 1996, 2003a; Mincy, 2006; National Urban League, 2008; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2008; Watson, 2006). A significant body of research has supported quantitative measures, which reveal low-test scores, high dropout rates, and crime and incarceration statistics suggesting that African American males are not successful in school or in society (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005; Fryer & Levitt, 2006; Hoffman, Llagas, & Snyder, 2003; Schott Foundation, 2008; Toldson, 2008). In decades of school reform, from Brown v. Board of Education to the current era of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, and the recursive educational reforms these have ushered into our schools, African American males continue to occupy the bottom tiers in terms of achievement at all levels of school (Donnor & Schockley, 2010; Hughes & Bonner, 2006; Mincy, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Noguera, 2003a; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). This concern raises the question of why, for generation after generation, African American males have not been successful academically.
In this book, I focus on the contextual factors that have influenced the cross-generational schooling experiences and achievement of African American males, revealing both the continuities and discontinuities that have been underexplored in past research, by using the voices of African American males to suggest directions for educational reform and future research.

**SCHOOL**

On many levels, the promise of educational advancement rendered in the 1954 landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* has not been fully actualized. Years after *Brown*, education for some students did improve; for instance, some received far better access to resources and materials than their fathers ever received. For most, however, advancement never occurred. Despite recent reform efforts such as small schools, vouchers, charter schools, and the federal legislation of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), a large number of African American males are still trailing behind other students in schools and in U.S. society. Today’s standardized test achievement data demonstrate that African American males across all grade levels continue to lag significantly behind their counterparts. Legislators, administrators, and teachers still fail to offer constructive and engaging ways of addressing and countering these problems. In this way, African American boys are caught between a school system that holds low expectations and negative perceptions of their academic abilities and a society that often mirrors and distorts these images (Davis, 2003; Howard, 2008; Lewis & Moore, 2008; Noguera, 2003s; Osborne, 1999; Steele, 1990, 1998). This poses significant challenges for African American boys and their families. Many African American families continue to struggle for equal educational opportunities for their children. This is especially true for poor and working-class families living in inner cities and rural areas.

**SOCIETY**

The American public image of the African American family is one that is broken, weak, and unstable (Frazier, 1966; Hill, 2003; Lewis, 1966; Moynihan, 1965). Furthermore, the rise in the number of African American single-parent, female-headed households has had a tremendous impact on how African American fathers are viewed. These fathers are believed to be disengaged from their families or, worse, seen as deserters of their children. This negative public perception of absent African American fathers has raised much debate about the presence of positive male role models for African American boys (Hutchinson, 1997). In understanding and confronting these perceptions, people must examine the causes of this phenomenon, whether perceived or actual, so that we can begin to explore the structural changes in society and the impact they have had on our children. This exploration requires qualitative information that census data have not captured.
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Qualitative research allows the lived experiences and perceptions of research participants to be captured in ways that quantitative research does not (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lawler, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Weiss, 1995). The increasing numbers of single-parent African American male- or female-headed households have only recently been studied (Hill, 2003). Findings from this study suggest that the changes in the structure of African American families belie the complexity of making generalizations about the influences that fathers have on their young children. The complexities of these relationships should be examined in ways that go beyond only knowing how many family members reside at the same address and start to address why this is occurring.

FAMILY

Family plays a significant role in the lives of children and a powerful influence on children’s orientation to education and school. Many researchers have noted the crucial role the family has in shaping children’s beliefs, perceptions, and values about their schooling (Kohn, 1999; Meier, 2002; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Sampson, 2002; Scanzoni, 1971; Thompson, 2003). Research suggests that parents’ beliefs regarding past experiences of their own education are often passed on, directly or indirectly, to their children (Daniel & Effinger, 1996; Hale, 1994; Neblett, Chavous, Nguyên, & Sellers, 2009; Osborne, 1999; Sampson, 2002). Until recently, research focused on the intergenerational schooling experiences of African American males within the context of their families has been underexplored (Hucks, 2008). In 2009, Rowley and Bowman suggested that successful academic outcomes for African American males in higher education are impeded by “cross-generational family and student role strains”—specifically citing the absence of African American fathers and male role models as negatively influencing student motivation and peer risk behaviors, both in and out of school.

Furthermore, a limited number of studies have reported how African American role models actually do influence the children in their lives and their education (Hale, 1994; Hill, 2003; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Some of these studies have focused more on the relationships between African American mothers and their sons (Ferguson, 2001; Hale, 1982; Thompson, 2004), while others have focused on the role of fathers in their daughters’ education (Draughn & Waggenstock, 1986). Still others have been intergenerational studies of the educational experiences of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters (Carothers, 1990; Daniel & Effinger, 1996; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Willie & Reddick, 2003). Only recently have studies begun to examine the impact of African American fathers on their sons’ education (Harris, 1999; Polite & Davis, 1999; Scott, 1997).

While intergenerational studies about fathers, sons, and other male role models in the immediate and extended family may have offered males an opportunity to speak about education, these studies have not used a multi-theoretical framework as the current study does.
Existing research shows that African American males are oftentimes most likely to be overrepresented in categories associated with school failure (Mincy, 2006; Moore, 2006; Noguera, 2008). The challenge for addressing this over-representation in underachievement is great and will require a level of engagement, investment, accountability, and achievement for all who play a role and have a stake in bringing about change for African American males.

The collective voices of African American males regarding their school and life experiences, and the issues and challenges they face, are missing from the literature. In examining the schooling experiences and achievement of African American males, educators and researchers have often not viewed them as being knowledgeable informants of their own experiences (Dance, 2002; Laubasher 2005; Mincy, 2006; Sampson, 2002; Sewell, 2000; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003; Thompson, 2004). Contrary to that approach, I asked African American boys and men to share their schooling experiences with me and they did.

My research documents the educational histories of a small number of urban African American boys, between the ages of 8 and 12, and those of the adult males in their immediate and extended families. I chose the age group of 8 to 12 for two reasons. First, it is a group that has not been intensively studied. Second, it is also the age group for whom standardized testing becomes the method of evaluating students’ academic achievement in public schools—evaluations that resonate throughout the rest of these students’ academic lives.

My study contributes to the research on African American males by closely examining the intergenerational educational experiences of boys and men in a select number of families. This research explored the connections that have gone unexamined by past researchers about the education and achievement of African American males. The goal of the study was to explore how African American males characterize their schooling experiences across generations, which is crucial for understanding the intergenerational conflicts, continuities, and interwoven experiences involved in their educational stories.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study focused on understanding schooling experiences across generations from the perspectives of African American males. In exploring what their schooling experiences are across generations, this study investigated how their experiences shed light on the ways African American males were, and continue to be, served by the U.S. public educational system. In a quest to dig more deeply into these issues, I developed the following research questions:

– What are the educational stories of African American males?
– How do the educational experiences of previous generations of African American males inform those of the next generations?
CHAPTER I

– What “human capital” (parents, siblings, extended family, friends, and role models) do African American males use to navigate the public school systems?
– How do African American males evaluate their public school education?
– How do African American males see the value of their education and that of their families who send them to school?
– In what ways do African American males see the connections between their schooling experiences and life outcomes?

The yield from these research questions is the participants’ multi-layered stories of their schooling experiences.
CHAPTER II

THE STORIES LIVES TELL

TELLING THE STORIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

Framing the story of African American males and their families requires the inquiry of diverse literature. This literature review draws from historical, psychological, sociological, and anthropological research. Such a broad spectrum of research is necessary to identify major issues and factors when examining the intergenerational experiences of African American males. In addition to the social science literature, fiction and autobiographies were used in this dissertation because they introduce a unique perspective on the lives of African American males in the context of their schools and families. Authors such as James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, and John Edgar Wideman weave their own life stories into fictional accounts, capturing the nuance of life for African American men living in the United States. The complexity of the lives of disenfranchised people has often been ignored in social science literature, reducing our understanding to simple equations; these fictional stories, on the other hand, counteract this simplicity and offer a rich context for understanding the human condition of people’s lives.

Where They Stand: The View of African American Males Within Educational Settings

As stated previously, the obstacles African American males face are extreme, given that they are the least employed, the most imprisoned, and often the most oppressed (Davis, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992; Noguera, 2003b). “Achievement” and “African American males” are terms usually linked together when low educational outcomes are discussed. Many researchers have noted that much of the data on African American males and their achievement are typically focused on low test scores, dropout rates, and crime and incarceration statistics (Dance, 2002; Hopkins, 1997; Noguera, 2003a; Osborne, 1999). The majority of existing quantitative achievement data is often used to support the notion that African American males are experiencing a serious crisis on multiple levels of society, especially in education. Of course, more than just statistics are involved in the daily lives and experiences of these boys and men, many of whom manage to succeed despite the challenges they face both in school and society.
When focusing specifically on young African American boys in schools, it is important to remember the cultural and social status of African Americans in the United States and the negative perceptions frequently associated with them. In her book *Tough Fronts*, L. Janelle Dance (2002) offered her view on the relationship between urban schools and African American boys and how educational institutions need to be more culturally responsive to their needs. She stated:

Urban schools must acquire an empathetic understanding of what life is like for the students they serve. Otherwise, combating the negative aspects of street culture without an adequate and realistic understanding of how students relate to this culture and survive this culture is a losing battle: the casualties are reflected in high suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates for inner-city youth, especially Black and brown males. (p. 10)

Researchers suggest that African American males have countless personal stories to tell that speak of the obstacles they encounter in school—and in life (Anyon, 1997; Davis, 2003; Delpit, 1995; Majors & Billson, 1992; Noguera, 2003b; Polite & Davis, 1999; Sampson, 2002; Sewell, 2000; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Stevenson, 2004). In listening to and examining what African American male students have to say about their schooling and about those who teach them, schools will be able to offer sustainable ways to impact their educational experiences and outcomes positively.

Who They Are and Where They Live: The View of African American Males and Their Families

Since family is pivotal to a child’s development, what then is the role of African American families in the development of their children? A large body of research has attempted to answer this question, documenting the significant role that the family plays in students’ achievement and orientation to education and school (Davis, 2003; Hale, 1982; Hill, 2003; Kunjufu, 1995; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Ogbu, 1974; Sampson, 2002; Thompson, 2003). From their inception as slaves in America, much has been written about the African American family. Research has been conducted about African American families from the 1800s to the 1900s, including a seminal study written in the 1940s by E. Franklin Frazier (1966), which offers a challenging perspective on African Americans that had not existed before. This study identified the strengths of the African American family that had gone unrecognized until then. This investigation proliferated even more in the 1960s with the publication of the *Moynihan Report* by Daniel P. Moynihan (1965). Moynihan explored African American families and attributed their problems to the “inherent feebleness” of their family. Unfortunately, this negative perspective superseded Frazier’s work and has led many in the popular media and the government to place blame on the African American family for the problems they face.

In a recent article, Leswin Laubasher (2005) counteracted these perspectives, arguing that the research on African American men is largely centered on crisis
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and pathology. He suggested that this crisis is manufactured and is a result of the negative research on the deficits of African American men, thus sustaining a societal misrepresentation rather than truly understanding the realities of interlocking families and how they are affected by institutionalized racism. The literature itself on these crises played a significant role in perpetuating an oppressive representation of African American males in society. Laubasher thus called for the development of research that does not support the problematic societal views of African American males and instead focuses on their strengths.

Other literature also explored the impact of relationships within African American families. A socio-psychological study conducted by Diane Hughes and Deborah Johnson (2001) focused on the racial socialization experiences of 94 parent-child dyads. The authors explored the transactional processes between parents and children, focusing on the child’s identity exploration and their parents’ racial socialization. In doing so, the authors studied the effects of the unfair treatment of the children in school. They also found that the children’s views of discrimination and their ways of questioning this oppression had an effect on how their parents talked to them about race. This was significant in that it showed racial socialization as being transactional. One limitation of the study, however, was that the sample was taken only from affluent African American parents. It would be interesting to see if these same transactional results appear with families from varied socio-economic backgrounds.

While research on African American families has increased, much of the research has historically focused on the influence of mothers and grandmothers—and not fathers and grandfathers—on their children’s education. The research on familial influences and school experiences from the males’ perspectives, specifically the school experiences of fathers and sons, is seriously lacking in scope. Some studies have explored the schooling experiences of African American males at the secondary or college level, but more connections need to be made to previous elementary school experiences and how these experiences relate to the older males in their families.

The intergenerational school experiences of African American males have also not been looked at closely in the existing research on African American males. These holes in the literature may be tied to the societal view of the “absent father” or the so-called “lack of male role models” believed to plague the African American community. To counteract this, several studies have explored this negative misconception of African American fathers. One study by Roberta L. Coles (2002) examined the parenting methods of a small group of single African American fathers and their experiences as the primary caregivers of their children. Coles found that the men’s past experiences throughout their life had a significant impact on their roles as fathers in raising their children in that these experiences informed their beliefs and perceptions about their children’s current experiences both inside and outside of school. The findings of this study also suggested that the fathers’ social networks had a significant impact on the parenting choices they made. Pedro Noguera (2003a) also explored this phenomenon in City Schools and the American Dream, in which he addressed the inadequate resources African American males have for social capital,
which is the social network people need to access things they require. This dearth of social capital thus has tremendous negative influences on the experiences of poor children and their families in and out of school.

In terms of the intergenerational literature on African American males, the research has, for the most part, been centered on the influences of ethnic identity on educational, psychological, and cultural struggles. I have been unable to find studies that specifically examine the impact of intergenerational, familial relationships. While a growing body of literature is looking at the issues and challenges encountered by African American fathers (Clayton et al., 2003; Hamer, 2001; Mincy, 2006), nothing yet addresses education in a systematic, qualitative way, because this research primarily centers on the challenges fathers face as economic providers.

Some work has been conducted to explore the issues of masculinity and gender role development in African American men (Sewell, 2000; Wade, 1996), but few studies have focused on how these issues impact school experiences within the context of the family. In *African American Teens Discuss Their Schooling Experiences*, Gail Thompson (2002) explored the school experiences reported by teenage African American male and female students. Although the students interviewed in this study were in high school, many of them reported significant experiences that happened during their elementary school years that they felt negatively impacted their later experiences in school. According to Thompson, “Tracking, starting in elementary school, not only contributes to low achievement among African American students but it also appears to have a strong effect on subsequent schooling experiences” (p. 164).

Due to the cultural and educational history of African American males, and the achievement issues they continue to face in school, there is a pressing need for research that explores how different generations of African American males have experienced school, how they relate these experiences across generations, and how this impacts their achievement. According to Bowman and Gadsen (1999), “Part of the solution to the problems facing young, poor African American males is located in schools. However, educational-reform discussions seldom address the special risks faced by African American males and are marked often by conflicting assumptions” (p. 178). These conflicting assumptions include misperceptions that African American children come from broken homes with families that do not value education, which ultimately causes behavioral problems and academic deficiencies.

Adding to Bowman and Gadsen’s research are several studies that have focused on the impact of community and family on children’s schooling experiences. Jeremy Price’s (1999) ethnographic-sociological study detailed the school experiences of two young African American men. Price explored the varying effects that teachers, graduation, and peer relationships had on the participants’ masculine and racial identities. The interviews revealed how gender, class, and race were woven throughout all levels of these students’ personal and social experiences. The study demonstrated these two men, who came from the same community, assigned very different meanings to their experiences both inside and outside of school. Their personal histories, their peer groups, and the context of the social institutions they entered shaped the meanings
they developed. In this way, Price urged the need for a theoretical framework that moves beyond the historical one-dimensional images of African American men. This study is significant in that it revealed how the complexities of race, gender, and class impact African American meaning-making systems.

Another sociological study by Dena Philips Swanson, Michael Cunningham, and Margaret Beale Spencer (2003) explored the effect of affective-and cognitive-linked developmental transitions on academic achievement and outcomes for African American males. Consisting of 219 ninth and tenth graders, data for this study were gathered using three different questionnaires that measured participants’ experiences and their negative and positive inferences. The authors explored the various stereotypes of African American males in society and the impact of family, school, and community on their affective and cognitive development. The authors suggested that to assist these males in positive and constructive ways, educators need to seek out and gain a thorough understanding of the significance of these factors on their lives.

These authors also used a human development perspective to examine the academic achievement patterns and outcomes that the participants in the study experienced. They found that hyper-masculine behaviors such as bullying and fighting were often exhibited by students in response to negative schooling experiences. As such, they advocated for interventions that not only attempt to change behaviors, but require a change in the environments that produce these responses. This research is crucial because of its developmental perspective and how this applies to African American male achievement and the complexities involved in addressing the issues faced by students and the schools that serve them.

Class also significantly impacts the life and school experiences of African American males. Based on ethnographic data of 8- to 10-year-old White and Black children, a study by Annette Lareau (2002) explored the effects of social class on family childrearing practices. Using data collected from interviews and observations of children and their parents, the findings from this study indicated that middle-class parents were more involved in activities that developed their children’s reasoning skills and provided more organized leisure activities. On the other hand, working-class and poor parents provided an environment that facilitated children’s natural growth, but they allowed their children to make more decisions about leisure activities. Lareau also found that Black middle-class families had more resources and strategies available for dealing with issues of racial discrimination than their working-class and poor counterparts. Another difference was that children from middle-class families developed a greater sense of entitlement when dealing with institutional settings, while working-class and poor families did not share this feeling. This research demonstrated the impact that class and family dynamics have on children’s potential life outcomes.

Lareau conducted another sociological study with Erin McNamara Horvat (1999) that centered on the intersection of race and class, looking at third grade African American children and their parents. Conducting case studies based on
classroom observations and interviews, the research suggested that White parents of students in schools that are predominantly White had less concern when dealing with institutional problems than African American parents who may be coming from historically-based patterns of racial discrimination. The researchers found that race has power regardless of social class in schools, and they pointed to the significance of class and race on social reproduction and the ways in which individuals activate cultural capital. Finally, the authors also suggested that the past experiences of parents and their children influenced their responses to racial discrimination.

AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS AND THEIR SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

For African American male students at every grade level, the discontinuity between home and school has a tremendous impact on their schooling experiences and academic achievement (Delpit, 1995; hooks, 2004; Kotlowitz, 1991; Noguera, 2003b; Rist, 1973). It is important to understand the variety of factors that shape and influence this discontinuity as well as any continuity, and the ways in which we serve African American males in the public school system.

Before looking at the school experiences of African American boys, it is crucial to explore racial identity and the socialization of African Americans. The first study, conducted by Ron Eyerman (2004), addressed racial identity and presented a structure for a theory of cultural trauma, focusing on how the history of slavery in the Americas has impacted the development of African American identity. Eyerman explained that after the Civil War, Black intellectuals created the term “African American” in response to the unfulfilled promise of full integration and further rejection (individual and collective) by American society. The author looked at the concepts of collective memory and collective identity, and used historical references to shed light on the impact of cultural trauma on both the individual and the collective African American culture. By looking at historical narrative frameworks and their representation, we can gain a stronger understanding of the impact of generational memory and how it is passed on.

Psychologists Richard Allen and Richard Bagozzi (2001) also conducted a study that investigated the framework of African American belief systems across three different age groups. They posed several key hypotheses informed by the historically negative treatment of African Americans by those belonging to the dominant culture. On a fundamental level, the researchers found that African American belief systems were informed by their sense of self and their worldview. The model they used to explore this issue focused on African American belief systems on both the individual and group levels. Using a multistage sampling method for this psychological study, the findings indicated that there was a significant difference in the degree of group identity between age cohorts based on whether they were born pre- or post-Civil Rights era. It was also found that individual and group African American identity was related to the views and values of the larger society across age groups. This
understanding of individual and group identity and belief systems is crucial for our understanding of the school experiences of African American males.

One of the few related studies that focused specifically on young African American boys was conducted by Ann Annette Ferguson (2001). Following a group of 11- and 12-year-old African American boys in an urban setting, Ferguson brought to light a pressing need to look at the early formative school years of African American males. She discussed how her young participants were already labeled as academically challenged by their teachers, leading to many negative schooling outcomes. Furthermore, she revealed the continuum of fathers in her study from present and wielding influence, to absent and how this impacted the children and their academic achievement.

Ferguson’s work is indicative of the major challenges that African American boys face in terms of their educational achievement. Stereotyping by those in positions of authority, including teachers, administrators, and security officers, is often due to the media’s labeling of African American males as aggressive and violent (Hill, 2003). These media influences have a profound impact on how the behavior of African American males is viewed by those outside of their ethnic group. According to Feagin and Vera:

Symbolic violence resides in relentless stereotyping, the media’s exclusionary standards of beauty, and the educational system’s insensitivities to the needs of multicultural communities. Symbolic violence can include White [police] officers’ hostile words and body language, which reveal disrespect for Black people and culture, as well as White officers’ show of force in Black communities when they stop and interrogate Black men just because they are Black. Symbolic violence is expressed in images of Blacks as inferior or as “gorillas in the mist.” Many Whites in all sectors of society acquiesce or participate in acts of symbolic violence even though they disapprove of physical violence. (in Dance, 2002, p. 139)

This insensitivity on behalf of teachers and administrators towards children of color has a profound impact on student experiences, classroom environment, and the overall school climate (Rist, 1970).

In terms of achievement, according to a sociological study by Vernon C. Polite (1999), African American males who attended the suburban high school that he studied felt that most of their counselors and teachers had not made an effort to challenge them academically, particularly their math teachers. These participants also felt that a “caring school environment” had not been created by their counselors or teachers. Furthermore, Polite suggested that these participants’ experiences reflected the high school experiences of African American students throughout the nation.

Pedro Noguera (2003b) also explored how environmental and cultural factors influenced African American boys’ behavior and performance in school. He looked at the role personal perception and group identity play on academic achievement. Noguera offered constructive ways to address the problems these boys faced in school and in
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society. Moreover, he raised the issue of generational, racial, and class differences as a source of difficulty for communication between adults and children. Because of these disparities, Noguera advocated for additional resources and support systems both inside and outside of schools to create conditions that produce academic success, thus meeting the needs and growth of African American boys on multiple levels.

Another article by Jason W. Osborne (1999) also offered possible courses of action that may be used to promote boys’ identification with academics and improve their educational achievement. The author examined three prominent theories (Steele’s stereotype threat model, Ogbu’s cultural-ecological perspective, and Majors and Billson’s “cool pose” theory) that addressed factors impacting achievement. These three theories took into account the social and cultural landscapes that African American males must navigate in school and in their communities—landscapes that affect the ways they may relate to academics. This has tremendous implications for schools and teachers when considering how they plan for and implement curriculum, interventions, and assessments.

WHERE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STORIES ARE TOLD: (AUTO)

BIOGRAPHICAL AND FICTIONAL LITERATURE

Fictional and autobiographical literature provides examples of the influence of family on children’s school experiences and their understandings of education. Here is where we find the intergenerational stories of African American men. Historically, as stated previously, social science literature has ignored the lives of disenfranchised people; to counteract this, many African American writers have written both autobiographical and fictional accounts to unravel and expose their experiences. Richard Wright (1945), W.E.B. Du Bois (1973), James Baldwin (1985), Toni Morrison (1977), Ralph Ellison (1995), Alice Walker (2003), and many others have told stories of struggle and resilience of African Americans from slavery to the present day.

One African American author in particular, Alex Haley (1976), in his compelling book Roots, offered one of the most powerful views of African American life across seven generations of his family. This account started with the capture of his ancestor by slave traders in Africa who brought him to America. What stands out most poignantly is the powerful familial relationships that sustain, despite the horrendous conditions of slavery. Furthermore, Haley highlighted how children’s learning and development occurred within the context of family and community, despite what slave owners sought to extinguish.

African American writers continue to tell the stories of what life is like for African American males at various ages and walks of life, providing varied lenses to understand African American experiences in post-slavery U.S. society. James McBride (1996) in The Color of Water offered a detailed account of his life growing up in the Red Hook projects of Brooklyn and the influence of his bi-racial family, his peers, and the environment on his life at home and in school. Similarly, in Raising
Fences, Michael Datcher (2001) shared his life experiences growing up on and off the streets of Los Angeles.

In Geoffrey Canada’s (1998) Reaching Up for Manhood, Bill Cosby’s (1986) Fatherhood, and John Edgar Wideman’s (1994) Fatheralong, African American men also told stories about the intergenerational relationships they had with their sons and the importance of developing and maintaining positive and constructive connections that helped their children overcome obstacles in school and in society. The following statement at the close of Wideman’s book encapsulates the sentiments shared by many African American men: “The powers and principalities that originally restricted our access to the life free people naturally enjoy still rise like a shadow, a wall between my grandfathers and myself, my father and me, between the two of us, father and son, son and father. So we must speak these stories to one another” (p. 197).

This type of literature counters greatly to most of the social science literature that has historically focused on only single, one-dimensional aspects of the lives of African American males, dangerously hypothesizing wide-scale implications about their performance, achievement, and life trajectories. Contrastingly, fictional and autobiographical literature sheds light on the complexity of issues defining the circumstances in which African American males find themselves. Inspired by this literature, my research also lifts up and celebrates the voices of African American males, specifically unraveling the complexities of their educational experiences.

IN SEARCH OF A THEORETICAL GROUNDING

As an African American male researcher, I found that multiple theories and concepts resonated with my own schooling experiences and the experiences of other African American males in my family and community. I quickly recognized that not one theory, concept, or perspective could, or should, be applied to the complexity of African American males. The idea of framing these multiple theories collectively, not separately, made more sense and told a richer story.

One theoretical framework of this study comes from Jason Osborne’s (1997) perspective on disidentification with academics. He suggested that the educational achievement of African American males is directly related to whether or not they identify with their education. According to Osborne (1999), the self-esteem of “identified students” is more strongly correlated with academic outcomes than it is with “disidentified students” (p. 557). In other words, students who feel connected to what they are learning in school will perform better academically as a result of this connection.

Other related theories and perspectives have contributed to this study’s framework. Drawing from psychological research, Claude Steele’s (1992, 1997) stereotype-threat model suggested that if one belongs to a minority group in which there are negative stereotypes about that group’s academic ability, then that group’s academic performance in school is adversely affected.
I also used John Ogbu’s (1997) cultural-ecological perspective, which hypothesized that the home culture and community with which a student identifies impacts his school performance. Ogbu also suggested that students coming from a culture that has viewed them as being oppressed may also view school as a continuation of that oppression. Ogbu moreover hypothesized that often the belief and value systems of African American males and their families are in conflict with those of educators and administrators at their schools. In *The Next Generation*, Ogbu (1974) discussed this conflict of opposing belief systems, claiming:

The White belief system, which contributes the other half of the self-fulfilling prophecy in education of subordinate minorities, consists of both folk and “scientific” definitions of the subordinate minorities as intellectually and culturally inferior to Whites. Whites confirm their folk beliefs and “scientific” theories by pointing to the high proportion of school failures and low scores on intelligence tests (IQ) among subordinate minorities. These beliefs and theories form the basis on which the schools sort and classify children from subordinate minorities, a classification that often marks the children as failures before the school actually teaches them anything. It is important to remember that teachers participate in the belief system of the dominant Whites rather than that of the subordinate minorities, and that their definition, classification, and treatment of children are determined by that belief system. (p. 14)

Ogbu demonstrated the serious need to examine belief systems at work on both sides of the home-school equation. Furthermore, the need for open, constructive, and continuous communication among students, teachers, parents, and administrators is the only way that possible solutions for the problems faced by all students, especially young African American males, will ever be identified and put into practice to improve their school experiences and lives (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; McDonald, 1996).

Adding to the work of Ogbu, Steele, and Osborne is the “cool-pose” theory envisioned by Richard Majors and Janet Billson (1992). This theory suggested that African American males adopt a pose of acting “cool” in school as a coping mechanism for the challenges they face. Lastly, I used Pedro Noguera’s (2003a) environmental and cultural perspective, which explored the interaction of harmful environmental and cultural factors that have an impact on young African American males both in and outside of school. Throughout my study, I examine how these theories and perspectives play out in the intergenerational narratives of African American males within the context of their families, highlighting how the components of this collective theoretical framework are revealed in the stories of their school experiences.

Based on these theories, it becomes clear that the problems faced by African American males within schools are complex. Many factors lead to discontinuity that impacts the educational and life outcomes of this population. I have attempted to identify some of the major factors through this study. In combination, they are difficult to address without a deeper knowledge of how these factors work together to impact
achievement. With this in mind, researchers need to investigate the complex strength and influence of these factors across different stages of children’s development and across the life span. Furthermore, researchers need to understand how these factors shift and hold across generations. According to Ruth Benedict (1934),

The life history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally handed down in his community. From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behavior. By the time he can talk, he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities. (p. 3)

Benedict demonstrated the importance of understanding how customs and beliefs are established, arguing that cultural institutions play a significant role in supporting or imped ing individual progress. Thus, these institutions more effectively serve dominant groups and subordinate minority groups from having their needs met because of the negative beliefs held by those in power.

As Margaret Mead concluded in Alan Dundes’ (1968) *Every Man His Way*: “If we are to build a world in which a variety of cultures are orchestrated together so as to produce a viable social order, we need intensive exploration of the types of clarification and types of presentation which will increase understanding between pairs of cultural groups and then among more complicated groupings” (p. 534). Franz Boas (1982) emphasized that “a synthesis of the elements of culture must be undertaken that will give us a deeper insight into its nature” (p. 265). I focused on family elements as reported by the males themselves.

Based on these theoretical frameworks, it becomes clear that psychological, sociological, environmental, and cultural factors are closely related and interwoven. This requires a thorough understanding of African American families and the schools their boys attend (Cross, 1991). If African American boys are to be successful in school and society, we need a more thorough knowledge of how education is viewed and practiced by the older males in their families and communities who hold key positions to the boys’ conceptions of schooling and achievement.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The current study contributes to the research on African American males by closely examining the intergenerational educational experiences of boys and men in a select number of families. This research explored the connections that have gone unexamined by past researchers between education and achievement of African American males. The goal of the study was to explore how African American males characterize their schooling experiences across generations, which is crucial for understanding the intergenerational conflicts, continuities, and interwoven experiences involved in their educational stories and how they impact students’ academic performance in schools today.
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Due to my shared ethnicity with the participants in the study, years of elementary school teaching of African American boys, and engaging with the literature on African American males, I quickly realized that not one isolated theory, model, or perspective could, or should, be applied to the complex lives of African American males. This design was based upon preliminary conversations with African American males prior to the current study, when I discovered that one theory or concept on its own could not capture the range of factors that inform the schooling experiences of African American males on an intergenerational scale. But enacting them as a collective did allow for a more open-ended research design that captured the intergenerational continuities and discontinuities that exist among the participants, and also gave rise to this new theory of collective achievement. The idea of seeing the African American boys collectively, not separately, made more sense and told a richer story. The following researchers provided this collective framework:

- Osborne’s (1997, 1999) perspective on disidentification with academics suggested that the educational achievement of African American males is directly related to whether or not they identify with academics.
- Steele’s (1992, 1997) stereotype-threat model suggested that if one belongs to a minority group in which there are negative stereotypes about that group’s academic ability, then that group’s academic performance in school will be adversely affected.
- Majors and Billson’s (1992) “cool pose” theory suggested that African American males adopt a pose of acting “cool” in school as a coping mechanism for the challenges they face.
- Noguera’s (2003a) environmental and cultural perspective suggested that the interaction of harmful environmental and cultural factors have an impact on young African American boys both in and out of school.
- Ogbu’s (1997) cultural-ecological model suggested that the home culture and community with which a student identifies will impact his school performance. He also argued that students, coming from a culture that has viewed itself as being oppressed, may view school as a continuation of that oppression.

The current study intended to address the deficit of African American male voices in the literature by engaging with African American males from within the same family unit across generations through qualitative interviews and observations in their homes and communities. This study focused on understanding schooling experiences across generations from the perspectives of African American males. In exploring what their schooling experiences are across generations, this study investigated how their experiences shed light on the ways African American males were and continue to be served by the U.S. public educational system. In a quest to delve more deeply, I used the following questions as a guide to framing the study and generate interview questions:

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What are the educational stories of African American males?

How do the educational experiences of previous generations of African American males inform those of the next generations?

What “human capital” (parents, siblings, extended family, friends, and role models) do African American males use to navigate the public school systems?

How do African American males evaluate their public school education?

How do African American males see the value of their education and that of their families who send them to school?

In what ways do African American males see the connections between their schooling experiences and life outcomes?