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African American Male Adolescents, Schooling (and Mathematics): Deficiency, Rejection, and Achievement

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The academic achievement gap, particularly the mathematics achievement gap, between Black students and their White counterparts has been well documented with numerical facts. As mathematics education researchers attempt to develop theories and practices that assist in eradicating the gap, they would serve mathematics education well if they would expand the sphere of their research into the sociocultural arena. To assist in expanding the sphere, this article presents a review of key historical and current theoretical perspectives regarding the schooling experiences of African American students, with an emphasis on African American male students, borrowed from the disciplines of anthropology, social psychology, and sociology. The review is organized around three discourse clusters: the discourse of deficiency, the discourse of rejection, and the discourse of achievement. The author suggests that researchers move away from the discourses of deficiency and rejection and toward the discourse of achievement when developing sound education theories and classroom practices that assist in eradicating the academic (and mathematics) achievement gap.

KEYWORDS: academic achievement, African American male students, mathematics achievement, mathematics education.

The academic achievement gap,¹ particularly the mathematics achievement gap, between Black² students and their White counterparts has been well documented with numerical facts (Strutchens, Lubienski, McGraw, & Westbrook, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Although a recent Education Trust study using National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) data documented that U.S. students were improving in their academic performance, it also noted that the achievement gap between Black and White students was increasing (Gewertz, 2003). This increase was especially evident in the eighth-grade NAEP mathematics test, where the Black–White gap increased from 33 points in 1990 to 39 points in 2000 (Strutchens et al., 2004). Although mathematics educators know that the achievement gap exists (and is increasing), we do not fully understand the complexities of why it exists. I believe, however, that Lubienski and Bowen’s (2000) analysis of equity research within mathematics education might provide an explanation for this lack of understanding. In their essay, “Who’s counting? A survey of mathematics education research 1982–1998,” they concluded, “One gets the impression that researchers look primarily at outcomes of these equity groups [ethnicity or class] and rarely examine how schooling experiences contribute to these outcomes” (p. 631).

Historically, there has been a general lack of examining the specific mathematics schooling *experiences* of African American students and other minority students, such as Latino/a, Native American, Caribbean, low socioeconomic, and so forth. In the past decade or so, however, there has been a growing number of scholars in the (mathematics) education community who have suggested expanding the sphere of mathematics education research into the sociocultural arena to more fully understand the schooling and mathematics outcomes of these students (e.g., see Atweh, Forgasz, & Nebres, 2001; Boaler, 2000; Burton, 2003; Gates & Cotton, 1998; Powell & Frankenstein, 1997; Secada, Fennema, & Adajian, 1995; Walshaw, 2004). Such research originates outside the realm of “traditional” mathematics education research and theory.

Lerman (2000) identified the interest in sociocultural theories within mathematics education as: “the *social turn* in mathematics education research” (p. 23). He claimed that this growing interest in sociocultural theories results from most of the philosophical and theoretical focus in mathematics education research centering on the *individual* acquiring mathematics knowledge and understanding, oftentimes slighting the dynamics of the sociocultural contexts—inside and outside of the classroom—in which it has been learned. Mathematics education research within the social turn, for example, is rooted in anthropology (e.g., Boaler, 1998), social psychology (e.g., Cobb, 2000), sociology (e.g., Dowling, 2001), and sociopolitical critique (e.g., Skovsmose, 2005). Theoretically, it offers, for example, broader models in which to study mathematics education (e.g., Martin, 2000; Reyes & Stanic, 1988), calls for the inclusion of student “voice” in mathematics education research (e.g., Moody, 1997; Secada, 1995), outlines the tenets of culturally relevant (responsive) mathematics pedagogy (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Matthews, 2003; Murrell, 1999; Tate, 1995; Wagner, Roy, Ecatoiu, & Rousseau, 2000), positions mathematics education within critical pedagogy (e.g., Frankenstein, 1990; Gutstein, 2006; Gutstein & Peterson, 2005), and argues for studies about historically marginalized students who are successful in school mathematics (e.g., Gieger, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1997).

Research within the social turn supports Weissglass’s (2002) assertion that the historical contexts and the sociocultural structures in which mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning are embedded have a significant effect on students’ mathematics learning and performance, especially on those students who have been historically marginalized. Therefore, using many of the arguments provided by these scholars, my work, specifically my doctoral dissertation, expanded the sphere of mathematics education equity research by documenting the voices of African American male students³ who were successful in school mathematics as they reflected on and talked about the sociocultural factors that affected their schooling and mathematics experiences (see Stinson, 2004).

In particular, my study examined the influences of sociocultural discourses on the agency of four African American men in their early 20s who had achieved and persisted in school mathematics (K–12). In the context of the study, *agency* was defined as the participants’ ability to accommodate, reconfigure, or resist the available sociocultural discourses that surround African American males for them to effectively negotiate⁴ these discourses in their pursuit of success. The concept *discourses* included institutions and language, as well as complex signs and practices that order and sustain sociocultural and sociohistorical constructed forms of social existence—

forms that work to either confirm or deny the life histories and experiences of the people who use them (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1996).

In the study, I employed qualitative action research methodology (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998), located within a critical postmodern theoretical frame (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, 2000). More specifically, study participants were asked to read, reflect on, and respond to historical and current research literature regarding African American children's schooling experiences. Their responses were analyzed using a "somewhat eclectic" (Sfard, 2003, p. 354) theoretical framework that included poststructural theory, critical race theory, and critical (postmodern) theory. Poststructural theory (e.g., see St. Pierre, 2000) provided a framework for rethinking and redefining key concepts, such as person, agency, and power, among others. Critical race theory (e.g., see Tate, 1997) provided a framework for understanding how the discourses of race and racism operate within U.S. social structures. Critical postmodern theory (e.g., see Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, 2000) provided a framework for discussing the purposes of education research.

Collectively, within this eclectic theoretical framework, the analysis of the participants' responses revealed that each had acquired a robust "mathematics identity" (Martin, 2000, p. viii), identities that affected their sense of agency positively. How the participants acquired such uncharacteristic mathematics identities for African American male students (i.e., discussions about African American male students who excel in mathematics are rarely, if ever, located in societal discourses or the research literature) was found, in part, in how they understood the formations of the socio-cultural discourses of U.S. society—formations that most often (inequitably) favor the dominant culture—and how they negotiated the specific discourses that surround African American males. Although occasionally the participants' responses were similar, their responses were never monolithic—not across participants and not even within participants. Present throughout each participant's responses, however, was recognition of himself as a "discursive formation" (Foucault, 1972, p. 38) who could, and did, actively negotiate sociocultural discourses as a means to subversively repeat (Butler, 1990) his constituted "raced" self.

The literature review for my dissertation study and presented in this article reflects Weissglass's (2002) previously stated assertion: the historical contexts and socio-cultural discourses in which mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning are embedded have a significant effect on what mathematics students learn. Weissglass illustrated his assertion through a diagram (see Figure 1). In his diagram, I argue that Weissglass appropriately positioned the Cohen and Ball (1999; also see National Research Council, 2001, p. 314) instructional triangle (see Figure 2) in its proper perspective.⁵ That is, for critical postmodern researchers who are focused on issues of equity and social justice within education, specifically in the mathematics classroom, the critiques of mathematics education become much broader than those that are found within the confines of the *students* ↔ *teachers* ↔ *material technologies* (e.g., mathematics curriculum) instructional triangle.

While agreeing with Weissglass's (2002) positioning of the instructional triangle, I do not mean to imply that I reject, nor do I suppose that Weissglass did either, the usefulness of Cohen and Ball's (1999) framework in understanding and implementing reform in instruction, specifically in mathematics instruction. Throughout the construction of their framework, Cohen and Ball consistently made reference to the environmental contexts in which the instructional triangle

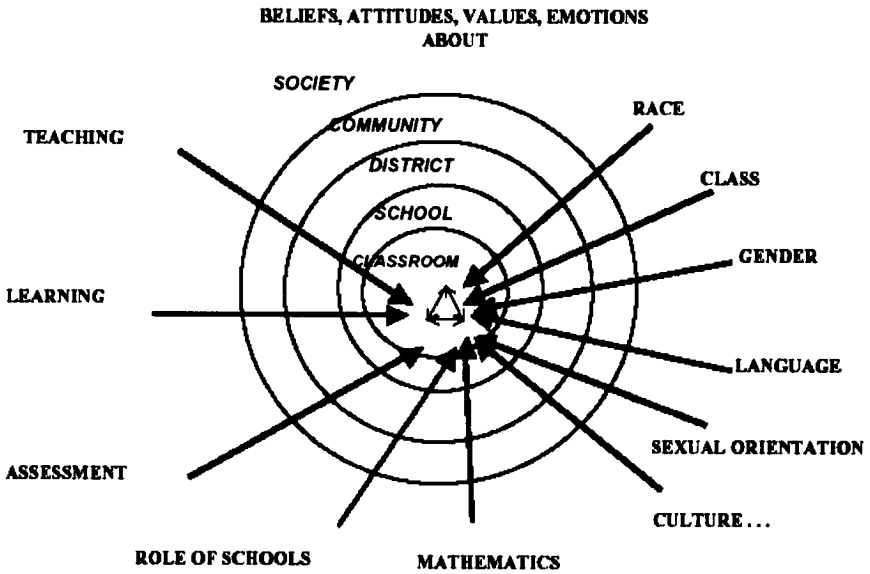


FIGURE 1. *The many factors that affect student learning (Weissglass, 2002, p. 35). From "Inequity in Mathematics Education: Questions for Educators," by J. Weissglass, 2002, The Mathematics Educator, 12(2), p. 35. Copyright 2002 by the Mathematics Education Student Association. Reprinted by permission.*

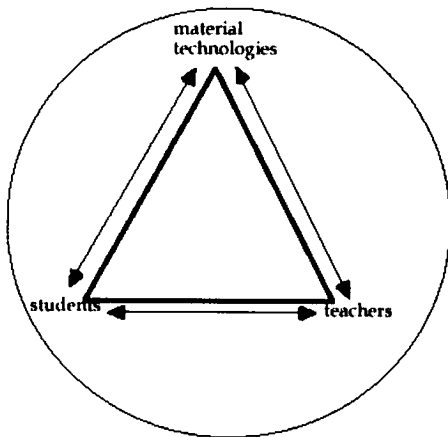


FIGURE 2. *Instructional triangle (Cohen & Ball, 1999, p. 3). From "Instruction, Capacity, and Improvement," by D. K. Cohen and D. L. Ball, 1999, CPRE Research Report No. RR-043, p. 3. Copyright 1999 by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education. Reprinted by permission.*

was embedded, which I inferred included historical and sociocultural contexts. In the conclusion of their report, they noted, "Our theoretical frame assumes that the environments of instruction are critical to intervention: to intervene in instruction is to somehow manage those environments" (p. 28).

I argue that to somehow manage those environments requires not only an examination of how the instructional triangle is constructed as a whole and embedded in an environment but also an examination of how each of the vertices (i.e., students, teachers, and mathematics), in turn, is constructed before it enters into the instructional triangle. Gates and Vistro-Yu (2003) claimed that:

Those involved in mathematics education (as teachers, researchers, curriculum developers, and so on) do need to look internally for many of the solutions to the problems of underachievement. However, while this is a necessary condition, it is by no means sufficient. We also need to adopt a degree of social consciousness and responsibility in seeing the wider social and political picture. (p. 63)

Such an adoption of social consciousness and responsibility greatly broadens the dimensions of the examination, delving deeper into how the social, political, cultural, and economic discourses of society in general affect the construction of students, teachers, and mathematics. Because my study reflected the social turn in mathematics education research, the literature reported in this article (and my study) discusses theoretical perspectives borrowed from anthropology, social psychology, and sociology as I attempted to delve deeper into understanding my African American male participants' schooling experiences and their achievement in school mathematics.

Framing the Review

On July 30, 1619, in the Jamestown church, Virginia colonists marked the future of a new republic as community delegates met as the House of Burgesses to consider the enactment of laws for the colony (Current, Williams, & Freidel, 1979). This event was followed by another event just days later that would have equally large ramifications for the future of the new republic: It was "about the latter end of August" when a Dutch ship brought in "20 and odd Negroes" (Rolfe as cited in Current et al., 1979, p. 27). It is argued that these Black persons were brought into Jamestown not as slaves but as indentured servants who were to be held for a term of years and then freed, similar to the White servants with whom the landowning colonists were already familiar (Current et al., 1979). Nevertheless, no matter what the conditions or the intentions of how these 20 and odd Blacks found themselves at the harbor of Jamestown, "a start had been made toward the enslavement of Africans within what was to be the American republic" (Current et al., 1979, p. 27).

Even though this Dutch ship made dock on the shores of Virginia nearly 400 years ago, the repercussions of the ship's "cargo" to the development of the American republic still loudly reverberate today, both positively and negatively. Marable (1994) noted, "Recent historical research indicates, the development of what was to become the United States was accomplished largely, if not primarily, by African slaves, men and women alike" (p. 70). The contributions of Africans to the early development of the new American republic are numerous, ranging from being the first to cultivate wheat on the continent to serving as troops in the earliest "Indian"

battles and the American Revolution (1994). Gates and West (2000) in the introduction to their book *The African-American Century: How Black Americans Have Shaped Our Country* wrote, "The African-American Century sits at the center of the American Century just as black culture constitutes an essential element of American culture" (p. xiii). Nevertheless, despite that Africans and the African slavery experience were woven into the fabric that constituted the new American republic and that Africans moved from American slaves to African American U.S. citizens, making significant contributions to the development of the nation along the way, the negative consequences of slavery, segregation, racism, and discrimination (i.e., White supremacy) have continued to inflict: "a variety of harsh injustices on African-Americans in the United States, especially on males" (Majors & Billson, 1993, p. 1).

The consequences of the harsh injustices of racism and discrimination inflicted, specifically on African American males, are highlighted in countless U.S. government and private-consortium research reports and scholarly and popular press books and articles and are often even the topic of discussion on mass media television and radio talk shows. In effect, in the United States, it is virtually impossible for one to escape hearing about the "plight" of the African American male, a plight that includes unemployment; underemployment; education deficits; higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse; higher rates of a variety of health problems, such as heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes; delinquency; crime; imprisonment; and so forth (Majors & Gordon, 1994a). The overabundance of sources that recount, often superficially, the plight of African American males coincides with their frequent portrayal in the popular media and the characterization by the public in general as "punks, troublemakers, dope addicts, gang-bangers, lazy, and hostile" (Majors & Gordon, 1994a, p. xi).

Recently, however, there has been a slight shift in how the popular media and the public in general characterize African American males; in that, stories that illustrate the complexities of their lives and the multiple roles they play, historically and currently, in the United States have been made available. Accompanying this slight shift is a growing body of scholarly literature that examines not only the consequences of slavery, segregation, racism, and discrimination but also how most African American males (and females) manage the consequences of such injustices, with many achieving success in school and society despite these injustices (e.g., see Bowen & Bok, 1998; Cose, 2002; Fordham, 1996; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Majors & Billson, 1993; Majors & Gordon, 1994b; Perry, Steel, & Hilliard, 2003; Polite & Davis, 1999a; Taylor-Griffin, 2000).

Organizing the Review

This review is inclusive of the growing body of literature of achievement, as well as including the "traditional" literature regarding African Americans. It is organized around three broad categories: (1) literature that examines the consequences of racism and discrimination, often placing blame on the "culture" and "genetics" of African Americans; (2) literature that examines the coping strategies against racism and discrimination employed by African Americans, strategies in which it is claimed that African Americans reject the dominant culture or their own culture; and (3) literature that examines the achievement of African Americans despite racism and discrimination. For the purpose of this article, I have narrowed the categories by roughly

identifying three discourse clusters surrounding discussions regarding the schooling experiences of African American students that correlate with these three broad categories: the discourse of deficiency, the discourse of rejection, and the discourse of achievement, respectively. In the following discussion, I describe and critique each discourse cluster, specifically relating each cluster to the schooling experiences of African American male students. Included in the critique is an examination of how the discourse affects communities, schools, teachers, and African American students' (mathematics) achievement.

The reader should take note that the theories reviewed under the headings *Discourse of Deficiency* and *Discourse of Rejection* correspond directly to literature in which the participants of my study were requested to read, reflect on, and respond to (a methodological procedure described in chapter 4 of my dissertation, see Stinson, 2004); therefore, the literature reviewed under these headings is limited. In making decisions about which theoretical perspectives to have my participants read, I attempted to expose them to literature that discussed the theoretical perspectives that, I believe, were prominent within the education discourses during their high school years, the mid- to late-1990s. (I was a mathematics teacher in their high school during the 1995–1996 through 1999–2000 academic years.) Engaging the participants in reading the literature regarding the schooling experiences of African American students, specifically African American male students, provided the participants and me with a common vocabulary for our conversations throughout the study. The purpose of the engagement, however, was not for the participants to confirm or disconfirm the applicability or usefulness of the various theoretical perspectives presented in the literature but to express their (and their friends') schooling and experiences in light of the theoretical perspectives presented. Moreover, engaging the participants in the literature assisted in researcher reciprocity (Lather, 1986), bringing the participants into the study to transform them from passive research participants into active coresearchers—a most important transformation required when conducting action research (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998).

Discourse of Deficiency

The discourse of deficiency focuses on the perceived deficient cultural, schooling, and life experiences in general, of Black children. School administrators and teachers who participate in this discourse often claim that the “lower” academic achievement of many Black students exists because Black children experience higher rates of poverty, living in high-crime communities, unstable single parenting, and minimal parental involvement, as well as suffering from the negative effects of slavery, segregation, racism, and discrimination.⁶ Other scholarship asserts that Black students' lower academic achievement is natural and genetically inscribed (e.g., see Herrnstein & Murray, 1994).

The specific theories that I located in the discourse of deficiency are (a) the cultural deprivation theory, (b) the culture conflict theory, (c) the institutional deficiency theory, (d) the educational equality theory, and (e) the heredity theory. Ogbu (1978a) provided a historical summary and critique of these theoretical perspectives as he attempted to explain Black students' lower academic achievement, specifically the Black–White achievement gap (see also Ogbu, 2003, for a similar critique). But before I provide Ogbu's summary and critique of these theoretical perspectives, a caveat is necessary.

In his summary and critique, Ogbu (1978a) dismissed most of the deficient theoretical perspectives as not fully explaining the Black–White achievement gap and, similarly, the core curriculum and multicultural education perspectives discussed later in this article (see Ogbu, 1992). As he did so, the reader should be mindful that Ogbu was laying the groundwork for his *cultural-ecological theory* reviewed in the *Discourse of Rejection* section of this article (J. E. Morris, personal communication, May 28, 2004). For a different viewpoint on how many of the deficiency theories Ogbu critiqued and dismissed operate in the current schooling experiences of African American students, I encourage the reader to see Darling-Hammond's (2005) book chapter "New standards and old inequalities: School reform and the education of African American students," or Irvine's (1991) book *Black Students and School Failure*, or Kozol's (1992) book *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*; or for yet another viewpoint, see Delpit's (1995) book *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. I limited my review of literature under the heading *Discourse of Deficiency* to Ogbu's summary and critique for a pragmatic reason: Chapter 2, "Black–White differences in school performance: A critique of current explanations," in his book *Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (1978b) provided an accessible, comprehensive, yet condensed discussion of the deficiency theories for the participants of my study to read, reflect on, and respond to; a methodological procedure compatible with action research, as noted.

The cultural deprivation theory claims that Black children perform less well academically than White children because they are "culturally deprived," coming to school: "from home and neighborhood environments that do not provide them with adequately organized stimulation for normal development" (Ogbu, 1978a, p. 44). Ogbu dismissed the cultural deprivation theory, noting that it fails to explain why some students who are not culturally deprived do poorly in school or why some students who are culturally deprived do well in school. He also noted that the measurements of school achievement used within the theory are based on White, middle-class, cultural values, arguing, "By these standards most of the world is culturally deprived, and in need of enrichment programs" (Spradley as cited in Ogbu, 1978a, p. 46). Most importantly, he dismissed the cultural deprivation theory because it, "embodies the assumption that children who are failing in school are to be blamed for their failure, not the school or society" (p. 46).

The culture conflict theory has two variants that explain why Black children perform less well academically than White children. One variant emphasizes the failure of the Black community to equip Black children with the White, middle-class skills necessary for school success, and the other variant emphasizes the failure of the schools to fully use the unique experiences of Black children. Ogbu (1978a) claimed that the culture conflict theory is inadequate in explaining the differential in achievement between Black and White students because it fails: "to explain why the conflict should exist at all" (p. 48). Furthermore, he argued, "The existence of cultural differences does not automatically lead to conflict or to school failure" (p. 48).

The institutional deficiency theory claims that Black children perform less well academically than White children because the institution of school is organized to favor: "middle class and upper class, non-minority children and to suppress the aspirations of children from disadvantaged groups" (U.S. Senate, Select Committee 1972, as cited in Ogbu, 1978a, p. 48). Ogbu dismissed the institutional defi-

ciency theory, claiming that it fails to acknowledge schools as “agents of a caste society” (p. 51).

The educational equality theory claims that Black children perform less well academically than White children because the Black children’s schooling opportunities and experiences are not equal, regardless of the fact that “equal educational opportunity has been one of the main tenets of public school education” (Ogbu, 1978a, p. 49). Ogbu dismissed this theory, noting that it fails to examine the cumulative effects of historically unequal education opportunity or the effect of historically unequal access to jobs on education achievement.

Finally, the heredity theory claims that the achievement gap between Black and White students exists because Black students: “have inferior genetic endowments for certain kinds of intellectual skills” (Ogbu, 1978a, p. 55).⁷ Ogbu completely dismissed the heredity theory, citing numerous methodological and data distortions in the theory.

Summary of the Discourse of Deficiency

In all of the theories located in the discourse of deficiency, African American children, specifically African American male students, are often characterized as incapable of measuring up to schools’ predetermined goals and objectives and lacking the behavioral and social skills and life experiences to be academically successful. Ogbu (1978a) specifically implicated the cultural deprivation theory as erroneously labeling many aspects of African American children’s experiences as “pathological” (p. 46). The labels *at risk learner* and *special needs learner*, which have developed out of the discourse of deficiency, are terms that permeate discussions within this discourse about Black children, specifically about Black boys and Black male adolescents. Davis (2001) argued that society perpetuates this discourse because Black male images are: “negatively constructed and perceived in the media and in everyday life . . . portray[ing] the young Black male as violent, disrespectful, unintelligent, hyper-sexualized, and threatening” (p. 171).

Community and school efforts to improve Black students’ educational outcomes, specifically Black male students, located in the discourse of deficiency are intervention strategies—strategies that are designed to “fix” the deficiency (Ogbu, 1978a). Examples of such interventions include “at risk” curricula, pullout programs, and (dominant) culture development programs. Although these strategies are intended to improve student performance, they most often essentialize⁸ the experiences of Black male students and thus have minimal positive effect. In fact, such programs can contribute to the continued marginalization of Black male students (Duncan, 2002). The labels *at risk learner* and *special needs learner* have been used to justify tracking many African American male students, placing them in disproportionate numbers into lower track and special-education classes (Harry & Anderson, 1999; Oakes, Ormseth, Bell, & Camp, 1990). This discourse also negatively affects the effectiveness and behavioral expectations of individual teachers in the mathematics classroom (Cousins-Cooper, 2000). Irvine (1991), through a synthesis of several empirical studies on teacher expectations and student race, concluded, “Teachers, particularly white teachers, have more negative expectations for black students than for white students . . . [regarding] such variables as personality traits and characteristics, ability, language, behavior, and potential” (pp. 56–57).⁹

The pedagogy derived from the discourse of deficiency is an antiintellectual “pedagogy of poverty” (Haberman, 1991, p. 290). Haberman described the pedagogy of poverty as routine teaching acts of giving information, asking questions, giving directions, making assignments, monitoring seatwork, reviewing assignments, giving tests, reviewing tests, assigning homework, reviewing homework, settling disputes, punishing noncompliance, marking papers, and giving grades (p. 291). He identified four syllogisms that undergird the pedagogy of poverty:

1. Teaching is what teachers do. Learning is what students do. Therefore, students and teachers are engaged in different activities.
2. Teachers are in charge and responsible. Students still need to develop appropriate behavior. Therefore, when students follow teachers’ directions, appropriate behavior is being taught and learned.
3. Students represent a range of individual differences. Many students have handicapping conditions and lead debilitating home lives. Therefore, ranking of some sort is inevitable; some students will end up at the bottom of the class, whereas others will finish at the top.
4. Basic skills are a prerequisite for learning and living. Students are not necessarily interested in basic skills. Therefore, directive pedagogy must be used to ensure that youngsters are compelled to learn their basic skills. (p. 291)

In the context of mathematics education, Strutchens (2000) noted that the directive, controlling, and debilitating pedagogy (i.e., pedagogy of poverty) typically faced by African American students sharply contrasts with the types of teaching advocated by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) (1989, 1991, 2000). Moses (2001) characterized this type of antiintellectual mathematics pedagogy as one that provided poor students and students of color with a “sharecropper” education.

Cose (2002) provided an example of the effects of the discourse of deficiency on Black males by presenting the results of a 1998 Gallup poll, which inquired into why Black male students perform less well on standardized tests than most White students. The poll results reported that 19% of the Black respondents and 9% of the White respondents believed that “African American males are born with less ability” (p. 84). African American male students become actively engaged in this discourse as they react to low teacher expectations and reject the labels *at risk learner* and *special needs learner*. The negative consequences of this reaction and rejection is evident by a 1992 analysis of New Orleans Public Schools: “African American males accounted for 58% of the nonpromotions, 65% of the suspensions, 80% of the expulsions, and 45% of the dropouts, while accounting for only 43% of the school population” (Garibaldi as cited in Polite, 1999, p. 104). This analysis provides one example of possible detrimental results of the discourse of deficiency on African American male students.

On the whole, located in the discourse of deficiency are theories that support, in varying degrees, a perspective of deficiency in African American students. This perceived deficiency takes on many forms: cultural, educational, or even genetic. The perceived deficiency can lead school administrators and teachers to hold lower achievement and behavioral expectations for African American students, specifically for African American male students. In a large part, the discourse of deficiency gave birth to the concepts *at risk learner* and *at risk programs*; both concepts most

often essentialize African American children's school experiences. Statistically, the devastating consequences of the discourse of deficiency on African American male students can be seen through the insignificant percentages of African American male students included in school honors and advance placement courses (especially in mathematics) compared to the rather significant percentages of African American male students included in school nonpromotions, suspensions, expulsions, and dropouts. Even though the discourse of deficiency may not be discussed as openly within the hallways of the academy and public schools as it was during earlier decades through the 1980s, its damaging effects still linger, as evidenced by the reporting of statistical data:

Nationally, barely a quarter of the 1.9 million black men between 18 and 24—prime college-going years—were in college in 2000, according to the American Council on Education's most recent report on minorities in higher education. By comparison, 35 percent of black women in the same age group and 36 percent of all 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in higher education. (Arenson, 2003, ¶ 7).

Discourse of Rejection

The discourse of rejection broadly focuses on the systematic rejection¹⁰ of school and academics by African American students, specifically by African American male students, or on the systematic rejection of cultural-specific "Black behaviors" by African American students, again, specifically by African American male students. Both forms of rejection are argued to be coping strategies employed by African Americans in managing the negative effects of racism and discrimination. In the following discussion, I review five prevailing theories found in the literature that I locate in the discourse of rejection—three theories that explore the rejection of schooling and academics: Majors and Billson's cool pose theory (Majors & Billson, 1993; Majors, Tyler, Peden, & Hall, 1994), Steele's stereotype threat theory (Steele, 1997, 1999, 2003), and Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory (Ogbu, 1978b, 1992, 2003)—and two theories that explore the rejection of Black behaviors: Fordham's raceless persona theory (Fordham, 1988, 1996) and Fordham and Ogbu's burden of "acting White" theory (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Cool Pose Theory

Majors and Billson's (1993) cool pose theory suggests that some Black males develop ritualized forms of masculinity that allow them to cope and survive in an oppressive and a racist environment.¹¹ They claimed, "Being male and black has meant being psychologically castrated—rendered impotent in the economic, political, and social arenas that whites have historically dominated" (p. 1). Cool pose, then, is a coping mechanism that is materialized in ritualized forms of masculinity, which "entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control" (p. 4). These ritualized forms of masculinity physically manifest themselves through culturally specific demeanors, gestures, stances, walks, handshakes, and so on, and through culturally-specific clothing, hair, and other "fashion" styles.

Majors et al. (1994), drawing from the work of Goffman, stated that symbolically cool pose suggests, "Meaning is not inherent in social interaction but rather,

meaning must be 'negotiated' by individuals in a given situation" (p. 248). This negotiation process brings about Black males' adherence to particular roles, ideas, values, or norms that are often in opposition to, or reject, the dominant culture (and school culture¹²). These oppositional behaviors work "to keep whites off balanced and puzzled about the black man's true feelings" (Majors & Billson, 1993, p. 9). Majors and Billson's claimed:

When white people observe black males displaying cool pose, being aloof and seemingly fearless, they may see them as mysterious and imperturbable. But then they may also see them as irresponsible, shiftless, and unmotivated. What the black male regards as cool, the white person may define as an attitude problem. (p. 53)

Majors et al. (1994) identified cool pose norms as ranging from behaviors that enhance self-esteem among Black males, such as stylish dress, athletic feats, and unique handshakes, to compulsive masculinity behaviors that can lead to health problems and violence, such as toughness, sexual promiscuity, manipulation, and thrill seeking. Majors et al. argued that these compulsive masculinity behaviors result in higher incidents of domestic abuse, gang activity, and violence in general within the African American community.

In the context of schools, Majors et al. (1994) noted that there is often a conflict between the cool-pose behaviors adopted by Black boys and Black male adolescents and their White teachers:

Quite simply, white middle-class teachers and school authorities often perceive provocative walking styles, "rapping," use of slang, expressive hairstyles, excessive use of jewelry, wearing hats (and wearing hats backwards), wearing the belt unbuckled, untied sneakers, and so on as arrogant, rude, defiant, aggressive, intimidating, threatening, and, in general, behaviors not conducive to learning (Foster, 1986) (p. 255).

Majors et al. claimed that because White teachers often misinterpret, overreact to, and become frightened by these Black male cultural-specific behaviors, Black male students are physically punished and suspended and recommended for remedial and special-education classes more often than any other identifiable group of students.

Majors et al. (1994), building from the work of Oliver, suggested an Afrocentric cultural ideology or worldview could assist African Americans, specifically African American male students, in mitigating the adverse effects of racism and discrimination more productively than adopting a cool pose stance. An Afrocentric cultural ideology is not anti-White, but it encourages African Americans to reclaim the traditional African values of oneness with nature, spirituality, and collectivism—juxtaposed against the Eurocentric values of controlling nature, materialism, and individualism (Majors & Billson, 1993). Various rites-of-passage programs facilitate the development of an Afrocentric worldview (Majors & Billson, 1993; Majors et al. 1994). These programs provide development and training for Black boys and Black male adolescents "in the importance of enacting appropriate roles for son, husband, and father; Black history and cultural enrichment; sex education; educational reinforcement; political awareness; community service; and life-skills management" (Majors et al., 1994, p. 257).

Stereotype Threat Theory

Steele's (1997, 1999, 2003) stereotype threat theory centers on how societal stereotypes about specific groups "can influence the intellectual functioning and identity development of individual group members" (1997, p. 613). For instance, stereotype threat is manifested in the lower-than-expected test scores of African Americans on standardized assessment tests or in the lack of enrollment of mathematically talented women in advanced mathematics courses. In effect, stereotype threat is a "social-psychological threat," a threat that occurs "when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies" (p. 614). This situation threatens one with being negatively stereotyped, with being treated stereotypically, or with the possibility of conforming to the stereotype. Understood in another way, stereotype threat is a "situational threat . . . that, in general can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists (e.g., skateboarders, older adults, White men, gang members)" (p. 614). Steele claimed that this threat affects (some) members of any group who have been atypically stereotyped, such as female students who are successful in advanced mathematics or African American students who are successful in school.

In the case of school-identified (i.e., successful) African American students, the theory begins with the assumption that to sustain school success, one must self-identify with school and school achievement, and to self-identify with school and school achievement one must believe that one belongs and is valued in the domain. Stereotype threat becomes self-threatening when a member of a group begins to strongly self-identify with a behavior that has been atypically stereotyped for that specific group, such as the case for school success for an African American. Consequently, one neutralizes the self-threatening effects of stereotype threat by "disidentification" (Steele, 1997, p. 614), which is a reconceptualization of one's self-identity to remove the atypically stereotyped behavior from one's basis of self-evaluation (1997). In other words, stereotype is no longer a threat for a school-identified African American if that school-identified African American removes, or rejects, school success from his or her self-identity. Simply stated, "Pain is lessened by ceasing to identify with the part of life in which the pain occurs" (1999, p. 46).

According to Steele (1997), stereotype threat has an abiding effect on school achievement, which explains three situations that empirical evidence has demonstrated are present in the experiences of school-disidentified students: "the resilience of self-esteem to stigmatization; the relationship between stigmatized status and school achievement; and, among ability-stigmatized people [e.g., African American students], the relationship between their school performance and self-esteem" (p. 622). First, drawing from the work of Crocker and Major, Steele claimed that if the student did not identify with the domain (e.g., school success) to start with, being negatively stigmatized in the domain will not affect the student's self-esteem. Second, through reporting the results of Ogbu's studies, Steele contended that many castelike minorities (e.g., African Americans) often find themselves relegated to a "lower" status in the structure of schools and in society in general; therefore, their intellectual abilities are stigmatized—"sowing the seeds . . . of their school disidentification" (p. 623). Finally, citing the work of Porter and Washington, Rosenberg, and Wylie, Steele claimed that disidentification toward school success explains why Black students who often performed less well than White students on

measures of academic achievement still report slightly higher levels of peer-group self-esteem than White students.

Steele (1997) provided some “wise”¹³ (p. 624) schooling policies and practices that are intended to reduce the negative effects of the stereotype threat theory. He provided three categories of strategies. The strategies for both school-identified and school-disidentified students included developing optimistic teacher–student relationships, teaching challenge over remediation, and stressing the expandability of intelligence. The strategies for school-identified students included affirming the belongingness, valuing multiple perspectives, and providing role models. The strategies for school-disidentified students included nonjudgmental responsiveness and building self-efficacy. Steele and his colleagues’ preliminary findings of enacting wise policies and practices demonstrated: “that wise practices can reduce Black students’ underachievement in a real-school context and, as important, that unwise practices seem to worsen it” (p. 627).

Cultural-Ecological Theory

Ogbu’s (1978b, 1992, 2003) cultural-ecological theory asserts that the American racially stratified caste system contributes to the academic underachievement of specific “racial” minorities in U.S. schools. Ogbu (1978a) argued that the deficiency theoretical perspectives of the 1960s and 1970s (identified earlier in this article) were inadequate in their attempts to explain and alleviate the underachievement experienced by some minorities. Similarly, Ogbu (1992) later argued that the core curriculum and multicultural education perspectives of the 1980s and 1990s (and 2000s) were also inadequate. He believed that the core curriculum perspective is inadequate because it fails to address the complex nature of minority cultural diversity, inside and outside the context of schools. The multicultural education perspective is inadequate because it fails to recognize minority students’ own responsibility for their academic achievement, to base multicultural education theories and programs on reliable cultural studies, and to separate minority groups that are able to successfully crossover cultural and language boundaries. In his last book, Ogbu (2003) dismissed culturally responsive (relevant) pedagogy as well, arguing: “Teaching every group according to its cultural pedagogic style is not feasible in contemporary American public school classrooms” (p. 272) (evidently, Ogbu had a limited understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy; see Ladson-Billings, 1994).

In response to these (argued) limiting theoretical perspectives, Ogbu (1978b, 1992, 2003) suggested his caste theoretical perspective, claiming that the “crucial issue in [understanding] cultural diversity and learning is the relationship between the minority cultures and the American mainstream culture” (1992, p. 5). In organizing the various minority relationships that exist in the American mainstream culture, that is, the American caste system, Ogbu classified racial minorities into three types: (1) autonomous minorities, people who are minorities primarily based on a numerical sense (e.g., Jews); (2) immigrant or voluntary minorities, people who move or immigrate to the United States voluntarily (e.g., Chinese); and (c) castelike or involuntary minorities, people who were brought to the United States against their will and who had been conquered or colonized (e.g., Black Americans, Native Americans, and Hawaiian Americans). The different types of minorities are characterized by cultural differences: *primary cultural differences* characterize the voluntary

minorities and *secondary cultural differences* characterize the involuntary minorities (autonomous minorities' cultural differences are not discussed in this review).

Primary cultural differences as they relate to schooling are identified as language and custom differences. Ogbu (1992) believed that schools' structures enable voluntary minorities to learn to overcome these cultural "barriers" and that voluntary minorities do not interpret such learning as threatening to their own culture but as "instrumental and as additive" (p. 9). Secondary cultural differences as they relate to schooling are similarly identified; that is, language and custom differences, but rather than the schools being facilitators in overcoming these barriers, they exacerbate the differences. Involuntary minorities perceive cultural differences as part of their collective identity, differences that have evolved over time as coping strategies to combat oppressive conditions. The differences, therefore, are not to be overcome but maintained.

Ogbu (1992) suggested that secondary cultural differences motivate "cultural inversion" (p. 8). *Cultural inversion* is the rejection of certain forms of behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings by involuntary minorities because they are characterized as White, resulting in involuntary minorities adopting cultural behaviors, events, and so forth that are often in opposition to the dominant culture (Ogbu, 1992). Ogbu believed that the school's role in intervention into the secondary cultural differences of involuntary minorities leads to performance rejection (i.e., underachievement) by these minorities. In effect, the involuntary minorities, such as African Americans, view school success as a White cultural norm and thus create the negative student label "acting White" (p. 10) when involuntary minorities demonstrate (school) success. Ogbu claimed that *acting White* presented a "dilemma for involuntary minority students," a dilemma in which

they have to choose between "acting White" (i.e., adopting "appropriate" attitudes and behaviors or school rules and standard practices that enhance academic success but are perceived and interpreted by the minorities as typical of White Americans and therefore negatively sanctioned by them) and "acting Black," "acting Indian," or "acting Chicano," and so on (i.e., adopting attitudes and behaviors that the minority students consider appropriate for their group but that are not necessarily conducive to school success) (p. 10).

In addition to the concepts of cultural inversion and acting White, Ogbu (1992, 2003) noted that involuntary minorities lacked instrumental factors that motivate voluntary minorities toward achievement, such as the belief of a "payoff later" for hard work resulting from the limited examples of hard work (including hard work in school) being paid-off within involuntary communities (e.g., professional limits and ceilings for involuntary minorities). This limiting payoff experienced by involuntary minorities is juxtaposed against voluntary minorities who compare their payoff for hard work in the United States with that of their peers' hard work back home.

To neutralize the negative effects of cultural inversion and acting White, Ogbu (1992) recommended that school administrators and teachers should (a) recognize that involuntary minority children come to school with cultural norms that are not only different from White norms but also might be oppositional, (b) study the histories and cultural adaptations of involuntary minorities, (c) provide special counseling and related programs to combat accusations of acting White, and (d) teach involuntary minorities accommodation without assimilation strategies.¹⁴ He further suggested that the involuntary, middle-class community take an active role in pro-

viding involuntary children with “concrete evidence” that “school success leads to social and economic success in later adult life” and to rethink its role in dealing with involuntary children, going “beyond programs, advocacy, and institutional representation to reaffiliate with . . . [involuntary children and youth] socially” (p. 13).

Raceless Persona Theory

Fordham’s (1988, 1996) raceless persona theory contends that African American students who achieve school and academic success are often conflicted, feeling the need to reject their racial and cultural identity in the process of achieving school and academic success. Fordham (1988) argued:

Despite the growing acceptance of ethnicity and strong ethnic identification in the larger American society, school officials appear to disapprove of a strong ethnic identity among Black adolescents, and these contradictory messages produce conflict and ambivalence in the adolescents, both toward developing strong racial and ethnic identities and toward performing well in school. (p. 55)

Fordham began setting forth her argument by borrowing the anthropological concept *fictive kinship*, defined as “a kinship-like connection between and among persons in a society, not related by blood or marriage, who have maintained essential reciprocal social or economic relationships” (p. 56). She suggested that fictive kinship within the African American community is a learned cultural symbol that denotes a Black collective identity, resulting in community terms such as “brother,” “sister,” and “blood.” Similar to Ogbu’s (1978b, 1992, 2003) notion of castelike involuntary minorities, Fordham claimed that members of the Black collective identity develop cultural norms that are often oppositional to the norms of White America. She suggested that resisting, or rejecting, school and academic success is often considered part of the Black collective identity because it is perceived to be in opposition to the White identity. Fordham noted that even though Black students who assimilate to the White school norms have a better chance of school and academic success, they either consciously or unconsciously distance themselves from the Black collective—developing a raceless persona.

Fordham (1988) found her raceless high-achieving African American female research participants to be unequivocally committed to the values and beliefs of the dominant culture, which included a belief in an egalitarian meritocracy. She claimed that the internalized values, beliefs, and ideals that are taught and learned in school became part of the female students’ behavior patterns within their family and community. A raceless persona distanced Fordham’s high-achieving female students from their less successful peers, enabling them to pursue goals and objectives that might be severely criticized by the Black collective. Fordham argued that assimilating to school norms and distancing themselves from the Black collective “appear to be mandated by the school—the price they pay if they desire to achieve vertical mobility” (p. 74).

Like her female research participants, Fordham (1988) found her raceless high-achieving African American male participants to be committed to the ideal of an egalitarian meritocracy. However, unlike the female students, the male students were “much more victimized in the school context by the ‘double consciousness’ ” (p. 74). Later, Fordham (1996) clarified the use of *double consciousness* by suggesting that

the dicta for successfully rearing African American male children are more complex and complicated than those suggested for rearing female children. She claimed that African American parents teach their male children "to embrace a twofold contradictory formula: to concurrently accept subordination and the attendant humiliation (for survival in the larger society) and preserve gender domination (for survival in the Black community)" (p. 148). In other words, Fordham believed that African American parents teach their male children to simultaneously hold conflicting socially defined race and gender roles. As a result of this twofold contradictory formula, Fordham's high-achieving male participants demonstrated greater tensions than her female participants between the norms of school and academic success and the Black collective. These intensified tensions did not prevent successful schooling outcomes for these male students, however.

Fordham (1988) claimed that a raceless persona results in internalized conflict and anxiety as Black students juggle their school and community personae, arguing that it is a "clear example of internalizing oppression" (p. 80). She argued that the decision of whether raceless persona is a "pragmatic strategy or Pyrrhic victory can and should be determined only by Black Americans" (p. 82). In other words, does a raceless persona provide Black students entry into a successful future or are the costs of distancing themselves from the Black collective too great for what might be gained in return? Only Black Americans should decide. Fordham concluded by charging Black Americans to "define explicitly their relationship to the larger society, and hence their expectations for their children in the school context" (p. 82).

Burden of Acting White Theory

Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) burden of acting White theory is a coupling and extension of Fordham's *fictive-kinship* concept and Ogbu's *acting White* concept. This theory attempts to explain how African American students who are high-achievers or perform satisfactorily, although well below their potential (i.e., under-achievers), in schools manage the burden of acting White. Fordham and Ogbu claimed that few Black students have learned coping strategies that assist in resolving the tensions between success in the White identity of schools and the fictive kinship of the Black collective. Their analysis of successful students who had learned coping strategies demonstrated that students camouflaged their success by being actively involved in athletics, "which are regarded as 'black activities'" (p. 202), or by becoming the class clown; whereas others acquired protection from the school "bullies" and "hoodlums" in exchange for assistance with schoolwork and homework. They concluded that the learning and performance problems of African American students stem not only "from a limited opportunity structure and black people's responses to it but also from the way black people attempt to cope with the burden of 'acting white'" (p. 201).

Within the burden of acting White theory, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) noted an additional burden present for successful male students—the burden of being taunted as "gay." They claimed that resisting, or rejecting, school and academic success is linked to Black male masculinity and sexuality; thus, adding an additional burden on Black boys and Black male adolescents in schools (see also Fordham, 1996).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) claimed that their analysis has implications at several levels regarding the schooling of Black children. First, they stated that their analysis demonstrates the need to change the existing opportunity structure, both in

school and in the labor force. Second, they believed that their analysis confirms the negative effects of the subtle barriers found within schools that must be eliminated. Finally, they stated that the additional burden of acting White experienced by academically successful Black students should become a target of educational policies and remediation efforts, noting that both school officials and members of the Black community have roles to play in this regard. School officials should make attempts to understand fictive kinships and develop programs that divorce school and academic success from the idea of acting White. Likewise, members of the Black community need to develop similar programs, as well as begin an internal examination of the Black community's perception and interpretation of school learning.

Summary of the Discourse of Rejection

In the five presented theoretical perspectives, located in the discourse of rejection, Black students, specifically Black boys and Black male adolescents, with varying degrees, are perceived to reject either schooling and academics or the Black collective identity. When Black male students reject schooling and academics, community and school efforts to improve their educational outcomes are similarly identified as they were in the discourse of deficiency—as intervention strategies. The intervention strategies in this discourse, however, have as their primary goal the nurturing and development of Black boys and Black male adolescents—rather than “fixing” them. These strategies include after-school manhood development programs, as well as mentoring and rites-of-passage programs found in the larger community (Alford, McKenry, & Gavazzi, 2001; Harvey, 2001; Kunjufu, 1995; Majors, Wilkinson, & Gulam, 2001). Other strategies attempt to create inclusive education environments, such as African American immersion schools that work toward reducing the dominant Eurocentric perspective that prevails in U.S. schools (Pollard & Ajrotutu, 2001).

When young Black male students reject a Black collective identity, community and school efforts to improve their educational outcomes become focused on developing programs for Black students that teach the message that school and academic success are “not synonymous with one-way acculturation into a white cultural frame of reference or acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 203). These programs, however, need to be accompanied with a reexamination of the perceptions and interpretations of schools and school learning held by the Black community in general, given that it has been argued that the concept *acting White* originated in the larger Black community (Fordham, 1988, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu 1978b, 1992, 2003).

Despite that the intervention strategies, such as those mentioned in the first case of rejection (i.e., rejection of school and academics), have shown success, the danger of essentialism is still present (and may contribute to continued marginalization, as noted). Additionally, the availability of such intervention programs is limited, resulting in minimal effect on the total African American male student population.¹⁵ Moreover, unless the classroom teacher is actively involved in an intervention strategy, teacher achievement expectations and pedagogy in the discourse of rejection can maintain the pedagogy of poverty, if the lack of academic achievement from the student is perceived to be a student choice. Indeed, Haberman's (1991) syllogism number 1—teachers and students are engaged in different tasks—relieves the teacher of any responsibility for the rejection of school and academics by Black

male students, and syllogism number 3—an inevitable ranking—continues to facilitate the tracking of Black male students into lower level mathematics classes. In the second case of rejection (i.e., rejection of a Black collective identity), there is insufficient empirical evidence regarding education programs and changes in the Black community at large to make an educated assessment of community and school efforts.

Although it has been argued that theoretical perspectives located in the discourse of rejection, such as the cultural-ecological theory (Ogbu, 1978b, 1992, 2003), were developed to move education practice away from the discourse of deficiency, these perspectives provide no substantial plan for moving African American students away from acts of “rejection” or moving school structures toward acts of inclusion. Furthermore, even though the discourse of rejection might explain the schooling experiences of some African American students, the discourse regarding rejection in the first case continues to place the blame for the lower academic achievement of Black students on Black students rather than on the structure of U.S. schools and society.

Discourse of Achievement

The discourse of achievement focuses on the achievement in school and academics (and mathematics) by African American children, specifically African American male students. Polite and Davis (1999b) stated, “At the core of African American males’ experience in school and society is persistence and triumph—one that has been overshadowed by the literature and discourse that focus primarily on the social pathology of African American men” (pp. 2–3). The discourse of achievement has been the least researched and theorized discourse. Since the mid-1990s, however, there has been a sprinkling of research studies that have documented the voices of academically successful, historically marginalized students (e.g., see Bergin & Cooks, 2000, 2002; Hébert & Reis, 1999; O’Connor, 1997). Additional studies have specifically documented the voices of mathematically successful, historically marginalized students (e.g., see Berry, 2005; Martin, 2000; Moody 2000; Walker, 2006; see also Fullilove & Treisman, 1990, and Treisman, 1992, for an examination of undergraduate mathematics education and African American students). Although these studies did not exclusively focus on academically (and mathematically) successful African American male students, most had academically successful African American male students as research participants.

The studies reviewed within the category *Discourse of Achievement* were selected purposely; their conclusions were based, in part, on interviews with academically (and mathematically) *successful* historically marginalized students. Finding research value in the storytelling of participants is a tenet of critical race theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), one of the three theoretical approaches that framed my study. This review does not include the growing body of literature that examines the effects of culturally relevant mathematics pedagogy on the achievement of students (e.g., see Ladson-Billings, 1995; Matthews, 2003; Murrell, 1999; Tate, 1995; Wagner et al., 2000). Currently, this body of literature is void of studies that have documented the voices of successful students who have experienced culturally relevant mathematics pedagogy. Even so, much of the literature that is reviewed in this section questions theories and practices located within the discourses of deficiency and rejection.

Hébert and Reis (1999) analyzed a culturally diverse group of high-achieving and successful students from an urban high school who experienced circumstances in and out of school that have been hypothesized as inhibiting academic achievement. Their participants were successful despite the negative aspects of their urban environments. Hébert and Reis identified specific factors that enabled these urban youths to be successful: a belief in self, supportive family members and adults, an interactive network of high-achieving peers, extracurricular activities, challenging classes (such as honors classes), and personal characteristics, such as motivation and resilience. They argued that their study illustrated the resiliency of students and offered justification for why urban high schools should provide enrichment and extracurricular activities and advanced placement and honors courses.

O'Connor's (1997) low-income, high-achieving African American high school research participants also experienced circumstances in and out of school that have been hypothesized as inhibiting academic achievement. In addition to the factors identified by Hébert and Reis (1999) as promoting achievement, O'Connor documented that her high-achieving African American students had a positive racial identity and high awareness of race and socially structured racism. She claimed that even though these students understood the structural constraints of racism, they did not believe them to be "indomitable structures which could not be defied, negotiated, or in fact altered" (p. 623). O'Connor believed the perspectives of these students contradicted Ogbu's (1992, 2003) acting White theory. She wrote, "Though it is beyond the scope of this project to indicate whether these student were 'acting White' in the classroom . . . they certainly were not 'thinking White' " (p. 614). O'Connor found that her participants had a language for explaining the relationship between social structures and agency and a disposition toward collective struggle that "may have disposed them 'toward political action to transform society' (MacLeod, 1995, p. 257)" (p. 625).

Bergin and Cooks (2000) found a high level of competition for grades and recognition among students in a predominantly Black inner-city high school, and they noted that their research participants perceived academic competition as beneficial. Additionally, after an investigation of the concept *acting White* with average to high-achieving students of color, Bergin and Cooks (2002) concluded that they "did not hear a single comment from students admitting that they had altered their behavior, reduced their effort, or earned poor grades in order to avoid accusations of acting white" (p. 132). Bergin and Cooks believed that harassment about acting White was more likely to occur when students showed " 'proper speech,' or 'white dress,' or preference for other 'white' things" (p. 131), rather than from projecting school or academic success.

In the context of school mathematics, Martin's (2000) analysis of 35 high-achieving seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade African American mathematics students corroborated the findings of the previously presented studies. Like the participants from the other studies, Martin's participants experienced a multiplicity of obstacles in and out of school that are believed to prevent student success; however, they navigated their way through these obstacles, achieving academic and mathematics success. Martin's high-achieving students "consistently placed themselves in the 'good kids' group and did not care about negative labels that their peers tried to assign them" (p. 166). He claimed that these successful students had

incorporated a positive mathematics identity within their larger academic efforts for success.

Walker (2006) explored the role of peer influences on mathematically successful African American and Latino/a students. She linked the high school mathematics success of her 21 research participants with “a historical tradition of intellectual networks within their communities” (p. 43). Walker claimed that her mathematically successful research participants maintained fluid peer relationships with friends who shared their interests in mathematics or served as resources to assist in their study and understanding of mathematics. These fluid peer relationships were coupled with relationships with parents, extended family and community members, teachers, and school personnel who all held high academic and mathematics expectations for the students. This coupling provided the basis for the students’ intellectual community. Walker believed that without a deep understanding of successful students’ intellectual communities school personnel “may continue to undervalue the cultural contributions that students bring with them to school” (p. 68). She concluded, stating, “By continuing to explore African American and Latino/a academic success, we can build on historical—and indeed, current—traditions of community support and engagement for academic excellence in our quest to improve urban students’ mathematics achievement” (pp. 68–69).

Moody (2000) provided an in-depth analysis of two mathematically successful African American female students. Her analysis revealed that African American teachers serving as role models, caring educators (both Black and White), and parental support were key factors in the mathematics schooling experiences of her mathematically successful research participants. She believed that knowing more about different African American students’ success stories could assist the (mathematics) education community in improving “the mathematics education of African American students and help foster successful African American students” (p. 59).

Berry (2005), alternatively, provided an in-depth analysis of two mathematically successful African American male middle-school students. Berry’s “descriptive portraits” (p. 46) revealed five broad themes in his research participants’ schooling experiences: students were (1) exposed to preschool education materials and positive mathematics experiences in elementary school; (2) prepared by parents to understand and mitigate aggregated and individual discrimination; (3) supported by family (and extended family) members who adopted the roles of educator, protector, and advocator and made the expectations of school (and mathematics) success explicit; (4) involved in church, academic, and athletic extracurricular activities; and (5) engaged in positive self-definition and were motivated to succeed in mathematics and school. In summary, Berry suggested a critical need for education research “to focus on the success stories of those African American men and boys who are successful to identify the strengths, skills, and other significant factors it takes to foster success” (p. 61).

Summary of the Discourse of Achievement

The community and school efforts that explain the educational outcomes of Black male students located in the discourse of achievement are only speculative because of the limited amount of research within this discourse. What has been documented is that efforts such as mentoring programs, summer enrichment programs, and opportunities to enroll in advanced academic courses have positive

effects on success, as do student characteristics, such as motivation, resilience, ability to navigate, self-awareness, racial-identity, and agency. Social factors, such as supportive families, teachers, and community members, and an interactive high-achieving peer group have also been identified as having a positive effect on student success.

Some of the community and school efforts that have been documented as beneficial in research within the discourse of achievement can also be found in the discourse of rejection. These beneficial efforts include mentoring programs, for example. Furthermore, there is emerging research that is attempting to build new theoretical models to explain the achievement of Black students (e.g., Murrell, 2006, in press). Nevertheless, what remains unclear within this discourse is how parents, community members, and school personnel can facilitate the development of the student characteristics and social factors that have been documented as beneficial. In other words, in the specific context of the schooling of successful Black male students, we need to *know* and *understand* more about: How do successful Black male students become motivated? How do successful Black male students develop resiliency? How do successful Black male students learn to navigate (e.g., around or over aggregated and individual discrimination)? How do self-awareness and racial-identity influence successful Black male students? How do successful Black male students understand agency? How do families and communities influence successful Black male students? How do teachers influence successful Black male students? How do high-achieving peer groups influence successful Black male students?

Although determining plausible—and nonessentializing—answers to these questions would provide additional information to the education community regarding the education of African American male students, it still remains uncertain if these are even the right questions to ask. In effect, we do not even know what questions could or should be asked because of the limited amount of research that has focused on academically (and mathematically) successful African American male students.

Yet we do know, “students who reject academic achievement and students who embrace academic achievement exist side by side in schools throughout the United States” (Bergin & Cooks, 2002, p. 133). My experience as a high school mathematics teacher exposed me to young Black male (and female) students who performed not only just as well as White students on measures of academic achievement but also, in many cases, better than most Whites, or better yet, aimed toward academic and mathematics “levels of excellence” (Hilliard, 2003, p. 138). It is time education researchers begin to inquire about those African American male (and female) students who embrace academic achievement (and mathematics) to provide helpful suggestions to school administrators and teachers (and family and community members) regarding the education of African American children.

Conclusion

Education theories and classroom practices to combat the continuing problem of the academic achievement gap, specifically the mathematics achievement gap, between Black students and their White counterparts continue to elude educators. As mathematics education researchers attempt to develop theories and practices that assist in eradicating the gap, it would serve mathematics teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers well if we would heed Gates and Vistro-Yu’s (2003) advice and explore the wider social and political picture of mathematics teaching

and learning. Developing such a broad perspective in our research requires that we make the social turn in mathematics education research (Lerman, 2000).

As illustrated by the literature review provided in this article, mathematics education researchers, I believe, could learn much by borrowing theoretical perspectives from the disciplines of anthropology, social psychology, and sociology when examining the academic (and mathematics) achievement gap, particularly when examining the academic performance of African American male students. However, even as I presented various theoretical perspectives from these disciplines within the discourses of deficiency and rejection, I also argued for a new emphasis to be placed on the discourse of achievement. Through an emphasis on the discourse of achievement, it is my hope and belief that new and different education theories and classroom practices could be developed (and implemented) as mathematics educators began to look closer at how students who are constructed outside the “White male math myth” learn to successfully negotiate the schooling and societal discourses that surround mathematics teaching and learning. Applying what is learned from an examination of the negotiating practices of successful African American male students to the larger minority student population could make, as argued by Spencer, one of my mathematically successful African American research participants, “success stories [for historically marginalized students] more the norm as opposed to statistical outliers.”

Notes

¹See Hilliard (2003) for a critical discussion of how the “gap” is erroneously framed and how it might be reframed.

²The terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably throughout this article to describe an individual of African descent who claims the “cultural identity” of the United States. Throughout the article, when using the term *young man*, *male student*, *adolescent*, or *boy*, I am referring to male African Americans younger than 18 years of age. Furthermore, as I acknowledge the historical negative connotations of the term *boy* within the African American community, I strategically use the term occasionally to remind the reader that unjust schooling policies and teaching practices are inflicted on defenseless children.

³Throughout my 5 years as a high school mathematics teacher, I encountered many African American male and female students who excelled mathematically; however, my dissertation study focused on the mathematics achievement of African American male students only. While focusing on African American male students, Professor White cautioned me about an erroneous perception often employed within the African American community, a perception that suggests if the concerns of African American men are addressed, all of the concerns within the African American community are addressed (D. Y. White, personal communication, March 3, 2004). I, however, clearly understand the flaw in this train of thought, understanding that patriarchy runs amuck within the African American community just as briskly as it does within society in general. I acknowledge that many of the concerns of African American women are different from those of African American men. Understanding this clear and distinct difference is what led me to narrow my dissertation’s focus to African American male students. Nevertheless, what was learned from this narrow focus, I suppose, could be loosely applied to all students who are constructed outside the dominant culture.

⁴The intended meaning of the term *negotiate* is its more robust definition, defined as: to deal with some matter or affair that requires the ability for its successful handling

(i.e., to accommodate); to arrange for or bring about through conference, discussion, and compromise (i.e., to reconfigure); or to successfully travel along or over (i.e., to resist) (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1999).

⁵Weissglass (2002) never specifically identified the triangle he referenced in his essay as the Cohen and Ball (1999) instructional triangle, but he rather stated, "Many years ago I encountered a diagram . . . that may be familiar to you" (p. 34) and then proceeded to provide a diagram. I made the inference to Cohen and Ball.

⁶I do not intend to suggest that these characteristics are not significant problems that national statistics illustrate are often found in the experiences of African American children (e.g., see U.S. Department of Education, 2003), nor that these characteristics do not affect student achievement and attitudes. What I am suggesting, however, is that these overgeneralized characteristics permeate U.S. society, leading many school administrators and teachers to make unsubstantiated claims about African American children, resulting in unjust schooling experiences for these students.

⁷Sadly, the heredity theory experienced a revival in the mid 1990s with the publication of Herrnstein and Murray's 1994 book *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. The media frenzy that surrounded the release of their book, I believe, illustrates the permanency, either overtly or covertly, of the heredity theory within the minds and actions of many Americans.

⁸Leistyna, Woodrum, and Sherblom (1996) defined essentialism as ascribing

a fundamental nature or a biological determinism to humans (i.e., men are naturally aggressive and women are naturally nurturing) through attitudes about identity, experience, knowledge, and cognitive development. Within this monolithic and homogenizing view, categories such as race and gender become gross generalizations and single-cause explanations about individual character. (pp. 336–337)

⁹Irvine (1991) also provided a caveat to this conclusion: "These conclusions do not ignore the fact that some white teachers are excellent teachers of black children or that some black teachers are ineffective with black children, treating them with disdain and hostility" (p. 61).

¹⁰The term *rejection* is used here to differentiate it from the critical theory concept *resistance*. In this context, *rejection* is referring to an act of refusing or discarding, most often followed by negative consequences, whereas *resistance* is understood as a legitimate and often positive response to domination, assisting individuals or groups to resist the negative forces of oppression as part of a larger political struggle that works toward social justice (Leistyna et al., 1996).

¹¹In the preface of their book, Major and Billson (1993) explicitly stated:

We stress that cool pose—which certainly characterizes the style of *some* black males, some of the time—does not apply to all black males, all of the time. Cool pose is a strategy *available* for use in the black community but is only one of many coping strategies developed within the American context (p. xii).

I urge the reader to be mindful of this caveat as he or she reads all of the theories discussed in the various discourses outlined in this review.

¹²I acknowledge that schools are riddled with many student subculture groups (and individuals) that are often in opposition to or reject the dominant school culture, all purporting a unique "style" (Hebdige, 2001, p. 3). Hebdige defined *style in subculture* as: "transformations [that] go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization' . . . [providing] a speech which offends the 'silent majority,' which challenges the principle

of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus” (p. 18). I argue that the style of cool pose (Majors & Billson, 1993) is somewhat different from other subculture styles; given that, cool pose is claimed to have begun and evolved in direct response to the injustices of racism and discrimination inflicted—historically and currently—on Black boys and Black male adolescents within the structures of school and on Black males in U.S. society generally.

¹³Steele (1997), drawing from the work of Goffman, noted that the term *wise* was borrowed from gay men and lesbians of the 1950s who identified “heterosexuals who understood their full humanity despite the stigma attached to their sexual orientation” (p. 624) as wise. Likewise, Steele argued for wise schooling policies and practices, policies and practices that understand the full humanity of stereotyped-threatened students.

¹⁴Ogbu (1992) defined Gibson’s *accommodation without assimilation theory* as when a student adopts the approved cultural norms of the school while maintaining his or her own cultural norms when at home and in the community.

¹⁵There are several economic, political, and personnel obstacles in implementing rites-of-passage programs and African immersion schools (e.g., see Kunjufu, 1995; Pollard & Ajirrotutu, 2001).

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