

African American Male Academic Success

Lawrence L. Scott

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Acknowledgements

As babies try to walk, they will constantly fall. Nevertheless, there is something inside each baby that tells it that walking is not only possible but also normal. Everyday, babies see their parents and others walking. They also experience others encouraging them to walk towards them, increasing their motivation to walk because others have modeled it for them.—Pastor Keith Graham, Now Word Christian Church, San Antonio, TX.

When I began this project, I desired to discuss the plight of inner-city youth of both genders and various races in their pursuit of higher education. As I perused over the superfluity of data, I noticed that the African American male experience was unparalleled to their counterparts and that I may provide research that can foster solutions to the plight of African American males. As I may not be able to adequately thank everyone who has played a role in the development of this research, I certainly want to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for giving me the desire and the platform to make a difference in the lives of inner-city youth. Secondly, I would like to thank my wife Chiara and my children, Gabriella and Christian, who allowed me to pursue this research project. It was your inspiration that carried me through the tough times. I would also like to thank my dissertation chair and advisor, Dr. Absael Antelo, for his patience and believing in my vision for this research project. I know at times I may have doubted myself, but your support helped me through the process. Similarly, I would like to thank Dr. Jessica Kimmel for providing me the inspiration for this study. Dr. Kimmel, I would like to be an inspirational professor like you some day. I would also like to thank Dr. Dorothy Ettling for helping me understand the importance of qualitative discourse which is required by

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Lawrence Scott

Abstract

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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University of the Incarnate Word, 2011

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of 10 selected academically successful African American male leaders. In this study, “academic success” was defined as these African American men who attained a master’s or postgraduate degree such as a M.D., Ph.D., or J.D. Even though there is bountiful research on the deficiencies in the lives of African American males, it is still unclear what conditions lead African American men to higher educational attainment. The goal of this study was to also add to the deficient, ever-emerging body of research in the area of African American male educational attainment, while providing viable solutions that speak to the plights of African American males from all educational backgrounds and experiences. Using a basic interpretive qualitative inquiry format, the research questions focused on (a) how professional and familial social capital is related to academic success, (b) the participant’s perception of the role of resilience in the pursuit of academic attainment, and (c) how does self-efficacy influence academic success for these African American male participants?

This research analyzed recurring themes from these participants, who were solicited because they can provide expert testimony on how an African American male can achieve academically. The inquiry produced three recurring themes: *Self-Belief and Identity*, *Social Network and Support*, and *Faith, Spirituality, and Inspiration*. After a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the themes, the following categories emerged: *Resilience Over Faulty Mindsets; Competition; Above Mediocrity; Social Network and Support; Family; Positive Influences, Mentors, and Peers; Opportunities; Faith, Spirituality, and Inspiration; Faith in a Higher Power; and Historical Responsibility*. All the participants identified *Social Network and Support* as a major factor in their academic success. Most participants credited a parent, peer, mentor, or teacher as the most influential person that helped them throughout their educational pursuits.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Context of the Study

On January 20, 2009, Barack H. Obama was sworn in as the first African American President of the United States of America. He has served as a community organizer, attorney, law professor, U.S. Senator, and now he is the 44th President of the United States of America. He also had to endure hardships that are common to many African American young men such as father absenteeism, single-parent upbringing, and impoverishment. President Obama currently has a bachelor of arts from Columbia University and a Juris doctorate from Harvard Law School. According to his Democratic nomination acceptance speech, Obama acknowledged that it was his educational opportunities that ushered him through the hardships of a single-parent, welfare recipient upbringing, to eventually attending two Ivy League universities and ultimately to obtain the highest leadership position in the nation (Obama, 2009).

President Obama's resilience, success, and leadership represents everything that educational opportunities can provide young people of all races; however, his selection does not negate the fact that many inner-city students, particularly of African American and Hispanic origin, are being "left behind" in educational and economical attainment. Why are many African American men unable to attain similar academic success and become leaders within their families and respective communities? What factors influence African American men to achieve high levels of educational attainment? Is Obama simply an anomaly?

In 2000, 31% of African Americans ages 18–24 were enrolled in colleges and universities; nearly two thirds of these students were female (Smiley, 2006). According to

the analysis of Webster and Bishaw's (2005) using the 2004 U.S. Census Bureau's data, college graduates are poised to make \$22,000 more annually than their high school graduate counterparts. Students with graduate degrees can make \$45,000 more annually than their high school graduate counterparts. Almost 95% of people with college degrees have employer-provided health care benefits, as opposed to 77% of high school graduates or 67% of high school dropouts. According to this study of the 2004 U.S. Census Bureau's data report, the median African American annual household income was about \$30,134, while the Hispanic household income was about \$34,241, as opposed to their non-Hispanic White and Asian counterparts who averaged an annual income of about \$48,977 and \$57,518 respectively.

Webster and Bishaw's (2005) data report also illustrated African Americans and Hispanics led the nation's poverty rate of 24.7% and 21.9% respectively, as opposed to the 8.6% of non-Hispanic Whites and 9.8% of Asians. Asians had the highest proportion with a bachelor's degree or higher (49.4%), followed by non-Hispanic Whites (30.6%), African Americans (17.6%) and Hispanics (12.1%). These findings suggest that educational attainment can lead to more economic opportunities, prosperity, and security.

According to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2006), young African American men between the ages of 16–29 make up 14% of all men in this age group in the United States, but disproportionately represent 40% of the criminal justice system. According to the research of Harrison and Beck (2005), African American men of all ages are 5 times more likely than Whites and 3 times more likely than Hispanics to have been incarcerated. Another Kaiser Family Foundation study (2006) asserted that in 2003

the leading cause of death for African American men between the ages of 15–29 was homicide.

Further ramifications of dropout rates. Research from the Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) suggested that it is more cost-effective and comprehensively beneficial to help everyone, especially Hispanics and African Americans, graduate from high school. In the United States, the nation spends an average of \$9,644 a year to provide education for a student and about \$22,600 annually per inmate that is incarcerated. In 2004 alone, the United States spent almost \$50 billion in incarceration costs. This study also illustrated that about 75% of the U.S. state prison inmates, 59% of federal inmates, and 69% of jail inmates did not complete high school.

Although Black males have a high concentration of incarceration and recidivism, as graduation and matriculation in college increased, the incarceration and recidivism decreased. In 2000, only 5% of African American males who graduated from high school and matriculated into college were incarcerated (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). The Alliance for Excellent Education study also examined the positive correlation between a 5% increase in male graduation rates and the annual savings for the federal, state, and local governments. In Texas alone, with a 5% increase in male graduation rates, the annual economic benefit could be as much as \$691,356,750 (\$428,340,492 for annual crime-related savings and \$263,016,258 for earnings from high school graduates).

On a national level, there have been many causes for student high school dropout rates. According to Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006), of all the students who dropped out, 47% of the students quit school because they said school was not interesting, 70% mentioned that they were not motivated to work hard, 80% responded

that they did 1 hour or less homework a day, 32% had to get a job to make money for the family, 26% had to take care of a child, and 22% had to take care of a family member. Another study from Swanson (2006) indicated that over half of the student dropout population leave between ninth and 10th grade. Swanson also concluded that weak grades in core subjects, poor attendance, and little involvement in school are highest predictors of a student prospectively dropping out.

Some students who dropped out may have possessed the drive to succeed, but encountered considerable academic challenges. About 30% could not keep up with the school work, 43% missed too many days and could not catch up, 45% said they started high school ill-prepared by their elementary and middle schools, 32% had to repeat a grade, and 29% felt that they could not meet the requirements for graduation even if they exhausted all their educational efforts. This is consistent with other research studies that examined the dropout rates as well as the success rates of minority students (Fine & Weis, 2003; Flores-Gonzalez, 2005; Rothstien, 2004). Although this information is applicable to all races, African American males are disproportionately affected (Rothstien, 2004).

Culturally specific ramifications of dropout rates. According to the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center (EPE, 2006), there are a variety of methods that states use under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to calculate their graduation rates, making it difficult to use comparative or standardized data. Using the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) which divides three grade-to-grade promotions (from nine to 10, 10 to 11, and 11 to 12), the EPE Research Center reported that in 2003–2004 the United States mean graduation rate was 70%. Also noted was a graduation rate of 53% African

American students, and 58% Hispanic students. Mathews (2006) discussed differences in reporting dropouts and how this can impede the process of locating plausible solutions to the problem.

Notably, there are some characteristic differences between African American and Hispanic dropout experiences. The Child Trend Data Bank (2006) reported a dropout rate of 7% for Whites, 12% for Blacks, and 24% for Hispanics, while mentioning that there may be some inaccuracies based on ethnic characteristics. Many African Americans, particularly African American males, were not counted in the National Center for Educational Statistics reports because they were incarcerated. In addition, 22% of the national dropout populations are Hispanic immigrants who either intermittently attend school in the United States, struggle with a language acquisition barrier, or have foreign-born parents that speak a language other than English.

Statement of the Problem

There is an abundance of research that highlights the negative aspects of the African American community, especially when discussing the African American male lived experience (Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Jackson, 1994). Other research highlights the resilience factors present in the lives of successful African American men (Dimas, 2006; Noguera, 2008). With all things considered, there still appears to be an unclear understanding of what conditions allow African American men to succeed academically or what concrete steps lead African American men to higher educational attainment. The deficit perspective research of African American men tends to vacillate between (a) African American men are victims of inequities and infliction within the historical, societal, and institutionalized context of slavery and its contemporary

ramifications (Byrd, Jacobs, Hilton, Stern, & Manly, 2005; Dotson, Kitner-Triolo, Evans, & Zonderman, 2008); or (b) African American males are victors through resilience, fighting for social justice, the betterment of race relations, and the eradication of inequalities (Brown & Brown, 2003; Graham & Anderson, 2008; King & Furrow, 2004; Smiley, 2006).

Out of the many studies that delineate a clear understanding of how African American attain academic success, very few offer a comprehensive understanding of the role social capital (in the form of social networks and role modeling) plays in the success of African American male educational attainment (Adelman, 2005; Caughy, Nettles, O'Campo, & Lohrfink, 2006; Hemmings, 2007). Whether it is the aforementioned issues of father absenteeism, incarceration, high school and college dropouts, homicide within the community, poverty, or a sense of hopelessness, African American men have been disproportionately victims of social maladies. Thus, many African American men with graduate and advanced degrees have illustrated a level of resilience unparalleled to many of their White or even African American female counterparts in order to succeed. Presumably, the more successful African American male role models, the more young African American males can emulate their positive attributes and collectively combat anti-intellectualism and victimology that has permeated and plagued the community for generations. According to McWhorter (2001), many of the challenges for African American males are self-perpetuated by accepting a philosophy of victimhood, separatism, and anti-intellectualism. He also asserted that African Americans can battle the anti-intellectual sentiment through a realization that most are not below the poverty

threshold, and that there is a well-established middle class that happen to live in various parts of the city and not just the *ghettoes* as promulgated by the mass media.

Others have also examined the notion of victimhood, and the baneful and historical effects on the educational and economic progression of African American males (Cosby & Poussaint, 2007; Parker, 2003; Parker, 2006). Parker (2003) purported that the governmental programs of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS), Emergency Assistance to Needy Families with Children (EANF), Section 8 Housing, and Food Stamps, all contribute to the reliance of African American families on the government, while consequently precluding initiative, self-growth, and individual and collective industry. She asserted that empowerment is the remedy for poor African Americans and Hispanics who have maintained heavy reliance, and in some cases intergenerational reliance, on the governmental programs (Parker, 2006).

Historical context of the African American experience. Further research from Thernstrom and Thernstrom (1997) extended the discussion of victimhood to include a historical component, referencing the issue of slavery and how slavery has led to conditions such as institutional inequalities, father absenteeism, impoverishment, racial discrimination and self-segregation, development of an identity crisis, lack of education, and hopelessness of African American men, especially in the South where most Blacks live (Morris & Monroe, 2009). Thernstrom and Thernstrom (1997) concluded that even after the abolishment of slavery, most newly liberated Southern Blacks lacked formal education, and they were, therefore, marginalized, disenfranchised, and economically and

politically disempowered. This marginalization led to lower educational opportunities for generations of Southern Blacks.

Even though African Americans were emancipated and received their citizenship through the 13th and 14th amendments, respectively, there still existed some inequities in education (Frey & Wilson, 2009). The 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case attempted to mitigate the inequities by establishing the “Separate but Equal” clause which invariably denoted substandard arrangements (dilapidated and outdated books, lack of materials, low teacher pay, and crowded classrooms without air conditioning) for African American students (Conneely, 2008; Dorsey, 2008). The 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* also attempted to end educational inequalities by extirpating segregation and allowing African Americans to be educated at predominately White, well-funded schools. This law had limited effect because it took the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to enforce the measures of desegregation (Frey & Wilson, 2009).

Some researchers would suggest that this intergenerational inequity in education has become a factor in the lower literacy rates and performance on standardized tests for African Americans (Byrd et al., 2005; Dotson et al., 2008). DeCuir-Gunby (2009) hinted that the condition of slavery led to a lack of racial identity and community of educational accountability, particularly in the South.

Cosby and Poussaint (2007) also discussed the African American male condition in the context of slavery. They asserted that African Americans throughout history have rejected victimhood and have assumed the role of activists; and that it was activism of freed and enslaved men that led to vast opportunities for the African American male.

Cosby and Poussaint also mentioned that activism can positively combat the plague of hopelessness because the activists are not only helping themselves and their families, but also the collective community that breeds inspiration and influence within each family.

In reference to the collective community, there is a need to study the effectiveness of a strong or weak social network, the value of social capital, and the support system available on the educational outcome of African American males. This study attempted to understand the importance of family, friends, mentors, outside organizations (e.g., church, after-school programs, and extracurricular activities), motivation, and other factors that influence the maturation and development of the African American males who have attained a level of academic success. As expressed by Kunjufu (2004), even though 68% of African American children are in a single-parent home situation, it is incumbent on the individual as well as the community (i.e., family and other social systems) to emphasize the importance of academic success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of 10 selected academically successful African American males. The researcher examined the qualitative data relative to social capital, resilience, and self-efficacy and to what degree it was perceived to influence academic success. The inquiry examined (a) how professional and familial social capital is related to academic success, (b) the participant's perception of the role of resilience in the pursuit of academic attainment, and (c) how does self-efficacy influence academic success for these African American male participants?

Secondly, using expert testimony, the researcher hoped to contribute to the emerging body of research in the field of African American male academic success. In this study, “academic success” was defined as these African American men who attained a master’s or postgraduate degree such as a M.D., Ph.D., or J.D. This study particularly focused on those that were leaders within an organization such as a K–12 school, university, or church organization.

Research Questions

The researcher posed a primary question: What are the critical factors that influence academic success in the perception of African American males? To obtain information about some of the hardships faced, the secondary question was the following: What were some of the obstacles that African American men had to overcome to achieve academic success? Lastly, in an effort to obtain a comprehensive perspective from the participants, the researcher asked questions that elicited perceptions of the participants’ experiences with social capital, resilience, and self-efficacy.

Researcher’s Assumptions

One evident assumption was the fact that African American males who had attained a college level of education were influential leaders. It was also presumed that African American men who had achieved in the academic arena, while exhibiting resilience throughout their journey to succeed, would have a rich perspective on what factors contribute to the development of African American male academic success and leadership.

Furthermore, it was also presumed that there exists an interrelationship of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that facilitate African American male leadership. For example, it

was assumed that social networking and mentorship played a major, if not predominate, role in the development of African American male academic success. Lastly, it was assumed that African American males experienced significant hardship to reach high educational attainment and that other African American males could benefit from the narratives of these successful African American males.

Definitions of Terms

To clarify the central phenomenon of this study, the following definitions were used.

Academic success: those who have completed graduate or postgraduate work and have participated in the workforce within their related field for at least 1 year.

African American: a Black American of African descent (*Random House Dictionary*, n.d.).

Dropout: students who left school prior to graduation, or the completion of a formal high school educational program, and failed to return by mid-October of the following fiscal year.

Parental involvement: the parents' attendance to school-related functions, and in consistent collaboration and consultation with the school personnel (i.e., teachers, administration, coaches) for the academic advancement of their child.

Resilience: the ability to recover from various obstacles and hardships.