



# **JV Educational: The Journal of Educational Research and Interdisciplinary Studies**



**Volume II, Issue I**

**Fall/Winter 2017**



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JV Journal of Educational Research & Interdisciplinary Studies (ISSN 2379-1470) is published four times throughout the year by JV Educational Consultants, LLC., 6689 Orchard Lake Road, Suite 154, West Bloomfield, Michigan 48322.

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# Achievement Gap: A Look Back and a Way Forward

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## Abstract

The achievement gap has been a pervasive issue in the U.S. education system. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2014), “achievement gaps occur when one group of students outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant (that is, larger than the margin of error)” (para 1). Achievement gaps can be seen in success indicators such as high school completion, standardized test scores, dropout rates, and proportion of students of color enrolled in college preparatory courses (Education Week, 2011).

## Introduction

The achievement gap was first highlighted in the Coleman report, better known as the report on Equality of Educational Opportunity (Coleman et al. 1966). The goal of the report was to understand if schools of lesser quality attended by African Americans contributed to the achievement gap. This research study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education and published in 1966 highlighted that differences in family background had a substantial association with achievement, as did the backgrounds of other students in the school; the latter was reason to advocate for desegregation in schools. LadsonBillings (2006) also summarized literature that

offered several explanations for the achievement gap. These explanations ranged from sociocultural factors such as school environment, family background, and teacher communication skills as noted in the Coleman Report; stereotype threat; cultural mismatch in education; curriculum and the school; and educator practices (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The achievement gap is usually discussed in reference to the performance of African American and Latino students lagging behind their White peers in academic success (Education Week, 2011). Currently, achievement gaps continue to exist particularly in the subjects of math and reading (NAEP, 2014). In 2013, Black students in eighth grade scored 30 points lower than their White peers in Mathematics (NAEP, n.d.a). Moreover, in the same grade and subject, White students scored higher than their Latino peers (NAEP, n.d.a). Additionally, reading scores for Black and Latino students lagged behind their White peers by 25 and 20 points respectively (NAEP, n.d.b).

It is evident that the achievement gap not only affects test scores, but can lead to disadvantages in college and career readiness and preparation. The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) found that 87% of White high school students graduated as compared to 75% of Latino students and only 71% of Black students. The authors contend that the achievement gap has been maintained through legal precedence, policy, and educator practices, and that a paradigm shift in these regards is needed to promote meaningful change.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the lens through which we view and discuss the achievement gap. CRT posits that race is a powerful construct of human social life. As such, CRT scholars view racism as a normal and natural part of American society; however, they resolve themselves to unmasking all forms of racism and oppression (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). This theoretical lens challenges the notion of whiteness as normal and calls for counter-narratives of the experiences of racial oppression of people of color (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These narratives with the CRT lens illustrate the limits of the current litigation and policies in fueling social change. In recognition of these limits, CRT scholars call for and are engaged in the active struggle towards social changes to address the racial realities of people of color.

CRT made its way into the field of education in 1994 as a means to analyze and critique educational research and practice (Ladson-Billings, 2005). The use of CRT in the field of education has helped scholars and practitioners understand how race and racism manifest in PK-12 schools at the micro and macro levels (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). At the micro level, for example, researchers have highlighted the individual experiences of racism and oppression that students of color face while navigating PK-12 schools (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). At the macro level, CRT scholars analyze the effects of larger policies and practices on students of color, which include school curriculum and instruction, assessment, school funding, and legislation (e.g. NCLB, IDEA, etc.; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). At each of these levels, scholars integrate the major tenets of CRT by focusing on the experiential knowledge of racism and challenge the dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy. CRT offers a lens to engage these issues and join in the active struggle against the persistence of racism in education.

A necessary part of this conversation is the consideration of the legal and historical context within which the achievement gap exists.

### **Legal History and Trends**

Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall, two Black men who were lawyers and leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense and Education Fund, spearheaded the challenge against racial segregation in U.S. public schools throughout the 1930s and 1940s. By 1950, most U.S. school systems were segregated either on de jure (i.e., legally) or de facto (i.e., custom) terms. To this end, the educational experiences of Black children were inferior to that of Whites, in part due to the scarcity of resources in Black schools that were provided in White school systems. The NAACP had prior experience challenging racial discrimination in the realm of education particularly at the graduate and professional ranks of institutions of higher education. This was seen specifically through four legal cases, which set the foundation for challenging the precedence set with the “separate but equal” ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896): 1) *Murray v. Maryland*; 2) *Missouri ex rel Gaines v. Canada*; 3) *Sweat v. Painter*; and 4) *McLaurin v. Oklahoma*. It was ruled in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case that racial segregation was constitutional in as long as there were equal public facilities across the country. In the *Murray v. Maryland* (1936) case, Donald Murray claimed he was denied admission from the University of Maryland School of Law because of his race. Arguments were put forth that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the area were not on par with the College Park school. The city court ultimately ruled in favor of Murray. After an appeal at the state level, the Maryland Court of Appeals also ruled on behalf of the plaintiff Murray who was later admitted and graduated from the university in 1938.

That same year, another case led by the NAACP was brought forth, *Missouri ex rel Gaines v. Canada* (1938), where the state of Missouri optioned to build an all-Black law school for Lloyd Gaines, a Black male graduate of Lincoln University (Mo.), who was denied entry to the University of Missouri Law School because of his race (Stout, 2009). During this time, the Chicago native completed a master’s degree in economics from the University of Michigan while the trial was completed. Through various appeals, the NAACP led his case before the Supreme Court who ruled in favor of Gaines on the grounds of the 14th Amendment and the clause for equal protection (Stout, 2009). Interestingly, in 1939 Gaines never entered the University of Missouri Law School, mysteriously disappearing with his family unaware of his whereabouts (Stout, 2009).

The third case, *Sweat v. Painter* (1950) involved Heman Sweat’s attempt to be admitted to the University of Texas’ law school for Whites, as the school established one for Blacks to prevent any racial amalgamation. The Supreme Court ruled the schools for Blacks, while separate from the White law school, was not equal. Thus, Sweat was to be admitted to the White law school (Carter, 2005).

The fourth case, *McLaurin v. Oklahoma* (1950), involved George McLaurin, a Black male, who was initially denied entry to a doctoral program at the University of Oklahoma. He sued the school for not complying with state law that stated that Blacks could be admitted, but needed to be provided with separate facilities. He was later admitted, and though he was in the same classroom as his White counterparts, had the same professors, and same textbooks, he was given an assigned

seat in classes, a designated table in the library, and special seating in the school's cafeteria. McLaurin petitioned at the U.S. District Court level to remove the experience of separate facilities so that he could interact more fully with other students. The NAACP argued the conditions in which McLaurin learned prevented him from obtaining an equal education (Carter, 2005). McLaurin's petition, though, was denied.

While challenging law and graduate schools for racial discrimination, the NAACP turned its attention to racial segregation at the primary and secondary school levels. In 1952, they led five cases from different jurisdictions across the U.S. contesting the "separate but equal" ruling from *Plessy v. Ferguson*, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, *Gebhart v. Ethel*, *Davis v. Board of Education of Prince Edward County*, *Boiling v. Sharpe*, and *Briggs v. Elliot*. While filed separately, the highest court in the U.S. merged the cases under *Brown v. Board of Education*. For more than fifty years, public schools across the U.S. had been racially segregated and provided with unequal resources and facilities. For example, White schools often had better facilities and infrastructure, while outdated textbooks were commonplace in Black schools. The NAACP argued in *Brown* that the current racial segregation in U.S. schools violated the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment of the Constitution.

At the level of the U.S. District Court, the three judges who heard the *Brown v. Board of Education* cases ruled in favor of the respective school boards, leading Marshall, the chief counsel, to appeal the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court. After two years, a final ruling was given on May 17, 1954. The Court ruled unanimously that state-sponsored segregation in the realm of public education was unconstitutional stating "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." Regardless of facilities and resources, this decision ruled racial segregation violated the 14th amendment and created negative effects for Black children, reversing the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. The Supreme Court later ruled in May 1955 the states were to end separate educational institutions (whether *de jure* or *de facto*) with "all deliberate speed."

While the ruling was deemed a victory, it took nearly a year before states developed plans to desegregate their schools. This impeded the expected progress the NAACP hoped for conceding the desegregation process (Ogletree, 2004). Whites were hostile to the presence of Blacks in their communities (Ogletree, 2004). Instead of the immediate integration of public primary, secondary, and collegiate schools, across the nation there were numerous school closings, a mass exodus of Whites from the city to the suburbs, and numerous demonstrations where Whites expressed their displeasure with integration (Ogletree, 2004). For example, Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas used the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the integration of Central High School in Little Rock in 1957. In 1958, lawmakers in Norfolk, Virginia closed schools in an effort to prevent the integration of the city's historically White schools (Bly, 1998). On June 6, 1966, James Meredith, a Black man from Mississippi, was shot during his one-man march against the color barrier at the University of Mississippi.

Thus, the Supreme Court's ruling did not provide immediate protection for equal educational opportunities. Rather, states procrastinated on matters pertaining to desegregation. This was evident in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), a case that ensured suburban districts that were predominantly White were not susceptible to forced integration if there was no evidence of prior racial segregation (Chapman, 2014; Reardon, Grewal, Kalogrides, & Greenberg, 2012; Wells,

Baldrige, Duran, Grzesikowski, Lofton, Roda, Warner & White, 2009). Such rulings only perpetuated the educational disparities Brown sought to alleviate. Despite the many advancements Black people have made since the 1954 ruling, there are still great disparities in American public schools.

### **Post-Brown Educational Policy and the Achievement Gap**

The Coleman report was one of the first to highlight the achievement gap. That report was dispersed nearly 12 years after the Brown v. Board decisions and discussed the negligible impact that racial integration, school facilities, and school curriculum including compensatory education had on improving achievement. This particular report challenged the previous actions the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESEA provided Title I funds to support compensatory programs to equalize educational opportunities for disadvantaged students, though it also helped to negate racial integration through federal funding opportunities which incentivized districts that maintained larger concentrations of poor, Black children.

A Nation at Risk was a report written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983 to provide both defined and provided solutions facing the American education system. The report called American education mediocre at best, stating that “educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them” (The National Commission for Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 3). In addition to international competition, the authors argued that individuals who did not possess a certain level of skills or education would be disenfranchised. In the report—the authors also identified specific problems facing schools, which included differing and somewhat minimal high school graduation requirements, significantly less time spent in math and science courses when compared to other industrialized nations, and teacher preparation curriculum focused more on educational methods instead of content (The National Commission for Excellence in Education, 1983).

The Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) was a revised version of America 2000, a plan that never received congressional support under former President George Bush, Sr. (Kessinger, 2011). Goals 2000 was an attempt to improve learning and teaching through a national framework for educational reform through “research, consensus building, and systemic changes needed to ensure equitable educational opportunities and high levels of educational achievement for all students” (1994). Eight goals were outlined in the Act, six of which are from the America 2000 plan (Kessinger, 2011). The goals (1994) included:

- (1) all children will start school ready to learn;
- (2) the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%;
- (3) all students will demonstrate competency in specific subjects in grades 4, 8, and 12;
- (4) the Nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century;
- (5) United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement;
- (6) every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship;
- (7) every

school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning; and (8) every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children (National Education Goals section, para. 1-8).

Just as Goals 2000 was passed, the ESEA was reauthorized as the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA, 1994). It encouraged comprehensive reform at the state and local levels in order to meet national goals. IASA required states to (a) establish common statewide standards for all students in reading and math in grades 3 and up; (b) implement statewide assessments aligned to the standards in at least 3 grades; and (c) implement a statewide accountability system for evaluating school-level performance. Under the provisions of IASA, states still were granted full autonomy to make instructional, governance, and fiscal policy decisions to support student achievement.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was the subsequent reauthorization of the ESEA, which extended the provisions under IASA. NCLB represented even greater federal power in educational reform by calling for specific educational goals for students as well as what will be done when goals are not achieved (Wong & Sunderman, 2007). NCLB mandated for greater accountability in that statewide accountability systems are based on rigorous state standards in reading and math. Students were to be tested annually in grades 3-8 to ensure that they reached proficiency standards, ultimately leading to all students being on grade level by 2014. To ensure that no group was "left behind," assessment results were required to be disaggregated by subgroups including poverty, race/ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency. Schools that failed to make adequately yearly progress (AYP) for three consecutive years were required to provide supplemental programs to students to improve student achievement. If schools failed to meet AYP for four consecutive years, restructuring measures were taken by an outside entity (NCLB, 2001). Moreover, NCLB mandated the hiring of "highly qualified" teachers, granting state and local agencies authority over failing schools. Additionally, teachers were charged to use best practices, meaning teaching strategies that were evidence based and aligned to national and state standards.

Despite extraordinary efforts, educational reform stemming from the national agenda has fallen short. Although A Nation at Risk set the scene for greater Federal authority in education reform, all subsequent education legislation has been met with great challenges. While the IASA provided a framework for educational reform and held schools receiving Title I funds to the same high expectations as other schools, states had full autonomy to make decisions on academic and performance standards. Holding schools and districts accountable to high-stakes mandates proved to be difficult (Wong & Sunderman, 2007). Thus, only a handful of states were granted fully approved standards and assessment systems under IASA (Wong & Sunderman, 2007).

As a response to the failure of IASA, NCLB provided stricter requirements for educational goals. However, these stricter mandates actually further marginalized the students that they were intended to serve. In looking at data from the National Assessment for Educational Progress, substantial gaps still exist for the nation's most vulnerable students, students in urban schools. For example, while the gap in 4th grade reading has narrowed, students who are eligible for free and reduced meals are still lagging behind students who are not eligible for free and reduced meals by 24 points

(NAEP, 2012a). This trend is also present when looking at race/ethnicity as Black and Latino children score 25 points lower than White children in reading (NAEP, 2012b).

Many of the same economic and social realities that existed sixty years ago are still present today. The legacy of disenfranchisement has unfortunately been passed down from previous generations for persons of color in the U.S. Research has demonstrated in some instances that economic barriers of a community has a greater association to test scores than does racial segregation as the academic achievement of Black and Latino children continues to be abysmal (Johnson, 2014). Many failing school systems are plagued by poverty, large student to teacher ratios, a lack of resources for their pupils, inexperienced staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors), and high teacher turnover rates. All of these issues coupled with racial segregation in residential communities across the nation present learning environments that prevent quality educational opportunities (Acevedo-Garcia, Rosenfield, McArdle, Osypuk, 2010).

As we look at historical and current trends, it is clear that the achievement gap has been a pervasive problem that has plagued the U.S. educational system. Recent Federal and state attention towards education through failed policy and initiatives begs the question of our commitment to the educational success of all children.

### **Policy Recommendations**

States and school districts should examine the allocation of funds to enhance resources at the early childhood and elementary grade levels. The achievement gap begins early and only widens with time; therefore, early intervention may hold promise for eliminating gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Reardon, 2013). All students should have equal access to resources including high-quality and credentialed teachers, engaging instruction and advanced curriculum, and school resources such as books, computers, and libraries (Reardon, 2013). The latest Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) report demonstrated that the U.S. allocates significantly less funding and resources for the most needy students compared to other developed nations (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Without a focus on changing systemic issues such as school funding inequities, poverty, the lack of universal early childhood programs, healthcare, social services, and before and after school care options, the achievement gap will continue to persist (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Reform is necessary outside of the classroom to address the challenging issues many students of color encounter that create obstacles to their academic success (Verstegen, 2015).

### **Practice Recommendations**

It is essential for educators to conduct a needs assessment of their school environment to determine the best approach to bridging the achievement gap. Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2011) found that attendance and student engagement were significant factors to consider in addressing the achievement gap at a particular school. The researchers found that low-achieving students were frequently absent and disengaged from the school environment. Therefore, a school-wide plan was developed specifically targeting attendance and instructional practices to increase classroom engagement. After three years of implementation, student attendance rates increased from 90.3% to 95.6% and gains in standardized test scores that exceeded state averages were noted.

Common trends in urban schools, where we most often observe an achievement gap, are teachers that lack the training to be effective with the students they serve (Darling-Hammond, 2011). Therefore, increased professional development and consultation opportunities amongst educators could help to support the delivery of culturally competent practices (Brown, Benkovitz, Mutillo, & Urban, 2011). Such practices would ensure that all students have a strong sense of self and are reinforced by the school culture for their individual identities and lived experiences. This can begin with individual and systemic services that reinforce what Holcomb-McCoy (2007) calls critical consciousness, which consists of group identification (i.e., focusing on the shared experience of a racial group); group consciousness (i.e., talks about power dynamics of different racial groups in society); and self- and collective efficacy (i.e., discusses role of each student in the social process and how they can promote change).

A large part of this endeavor must be advocacy. Educators must be aware of many of the underlying factors that contribute to the achievement gap. In this way, they are positioned to address issues such as stereotype threat as a barrier to academic achievement. Educators can unknowingly perpetuate these stereotypes if they are not made aware of them. Stereotype threat is the internalization of a negative stereotype about one's group and therefore being at a higher risk for confirming it (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Standardized tests can act either as road-blocks or doorways to higher academic achievement. They are often used by schools as a way of measuring intelligence and are then used to place students in more or less rigorous classes in Kindergarten through 12th grade. While stereotype threat can have deleterious effects, Ellis and colleagues (2015) found that African American students with strong racial centrality have higher academic self-efficacy, where racial centrality means cultivating a racial ideology in which identifying as African American is important to one's self-concept. Students with high racial centrality were able to negate the effects of stereotype threat and be academically successful. Educators can work together to create an environment that maximizes the positive effects of critical and group consciousness.

To foster this positive racial identity building in students of color, individual and small group counseling experiences could also be appropriate. Small groups of individuals with shared experiences create interpersonal bonds and support systems for students at school. Using a strengths based model, Tucker and colleagues (2010) found that interpersonal mattering is a good indicator of student success for African Americans specifically. Feeling like they mattered at school not only affected their desire to be academically successful, it also helped mitigate external stressors outside of school.

### **Recommendations for Research**

More research is needed around educator practices that may contribute to the achievement gap. For example, researchers should examine practices around cultural responsiveness in meeting the needs of students, especially those from at-risk populations (i.e., African American, Latina/o, low-income). Qualitative studies with African American, Latino/a, and low-income students to identify best practices of learning and mastery content for college readiness would also be appropriate. Further research should examine how policies and school environment affect students who are scoring lower on state exams and/or not completing high school requirement for college preparation. To this end, more interdisciplinary research is necessary; for example, research

integrating CRT scholarship and legal studies would add value to the current knowledge base. This approach adds an eclectic richness to research regarding the achievement gap (Dixon & Rousseau, 2005). Lastly, given that a major tenet of CRT focused on the active struggle toward eliminating racial oppression, more educational research is needed that captures this. For example, action research regarding efforts at the micro (e.g. school level) and macro (e.g. district & state level) should be documented and shared.

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# Addressing Cultural Barriers to Weight Loss for Overweight African-American Women

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## Abstract

African-American women are quickly becoming the most overweight group of women in the United States, placing them at risk for a host of health problems. There is no shortage of weight loss programs or diet information that may serve beneficial to African-American women. However, before any such program can be effective, any barriers must be addressed or removed. Certain cultural norms impact the way African-American women prepare their food, feel about exercise, view their bodies, and subsequently, lose weight. The critical first step, of understanding what cultural barriers exist that hinder the weight loss efforts of African-American women, must be taken to ensure successful intervention for this population.

## Introduction

Without a doubt, overweight and obesity is a growing public health concern in the United States (U.S.). The culture in America is a large contributing factor. There is a plethora of fast food restaurants and packaged, ready-to-eat food options at our disposal. As obesity rates continue to rise for all Americans, it is rising quickest among African-American women. According to the Office of Women's Health (2010), four out of five or 80% of African-American women are overweight or obese.

Being overweight or obese places individuals at risk for high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, and Type 2 Diabetes. Minority groups are disproportionately affected by these chronic health conditions (Green and Reinckens, 2013). There are a host of community-based, health promotion programs targeting weight loss and encouraging physical activity. Those resources are available in popular, structured support groups like Weight Watchers that meet in person, or online; on the internet; or even in the palm of one's hand. Technology has made it possible to track physical

activity and caloric intake through the use of cellular phone applications. Despite the abundance of readily available help, African-American women struggle to achieve and maintain a healthy body mass index (BMI).

It is likely that cultural barriers are to blame for the disproportionate prevalence of overweight and obesity among African-American women. African-American women have different thoughts about size and beauty. A typical meal consists of fatty foods and the challenges of hair care can keep an African-American woman from exercising. Interventions that are culturally sensitive may be what this population needs to be successful at achieving a healthier weight and improved state of wellness overall. Discovering and understanding the reasons why some African-American women consume unhealthy foods or get less than the recommended amount of daily exercise will lead to better interventions for this group.

### **Literature Review**

**Search Criteria.** The search for literature to identify the cultural barriers to weight loss that African-American women face began with the use of the CINHALL and MEDLINE databases. Keywords included in this search were obesity, weight loss, African-American women, cultural, attitudes, physical activity, body image, barriers and ‘2002 to present.’ The search yielded 128 results. Selections were made if studies included African-American women and made no large comparisons to other racial or ethnic groups. Additionally, studies were selected if they focused on diet, body image, and physical activity and were excluded if they compared African-American women to other races or included men. Ultimately, seven studies from peer-reviewed journals were selected for this literature review.

All of the articles in this review were qualitative research studies. Three studies examined African-American women’s perceptions of body image, two focused on dietary practices, and two explored ideas and attitudes about physical activity. Studies were evaluated for their strengths and weaknesses, and additional studies were appraised for strength and quality of the research design using the Johns Hopkins Nursing Evidence-Based Practice Model.

### **Body Image**

“Is Big Really Beautiful? Understanding Body Image Perceptions of African-American Females,” a study conducted by Sanderson, Lupinski, and Moch (2013) examined 383 African-American women attending a Historically Black College & University (HBCU) and 268 attending a Predominately White College (PWC). Participants were surveyed regarding their thoughts on body image, body shape, and appearance. Researchers predicted that women at the HBCU would have a greater level of body satisfaction. Results showed women at the HBCU were statistically more satisfied with their weight than the women at the PWC; women at the PWC placed greater emphasis on being slim and valued exercise more; and that both groups of women were likely to reject the standards of beauty and thinness defined by society. Based on this study, it is evident that culture and environment plays a role in level of body dissatisfaction and that women are likely to assimilate to the majority found in their surroundings.

Boyington et al. (2008) recruited 12 African-American overweight teens from a hospital-based pediatric diabetes screening and prevention program. Group interviews aimed to explore the girls' attitudes about weight, diet, and physical activity. Beliefs were influenced by environmental and personal factors such as social circles that determined acceptable body image; food choices, determined by taste and appearance; time constraints not allowing for physical activity; affordability of recreation to partake in activities; and time related to maintenance of hair and nails.

Another study, by Lynch, Chang, Ford, and Ibrahim (2007) considered 41 obese African-American women that were recruited with help from a community organization. Participants were audio recorded during focus group sessions and the recordings were evaluated for themes related to weight loss obstacles. Using a coding system to identify the themes, the following were classified as barriers to weight loss: lack of time and access to resources, lack of willpower, and acceptance of higher body weight.

In the last study reviewed that considered body image as a barrier to weight loss, by James, Pobe, Oxidine, Brown, and Joshi (2012), the health belief model was used to develop culturally appropriate weight management material for African-American women. In this study, focus groups were conducted with 50 women. The perceptions regarding body image were similar to findings by Cox et al. (2010). African-American women did not like the term obesity and found it offensive. Some women held extreme ideas of what it meant to be obese such as being 600 pounds or not being able to shower or tie shoes. Instead, women preferred terms such as thick and curvy.

Although two of the three studies mentioned above explored many barriers to weight loss, one consistent finding among them was that body image was a barrier to weight loss efforts. Information obtained from the interviews and focus groups illustrated that African-American women have a positive body image and an acceptance of their higher body weight. Moreover, African-American women have a slightly distorted view of perceived body image versus actual BMI and do not perceive themselves as overweight, as do Caucasian women (Cox, Zunker, Wingo, Thomas, and Ard, 2010).

## **Diet**

A recent study performed by Lynch, Holmes, Keim, & Koneman, (2012) selected 28 African-American mothers to judge the healthfulness of specific foods. Women were recruited through non-probability sampling if they were 18 and had at least one child. Most participants were single, unemployed, had education at the high school level or less, and were overweight or obese, according to their BMI. Thirty pairs of 39 familiar foods were shown during the interviews with each woman. They were asked to identify the healthier food in the pair and to explain why. Audio-recordings of the interviews were compared to identify common themes for what made a food healthy. Interviewers found that participants judged a food's health by what nutrients it contained or by what effects it could have on one's health. For example, foods that contained starch were considered unhealthy and caused weight gain. Pork was considered unhealthy because it caused swelling in the body and headaches. This study brought to light considerable knowledge gaps among the participants related to nutrition and its effects on health.

Findings from the study by Mastin, Campo and Askelson (2012), indicated that the majority of women opted not to select healthy foods [in restaurants] because they did not taste good and the portions were smaller. They also expressed wanting more food for their money and that this was not possible with the healthier option. When asked to provide example of what healthy foods were, it was discovered that knowledge deficits about healthy foods existed. For example, one participant selected Chinese buffet as a healthy meal and was unaware of the sodium content or what truly constituted one serving. Lastly, women associated illness with heredity and not with diet or lifestyle.

### **Physical Activity**

Forty-six low-income African-American overweight and obese women in Flint, Michigan participated in a study by Mastin, Campo and Askelson (2012). Women provided researchers details about their health status and were interviewed for their individual thoughts on the barriers affecting weight loss. Social cognitive theory framed the design of the interview. In addition to current health status, health history, and diet and exercise behaviors, participants were interviewed on knowledge, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goal setting, planning, support systems, media influence, and perceived obstacles to weight loss. In reference to only physical activity, participants reported having little willpower and motivation and were unable to adhere to exercise plans. Little or no support systems were also a barrier to exercise and women expressed not having someone to exercise with or to encourage them to continue. Additionally, the women did not set goals or plan for weight loss; relied on TV and radio for information; and reported financial challenges making it difficult to support a healthy diet. The barriers identified were more individual-based than environmental; however, neighborhood safety still represented a valid barrier to physical activity in this group, as women did not feel safe enough to exercise outdoors.

In another study conducted by Im et al. (2011), researchers viewed the attitudes 21 African-American women had towards physical activity. An online forum lasting six months posted numerous topics for participants to make comments about. Four common themes were later identified and included; culturally acceptable body images, having missed the opportunity to learn [to exercise], regarding physical activity as a luxury, and participants wanting to exercise by themselves. Participants reported that it was culturally acceptable to have a larger, heavier bodies and did not need to spend time on losing weight; that they never learned to partake in physical activity due to race, poverty and lack of access to facilities; their fear of water kept them from learning to swim; physical activity was a luxury and that exercising brought on guilt for not being productive; they preferred to exercise alone, if at all, because of bad experiences of being teased as a child; and lastly, because they did not want to ruin their hairstyles as a result of working out and sweating.

Although these studies presented different barriers for physical activity, collectively they identified various reasons that keep African-American women from engaging in exercise. These reasons ranged from environmental to individual-based. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 40% of African-American women are not meeting the physical activity recommendations, thus representing a major problem for this population.

## **Implications for Practice**

The review of current literature confirms that there are many barriers to weight loss for African-American women, many of which are culturally specific. In recent years, more awareness has been raised about how beliefs, values, religion, culture and other socioeconomic factors influence health behaviors (Green and Reinckens, 2013). The Joint Commission (TJC) established a set of cultural competence standards for all accredited institutions in 2012 (Green and Reinckens, 2013). According to The Joint Commission (2010), cultural competence is one of several components of safe, quality care. Cultural competence is defined as a set of skills, behaviors, and attitudes embedded in a system or among providers and professionals that provide appropriate awareness and sensitivity to varying cultures (Green and Reinckens, 2013). To ensure the best outcomes, it is imperative that nurses in both the community setting and in the hospital understand the obstacles African-American women face when trying to lose weight.

This literature review has uncovered evidence that can be used to change practice. Weight loss programs for African-American women must be appropriately tailored to meet the needs of this population to help ensure weight reduction occurs. Although, this literature review identified three major themes hindering weight loss in African-American women; diet, body image, and exercise, one common theme existed in all studies. Researchers recommended incorporating the historical, social, and behavioral norms of the target culture into the given intervention's design.

### **The Role of the Clinical Nurse Leader (CNL)**

A major function of a CNL is to evaluate evidence and implement evidence-based practice to improve outcomes at the microsystem level (AACN, 2004). CNLs also use quality improvement strategies to make changes that benefit the health of specific populations. CNLs could take the evidence presented in this review and implement the recommendations made by the researchers. Because the CNL's role is also that of an educator, the CNL can educate nurses and other members of the health care team on the unique cultural characteristics of a given population. IN regards to weight loss programs for African-American women, the CNL can implement changes to programs to ensure the barriers that make it difficult for African-American women to lose weight are addressed and worked through. In this instance the CNL would be using evidence to improve the health outcomes for African-American women. Lastly, the CNL can work collaboratively with other professionals to accomplish their mission. A CNL could incorporate dietitians, behavioral therapists, and kinesiologists, for example, into a weight loss program's design to assist with improving outcomes and promoting better health.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, evidence supports the need for cultural sensitivity and competence as it relates to weigh loss and African-American women. Through culture sensitivity, effective programs can be designed to address the cultural barriers this population faces. If those barriers are addressed and dealt with appropriately, health care professionals can help African-American women achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Evidence has shown that health disparities exist for African-Americans. However, future research should include comparing African-American men to Caucasian men and others to determine if there are disproportionate levels of obesity between the groups. If so, what similar contributing factors do they share with African-American women. Additionally, people of other minority races, cultures, and ethnicities such as Native Americans, and Hispanics should be studied to determine reasons for the prevalence of obesity in those groups.

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# THE QUEST: The Educational Transformation

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With the demand to increase more college graduates in America, there is an impetus for social academic change to occur in higher education. College administrators must examine their institutional learning goals in order to ensure that degree completion is the documented outcome. Today—students learn differently, and they desire to be engaged greatly within the teaching and learning process. Both faculty and administrators must learn how to connect and engage [all] students within the teaching and learning process.

## “QUEST: The Model for a New Education”

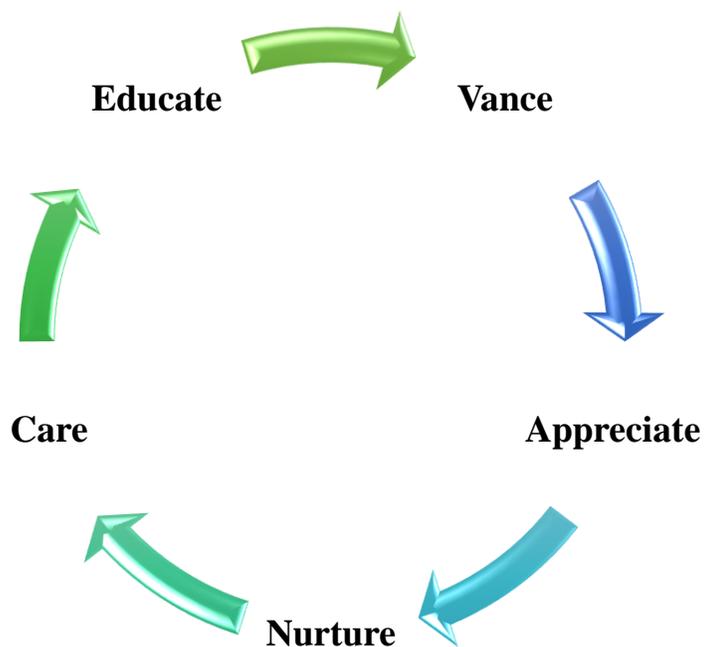
At the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, African American male students tend to have the lowest graduation rates in America (*The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2011). Currently, the average time it takes for a student to complete the two year degree (Associate) based on full- time enrollment is approximately 3.8 years (Complete College American, n.d.). However, the time is much longer for the African American male to complete his degree. Often—it is believed that the governing reason is that they are underprepared academically, as well as, lack the motivation to excel. With that being said, it is clear that a large number of higher educational institutions worked to create a learning culture where they are excluded from advancing at the academy, but remained present in the lower paradigm of Developmental Education within the areas of English, Math, and Reading.

After carefully examining this social academic ill, I became frustrated and determined to change the framework of the old teaching and learning culture in higher education. Far too long, many administrators and instructors believed that teaching was just the mere process of sharing

information without engagement. If the outcome goal is to educate and then graduate, then instructors must incorporate active engagement in the classroom. African American male students must feel welcomed and part of their learning experience—if it is to be meaningful. Harper and Quaye (2009) posited that “weak institutions are those that expect students to engage themselves. . . . A clear signal of institutional deficiency is when there are few ramifications for those who either blatantly refuse or unintentionally neglect to enact the practices known to produce rich outcomes for students” (p. 6). Students deserve more, and educational leaders must realize that students need to be directed and mentored within the learning process.

While working to change the platform of teaching and learning, I found that it was important to mentor and re-educate the instructor to become the instructor of learning first, and then the instructor to the student holistically. The instructional development training was based solely on the Vance Theory Concept: Value, Appreciate, Nurture, Care, and Educate (Vance, 2005).

*Figure 1: The Vance Theory Concept*



The Vance Theory Concept (2005) served as the passport to introduce administrators and instructors to the ideology of accepting the Value of the student’s culture within the learning environment as an intricate part of learning engagement. African American male students are directly connected to their culture, and their culture is the first foundational course that is taught in their first school—which is home. Seemingly—when both administrators and instructors display a vested interest in the culture of the African American male students, they tend to participate more in the learning process because they (African American male students feel connected and included).

After a year of intense training with instructors and re-educating educational administrators in the learning areas of Course Learning Design, Developmental Education, and Teaching and Learning at Baltimore City Community College, I was able to implement the first stage of my seven tier program design for African American male students—titled The QUEST (Vance, 2005). The QUEST Learning Cohort Program is an intense accelerated academic program designed to recruit, retain, and graduate African American males in one year from a community college. The program design focuses specifically on creating a learning environment which will foster, motivate, and stimulate academic growth for African American men, who are traditionally under-prepared for the rigors of higher education. In addition, the program model prepares African American men for the Associate's Degree in one of four programs: Allied Human Services, Business, Criminal Justice, and General Studies which are all structured to serve as the passport for transferring to the four-year institution.

Further, the QUEST Program is uniquely prescribed by offering custom tailored classes designed to provide students with a well-rounded educational experience rooted in education educational excellence second to none. Next, instructors are selected based upon their instructional skills, teaching pedagogy, teaching ideology, and demonstrated passion for working with African American male students after completing a semester of intense teaching and learning training, incorporating technology team teaching, and completing the Writing Training of the Vance-Brooks Model (2006).

Today, it is noted that the QUEST Program made ground breaking history of being the first and the only program at a community college to graduate five consecutive classes of African American male scholars to earn the Associate Degree in one year from 2009—2017 with a 100% retention rate while operating on a zero dollar budget. Although the QUEST Program operated on a zero dollar budget, the program generated over \$15.5 million in full-time equivalent (FTE) revenue. The QUEST Program is a successful model for time to degree completion for the nontraditional African American male student.

In addition, there are more than 200 students who earned degrees and certificates via the navigation of the QUEST Program, as well as, continued their studies earning both the bachelor and master degrees from Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Predominately White Institutions. More so, there have been more than 700 reverse transfer students who were able to matriculate within their respective academic programs by participating in the QUEST Program. The success of the program is credited to the designed and the continuous professional development training both for administrators and instructors by employing refined, cutting-edge, researched practices in student engagement, teaching and learning, and the collaborative team teaching instructional cohort practice.

Based upon the QUEST Program model design and its success, there are a number of community colleges and universities who are actively developing, revising, and re-structuring their educational program offerings to ensure that African American male students will be successful at their institutions. Still, with the various concerns regarding education and degree completion for African American males, it is imperative that more changes be made immediately at all higher educational

institutions. African American males have been overlooked in the classroom as bright promising leaders, but they are readily seen as the educational research targets, classified as non-academic achievers.

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