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Understanding High School Black Male Students' Achievement and School Experience

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Nguyen's study employs an interesting mixed-methods approach to teacher research. By mining the district database for information about the success rates of high school-age Black males, Nguyen uncovers intriguing quantitative patterns in the area of minority student achievement that demand her attention. Utilizing a qualitative interview protocol with a sample of young Black men whose standardized test scores indicate a potential for academic success, Nguyen examines the differences in educational experiences that cause some of these students to be labeled "high achievers" while others struggle in school. Through her research, Nguyen is able to delineate ways in which schools and individual teachers can become more deliberate in their attempts to connect with their Black male students.

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in minority student achievement stems from my own experience of growing up as a Vietnamese American student in the American public education system. My experience involved effectively existing within two very different cultures. At home, I was expected to behave under one set of expectations while at school I was expected to function under a completely different set of rules. My complex home and school experience led me to conduct this action research project.

I am currently considering the principalship for a career path through my administrative intern position in the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD). I have spent the last 3 years as a middle school counselor in the MMSD. My work both as a counselor and as an administrative intern has led me to the difficult conclusion that minority (especially Hispanic and Black) students are underachieving compared to their majority classmates. More specifically, Black students are the lowest-achieving subgroup in the MMSD. Data show that Black students as a subgroup have the lowest percentage of students scoring proficient or higher on the Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test (WRCT), complete algebra at the lowest rate, and have the poorest attendance rate. It should be noted that Black students' performance in reading and math has slightly increased over the last three years; however, the overall data continue to have alarming implications.

My action research project is connected with my pursuit of a leadership position in the field of education. My desire to enter into a leadership role stems from my obligation and responsibility to provide all students with equal education opportunity. The Madison Metropolitan School District currently has three priorities:

1. All students will complete third grade able to read at grade level or higher;
2. All students will complete algebra by the end of ninth grade and geometry by the end of tenth grade; and
3. All students will attend at a 94 percent attendance rate.

My hope is that my action research project will provide some valuable insights into Black male students' school experience that will, in turn, allow me to provide some suggestions to teachers for improving Black male students' achievement.

My action research question is: **What are the factors that support Black male students' achievement in MMSD?**

RESEARCH METHODS

Methods

The methods I used to conduct my action research study were reviewing the current data and interviewing high school students. I took a number of steps in order to review the existing data on Black male students. First, I requested general data, including grade point average (GPA), Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE) scores, special education status, and free and reduced-price lunch status for all Black high school students in MMSD from the Research and Evaluation Department. I discovered from the data that Black female students were succeeding at a higher ratio than Black male students, based on the above criteria. I then narrowed my research to studying Black male students. Second, I looked specifically at Black male students' data including: enrollment, free and reduced-price lunch status, special education status, and WKCE test scores. I looked for trends, as well as anomalies, within these different data categories. The trends I discovered provided a foundation and starting point for my research.

The second part of my action research project involved interviewing Black male high school students. My initial intention was to interview regular education, high-poverty, high-performing Black male students about factors that supported their academic success. After reviewing the data and speaking with several administrators, however, I realized that a substantial number of Black males showed proficiency on the WKCE but were underachieving according to their GPAs. As a result I decided that it would be valuable to interview both high-achieving and underachieving Black male students, all of whom were proficient on the state standardized tests. My target group became regular education, high-poverty, proficient Black male students, including five high achievers and six underachievers. (See the tables in the Interview Data and Analysis section.) I then requested and received permission from parents and guardians to interview 11 Black male high school students from the three primary high schools. My interviews were conducted on school grounds and lasted between 45 minutes and an hour apiece. I individually interviewed tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade students about their school experiences. (See the Appendix for a sample interview questionnaire.) The students' stories were extremely rich in depth and powerful in insight.

Limitations

I believe the findings of my study are quite relevant and powerful. However, as with all studies, there are limitations to my research. The three limitations of my study are:

1. Narrow study—the data I have are specifically on Black male high school students. This is not a comparison study; it is a single study of Black male students in one school district.
2. One-time study—my study looks at one group of students at one point in time and is not longitudinal.
3. Small sample of interviewees—although the data portion represents all high school, Black male students, the total number of interviewees is relatively small. Interviewees represent three of the four high schools in MMSD.

These limitations present possibilities for expanding my study in the future. I do believe, however, that the data and interview results I have are useful to educators.

DATA

MMSD Data

The first part of my research consisted of reviewing the current data on all Black male high school students in MMSD. I looked at a variety of data, including general enrollment, lunch status, special education enrollment, tenth-grade Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS) data, and GPA data.

First, I reviewed the general enrollment data. The following table breaks down the current high school Black male enrollment in MMSD by grade level:

Trend Data Enrollment	
<i>Grade Level</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>
9	210
10	188
11	119
12	94
Total	611

The data indicate that MMSD currently has 611 Black male students at the high school level. In addition, the data tell us that the largest number of Black males are enrolled at the ninth grade and that the number of Black

males enrolled decreases with each grade level. Furthermore, the number of Black male students enrolled in Grade 12 is less than half the number of Black male students enrolled in Grade 9. The data also indicate that the largest difference in enrollment is between tenth-grade enrollment and eleventh-grade enrollment. The questions that this data set brings up are: (1) Where are our Black male students "disappearing to"? (2) Is there significance in the large difference in enrollment between the tenth and eleventh grades? The possible hypotheses include students move out of our district, drop out, and/or enter the job market. The concern with the latter two possible explanations is the lack of education of students dropping out and entering the workforce.

I then compiled the data on students' lunch status in order to have a better understanding of the high school Black male population. The following table is a summary of students' lunch status:

Trend Data Lunch Status—Indicator of Poverty Level

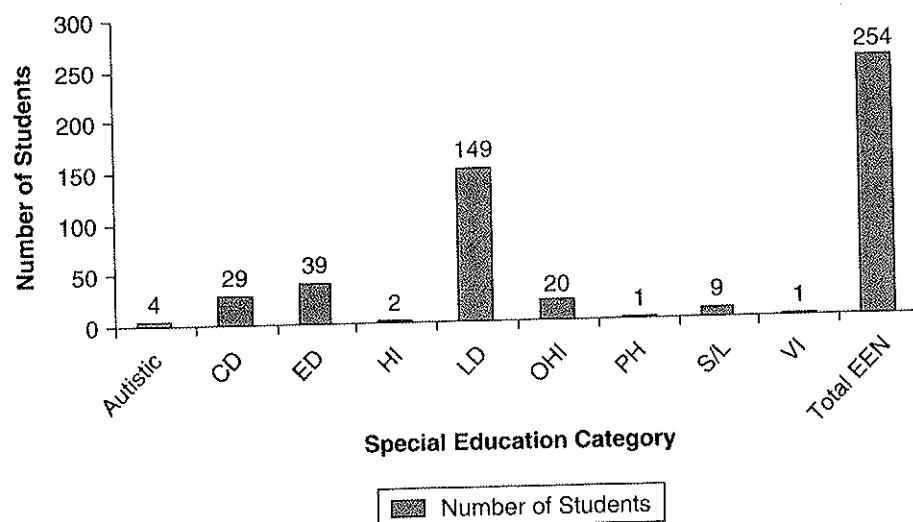
Grade	Number Free	Percentage Free	Number Reduce	Percentage Reduce	Number Regular	Percentage Regular	Total
9	116	55.24	21	10.00	73	34.76	210
10	99	52.66	15	7.98	74	39.36	188
11	38	31.93	13	10.92	68	57.14	119
12	30	31.91	7	7.45	57	60.64	94
Total	283	46.32	56	9.17	272	44.52	611

The data indicate that a little more than half (55.49 percent) of all Black male high school students receive free or reduced-price lunches. The data also indicate that the percentage of Black male students receiving free lunches decreases in the upper grade levels, while the percentage of regular lunch students increases. One conclusion that can be drawn from our general enrollment and lunch data is that poor Black male students in MMSD are the students who are leaving in the upper grade levels. This hypothesis is of particular concern because of the implication that poor students are leaving in the middle of high school, possibly without a diploma. The second possible conclusion is that students and families are not applying for free lunch as much in the upper grade levels.

Third, I reviewed the data on Black male high school students' enrollment in special education classes. The special education data are summarized in the following table and graph:

Trend Data Special Education Status

Grade	Number Not in Special Education	Percentage Not in Special Education	Number in Special Education	Percentage in Special Education	Total
9	113	53.81	97	46.19	210
10	101	53.72	87	46.28	188
11	81	68.07	38	31.93	119
12	62	65.96	32	34.04	94
Total	357	58.43	254	41.57	611

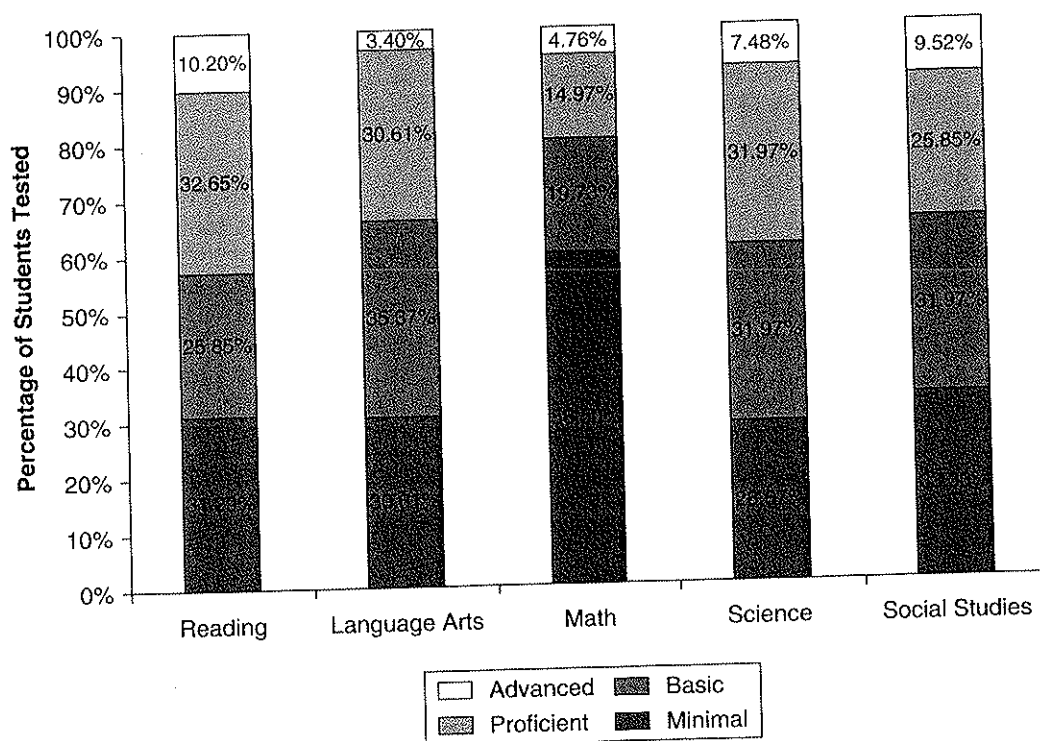


NOTE: CD = Cognitive Disability; ED = Emotional Disturbance; HI = Hearing Impairment; LD = Learning Disability; OHI = Other Health Impairment; PH = Physical Handicap; S/L = Speech and Language; VI = Visual Impairment; EEN = Exceptional Educational Needs.

The data indicate that 41.57 percent or 254 out of 611 Black male high school students are currently enrolled in a special education program, with the majority (149) of these students falling in the category of learning disabled. The overall yearly average for enrollment in special education in the school district is 14 percent. Given that 55.49 percent of MMSD Black male students are in poverty, I decided to take a closer look at the percentage of students in poverty who are in special education. The percentage of male high school special education students in poverty is 33.29 and the percentage of Black male high school special education students in poverty is 63.00. This tells us that almost twice the number of Black male students in special education are in poverty compared to the total population in

special education. Last, the special education data indicate that the percentage of students enrolled in special education decreases in the upper grades, while the percentage of regular education students increases. Two possible hypotheses are that special education students are leaving in the upper grades or that students are not enrolling in special education as frequently in the upper grades.

I was also interested in Black male students' achievement level, so I collected and organized the tenth-grade WSAS data for current juniors and seniors. The following graph depicts trend data for Black male students' performance on the tenth-grade WSAS:



During these two school years, 69 percent (147/213) of Black male students took the WSAS test. The percentage of Black male students who scored in the proficient or advanced category ranges from 20 percent in math, 34 percent in language arts, 36 percent in social studies, 39 percent in science to 43 percent in reading. This indicates that Black male students are showing the highest level of competency in reading and the lowest level of competency in math. The competency in reading, however, accounts for less than half the number of Black male students who actually took the test. In other words, the majority of Black male students had a score in the basic or minimal categories in each subject area. The percentage of students who scored in the basic or minimal categories

ranges from 57 percent in reading, 61 percent in science, 64 percent in social studies, 66 percent in language arts to 79 percent in math. These WSAS results imply that the majority of MMSD Black male students are not at the appropriate achievement level for academic success by the tenth grade.

Finally, I collected and cross-referenced Black male students' tenth-grade WSAS data and GPA scores. The following table is a summary of my data analysis:

Black Male Students' Tenth-Grade State Test Data

<i>Proficient/ Advanced</i>	<i>Number With < 2.0</i>	<i>Percentage With < 2.0 of Tested</i>	<i>Number With > 2.0</i>	<i>Percentage With > 2.0 of Tested</i>	<i>Total Number Proficient/ Advanced</i>	<i>Percentage Proficient/ Advanced of Tested</i>
LA	18	12.24	32	21.77	50	34.01
Rdg	23	15.65	40	27.21	63	42.86
Math	5	03.40	24	16.33	29	19.73
SC	17	11.56	41	27.89	58	39.46
SS	18	12.24	34	23.13	52	35.37

NOTE: Not Tested = 30.99% (66/213); Tested = 69.01% (147/213).

The data show that approximately 20 percent to 43 percent of Black male students who took the test had a score of proficient or advanced depending on the curricular area (language arts, reading, math, science, social studies). In addition, of the students who had a score of proficient or advanced, 17 percent to 36 percent currently have a GPA of less than or equal to 2.0 (depending on the curricular area). In other words, approximately one fifth to one third of students showing competency on the WSAS test are not showing academic success according to their GPA status. This is obviously not a cause-and-effect relationship because of the many factors that play into and influence test scores and GPA, however—at a minimum—it is a reason for some discussions. These data are especially alarming, however, when they are coupled with the fact that the majority of Black male students had a score of either basic or minimal on the tenth-grade WSAS. I conducted the student interviews to better understand why some Black male students succeeded while others were unable to succeed in the school district.

INTERVIEW DATA AND ANALYSIS

Characteristics of Interviewees

I asked 11 Black male high school students to tell me their stories and to talk about their school experiences. All my interviewees are non-special education students from high-poverty backgrounds (as determined by their receipt of free or reduced-price lunches) whose WSAS test scores indicate that they exhibit the potential for academic success. In addition, I collaborated with school staff members to confirm students' potential for academic success in a majority of cases. Five of the interviewees are currently high achievers (GPAs between 3.0 and 4.0) and six are currently low achievers (GPAs between 0.0 and 2.5). With the exception of two students, all the interviewees have attended Madison schools since kindergarten. The following table provides more specific data on each student interviewee:

Interviewee Characteristics

Student	Grade Level	GPA	Language Arts		Reading	Science	Social Studies
			Arts	Math			
1	11	1.65	P	P	Adv	P	Adv
2	10	1.03	P	P	P	P	B
3	10	2.37	Adv	Adv	Adv	Adv	Adv
4	11	1.81	P	B	P	P	P
5	11	1.56	P	P	P	P	P
6	12	2.39	P	B	Adv	Adv	P
1*	10	3.42	P	P	P	Adv	P
2*	11	3.19	Adv	P	P	P	Adv
3*	12	3.20	P	P	P	P	B
4*	11	3.22	Adv	Adv	Adv	P	Adv
5*	12	3.46	Adv	Adv	P	Adv	P

NOTES: * High-achieving students.

GPA is cumulative through January 2001.

Data is from eighth- or tenth-grade WSAS Test.

Adv = Advanced, P = Proficient, B = Basic, M = Minimal.

SUPPORTIVE FACTORS

High Achievers

I asked students who were high achievers to talk about their school experiences, including factors that have supported their school success,

as well as barriers to their achievement. First, I would like to focus on the supportive factors. According to the five high-achieving students, the following are factors that have helped them to be successful in school (next to the statement is the number of students who mentioned the factor):

External Factors

- Having a teacher or mentor (and also a parent for some) with whom they connected (5)
- High expectations (5)
- Supportive siblings
- Supportive friends who provided competition
- Supportive community
- Upward Bound Program

Internal Factors

- Drive or motivation (4)
- Having a goal or focus (3)
- Attending school and doing homework (2)
- Being active and involved in school activities

The factors that have been an especially positive influence for the high-achieving students are the presence in their lives of a supportive individual (teacher or mentor or parent), high expectations, and drive and motivation. All the students stated that having a teacher or a mentor with whom they connected has greatly impacted them. Student 4 talked about "being discovered by Ms. G in first grade," who was a great support and who also helped connect him with many opportunities, such as making a presentation to the school board as an elementary student. Student 1 described one of his elementary teachers as someone who "was willing to help me out at any time." This student went on to further describe how the connection with his teacher has helped him to make better choices and to stay out of trouble.

All the high achievers mentioned that high expectations served a major role in supporting them to be successful in school. For example, Student 3 shared that his fourth-grade teacher "told me that I could be anything I wanted to be and do anything I wanted to do, and I believed her!" The message Student 3 received from his teacher left a powerful impact on him, which in turn has positively influenced his school career. Student 2 talked about being pushed by his parents, by his teachers, and by his counselor to continually take more and more challenging courses that matched his potential. In particular, he spoke about being counseled to take advanced classes that he later greatly appreciated because of the doors that eventually opened to him. Student 4 talked about being told over and over

again by his mentor that "you are intelligent and you need to keep going." This student had taken to heart his mentor's message to succeed and said that he intended to achieve great things and hoped to become a positive role model for other Black male students.

Four of the high achieving students stated that having drive and motivation helped them to be successful in school. When discussing this factor, students shared about their responsibility of being a Black male or their responsibility to contribute to changing the negative stereotype of the Black male, their will to succeed against the odds, their strong determination and positive mind-set, and for several, their goal to be the first in their family to attend and graduate from college. Students emphasized not having the "luxury to fail" because they could not afford to contribute to the deterioration of the Black male population.

Low Achievers

I then asked students who were low achievers to discuss factors that have helped them in school. They mentioned the following as supportive factors (next to the statement is the number of students who mentioned the factor):

External Factors

- Supportive parent (2)
- Relevant course work (2)
- Tutoring (2)
- Sports (provided motivation) (2)
- High expectations
- Supportive friends who provided competition
- Relationship with the teacher

Internal Factors

- Drive or motivation (3)
- Having a goal (2)
- Flexibility

Several factors that have been a positive influence for a number of the low-achieving students include having a drive, having a supportive parent figure, relevant coursework, tutoring, and sports. Three of the six students mentioned that having drive helped them to achieve in school. For example, Student 1 stated that "if I put my mind to something, nothing can stop me." This student also talked about the importance of not succumbing to the negative stereotypes of Black males but rather proving the

stereotypes wrong by working hard in school. Student 5 felt that his determination helped him to keep going, especially when things got tough in school. This student also felt it necessary to "let go of the little things" in order to be able to succeed.

Two students mentioned that having a supportive parent was very important to them. Student 6 stated that "My mom is a major contributor . . . she tells me I can do better than her . . . she tells me she wants me to be able to do what I like most in life later." Student 6 talked repeatedly about how his mom has always been there for him and said that she even meets with his teachers to get him back on track when he's having problems at school. Student 4 also felt that he had very good support from his parents, and that they always want the best for him.

Two of the six low achievers felt that relevant coursework has helped them to be successful in school. For instance, Student 3 said that taking courses that relate to his future goal helps him to achieve in school. For this student, it was very important that he could connect his daily school work to his future profession. It motivated him and also helped him to stay focused in school. Similarly, Student 3 felt that he did best in the classes such as economics, social Studies, and contemporary world issues that were interesting to him and in which he could relate to the material being studied.

Two of the low-achieving students stated that having a tutor or mentor is extremely valuable. For example, Student 4 talked about greatly benefiting from a tutoring lab. This Student felt that his tutor "matches the way that I learn, which helps me to do better." In addition, Student 6 talked about taking advantage of afterschool help and how that has helped him to be successful in school.

Two students also mentioned sports as being a factor that has supported their academic achievement. For Student 2, sports motivated him to do well because he wanted to be able to play in the games. As a result, this student pushed himself to do well in his classes in order to be able to play on the field. Similarly, Student 3 pushed himself in school in order to be able to participate in sports.

Comparison

I have presented the supportive factors for the high-achieving students, as well as the low-achieving students. In summary, I would like to point out some key differences and similarities:

- All five of the high achievers had a supportive individual (a teacher or mentor or parent) in their lives, compared to two of the six low achievers (who mentioned parents being supportive).

- All five of the high achievers stated that having high expectations helped them to succeed, compared to one of the six low achievers.
- Four of the five high achievers and three of the six low achievers spoke of having an internal "drive" or motivation to succeed.
- Three of the five high achievers and two of the six low achievers stated that having a goal helped them to achieve (high achievers' goals seemed to be more specific and challenging, while low achievers' goals seemed to be more general).
- Two of the five high achievers said it is extremely important to attend school and to do homework.
- Two of the six low achievers spoke of being motivated by sports.
- Two of the six low achievers felt that tutoring supported achievement.

BARRIERS TO ACHIEVEMENT

High Achievers

I also asked the Black male high school students to speak about any factors that have been barriers to their academic success during their school experiences. According to the five high-achieving students, the following are factors that deterred them from school achievement (next to the statement is the number of students who mentioned the factor):

External Factors

- Family issues (2)
- Low expectations (negative perceptions of Black males) (2)
- Peers (negative influence) (2)
- Hard courses
- Mobility

Internal Factors

- Interpersonal skills
- Low motivation (loss of motivation)

The main factors that have been deterrents for the five high-achieving students include family issues, low expectations (related to negative perceptions of Black males), and negative influence from their peers. Two of the five students expressed that family issues have interfered with their academic endeavors. Student 1 talked about his dad being incarcerated and how that nearly destroyed all sense of hope for him. He stated: "I lost all will to go on

... what would be the point?" Fortunately, this student's dad convinced him to be strong, to go on, and not to make the same mistakes that he had made. Regardless of the fact that he may never again see his dad free, Student 1 has chosen to work hard and currently has a 3.42 GPA. Student 3 spoke of his parents' divorce and his mom's remarriage as major deterrents. In addition to the emotional roller coaster that he went through during his parents' divorce, the fact that his family also moved several times throughout his senior year made it very difficult for him to focus and feel connected. Family issues made academic achievement difficult for two of the five high achievers.

Two high achievers mentioned that low expectations (related to negative perceptions of Black males) have served as barriers to their achievement in school. Student 4 expressed that it is extremely difficult for him to be at his high school because he is a Black male. He went on to say that it is difficult because there are few role models among the students and staff and because negative perceptions of Black males are quite pervasive. Speaking about low expectations, Student 4 stated:

Teachers don't expect as much... they have seen many Black males fail, so it is hard for them to tell the difference. On the first day, they expect me to be in the lower-level classes. I get looks when they hand out books (not from all but from some). Only when I get an A on the first test do they recognize my abilities and begin to expect more. . . .

Student 1 shared that he has become more conscious of the difference in expectations that Black male students experience compared to other students. For instance, although Student 1 knows that he is capable of "A" work, he is quite often praised for getting B's on his tests. Fortunately, this student has a mentor who stresses that it is extremely important not to settle for less than what one is capable of doing.

Two of the five high-achieving students stated that negative-influencing peers can interfere with academic achievement. For example, Student 5 talked about how hard it is to have to choose between being with friends and staying focused on his studies. Similarly, Student 4 shared that peers can set him back by picking on him and by offering him unhealthy alternatives. Evidently, these two students have been able to make choices that allow them to strike a balance between school and peers.

Low Achievers

The six low-achieving students also talked about factors that have deterred them from academic achievement. They mentioned the following

as barriers to school success for them (next to the statement is the number of students who mentioned the factor):

External Factors

- Lack of connections with teachers (4)
- Irrelevant classes (3)
- Perceptions and low expectations of Black males (2)
- Family issues
- Hanging out with the wrong crowd (poor choices)
- Presence of security personnel or police
- Lack of time
- Drugs

Internal Factors

- Organization, attention, and memory (2)
- Not having goals
- Refusing to ask for help
- Low motivation

Several factors that have been barriers for a number of the low-achieving students include feelings of disconnectedness with teachers, irrelevant classes, and low expectations (related to negative perceptions of Black males). Four of the six students mentioned that feelings of disconnectedness with teachers have deterred them from achieving in school. For example, Student 5 spoke in detail about an incident involving a teacher that left him feeling "hopeless and wanting to quit." He talked about having a medical condition that interfered with his academics, and how the situation only got worse when his teacher refused to assist him after he had repeatedly asked for extra help. Student 5 ended by saying that since that situation occurred, he has not put in the same effort, and that his motivation has greatly decreased in all his classes. Student 4 shared about trying to build relationships with teachers for academic purposes. This student unfortunately has also been unable to get extra help, even though he has requested assistance several times from different staff members. Student 4 is quite discouraged due to his negative experiences. Student 2 stated that feelings of disconnectedness with his teachers have made it very hard for him to achieve. He emphasized that it is especially difficult when he is struggling and his teachers show little concern for where he is academically and whether he is learning at all. Disconnection with staff members has left these students feeling very frustrated, less motivated, and more hopeless.

Three low achievers stated that irrelevant classes make it difficult for them to learn. Students emphasized that they do best when the class curriculum has relevance or can be applied to their lives. Student 6 shared that when classes are irrelevant and unchallenging he quickly loses interest in the learning process. More specifically, Student 6 feels that too much of his class time is spent reviewing old material and not enough time is spent learning new material, which leaves him very unchallenged. Additionally, this student believes that he would be more engaged in learning if his teachers incorporated more visual aids and interactive activities. Student 2, on the other hand, expressed his concern about being rushed through the curriculum and not being able to learn how to apply what he was learning to his own life. Similarly, Student 3 prefers "a teacher who can interpret and explain well over a teacher who cannot explain well but knows everything." Both Student 2 and Student 3 explained that they understood that teachers have curriculum that they must get through, but for these two students at least, "learning to learn" is a lot more important than learning without clear understanding and without clear knowledge of relevance to their lives.

Two of the low-achieving students shared that low expectations (related to negative perceptions of Black males) have served as barriers to their academic achievement. More specifically, Student 1 and Student 3 shared that there are negative stereotypes of Black males in society, in the community, and at school. Student 1 went on to share that because of these negative stereotypes he continually has to work hard, to push himself to do better, and to demand that others have high expectations for him. This student wanted to tell younger Black male students to be aware of low expectations and to continue to challenge themselves to live up to their potential. Student 3 also felt that it is important to challenge the stereotypes and to do the best that one can.

Comparison

I have presented the barriers to achievement for both the high achievers and the low achievers. In summary, I would like to point out some key differences and similarities:

- Four of the six low achievers felt that disconnectedness with teachers deterred them from academic success, compared to none of the five high achievers.
- Three of the six low achievers stated that irrelevant classes served as a deterrent to high achievement (material versus meaning).
- Two of the five high achievers and two of the six low achievers (four students from the total of 11) stated that low expectations (negative perceptions of Black males) deterred them from academic success.

- Two of the five high achievers and one of the six low achievers (three students from the total of 11) stated that family issues interfered with school success.
- Two of the five high achievers and one of the six low achievers (three students from the total of 11) stated that peers can be a negative influence (pressure, intolerance).

TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS

During the interview, I asked students to identify an individual at school with whom they felt connected. Each student named at least one staff member; some students named two or three individuals. I also prompted the students to describe the individuals, including why they felt connected with the staff members. The characteristics listed by the low achievers and high achievers are quite similar. Black male students feel most connected with staff members who exhibit the following characteristics:

- Knowledgeable about the curriculum
- Has good classroom management skills and holds students accountable
- Makes learning interesting and fun
- Makes learning relevant and practical
- Likes teaching and has a positive attitude
- Takes time to listen to students' viewpoints and respects students
- Takes time to get to know students, is interested in students' goals, and is not afraid to share about himself or herself
- Truly cares about how all students do in school and wants all students to succeed
- Challenges students to do their best and expects excellence
- Is willing to provide extra help to students and connects students to tutors and/or mentors
- Is open-minded and willing to try new things
- Does not "mark students when they first come into their classes"

As is evident by the statements made by the Black male students, the interviewees feel most connected with staff members who have strong knowledge of their curriculum and use instructional strategies that engage learners, who have high expectations of all students, who are truly interested in students' opinions and goals, who are not afraid to take risks, and who enjoy teaching. Every one of the interviewees mentioned that he works harder and in turn does better in the classrooms of teachers whom

they respect and who give them respect. Connections to teachers seem to play a major role in interviewees' academic achievement.

REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

This has been an extremely powerful action research project for me. The process through which I conducted the study has left as powerful an impact as the results and conclusions I have drawn (from both my data and my interviews). My research project will certainly have a great impact on me as a leader, an educator, and a role model for all children.

I have several "next" steps as I complete this journey and begin a new one. I have already had the opportunity to share my research with several groups, including a Memorial High School study group and two Minority Student Achievement principal study groups. My plan is to continue to share my research with interested administrators, as well as MMSD staff members. I especially hope to share the stories and insights from the students I interviewed. I am also currently preparing a letter to send to the student interviewees and their families summarizing my findings, as well as my next steps. This is important because I want students to know that their voices have been heard and are impacting their educational system. Finally, I plan to continue researching the factors that have had a positive impact on minority student achievement. More specifically, I intend to focus on the Search Institute's 40 Assets (Search Institute, 2006) as well as the resiliency research. I see great potential in focusing on students' strengths, talents, and assets as we continue to examine how to best support all students in achieving to their individual potential.

One suggestion I have for future research is to duplicate the action research project I have conducted here with parents and with teachers. It is important to continue to gather data, stories, and insights from parents and teachers in order to get a full picture and understanding of how to best support Black male students in MMSD. This additional research will give a more complete picture and understanding of the struggles of Black male students. It is important that we continue to ask questions and conduct research that supports positive growth within the area of student achievement. Each one of us can make a difference.

EPILOGUE

Four and a half years have passed since I conducted the action research project titled Understanding High School Black Male Students'

Achievement and School Experience. During that time, I have had the honor to serve as an elementary school principal in two large school districts. I worked in the first school district for three years before I moved to my current school district. The action research project inspired me to (1) share the research data and findings with other professional colleagues in the field of education; and (2) keep equity at the forefront of my work as a school principal so that all students have an opportunity to receive a quality education. Equity has been a primary goal for me during the last several years due to the action research work.

The results of the research project motivated me to share the knowledge and insights that I learned from the Black male high school students with educators within and outside the school district. I have had the opportunity to speak with several prominent groups, including two school district principal groups, staffs of two elementary schools, a Minority Student Achievement principal study group, and participants in the Minority Student Achievement Network. Each group found the student data to be disturbing and the recommendations to be helpful. It is evident that more student voices need to be shared and that school districts need to listen to them. I have embraced opportunities to share the Black male high school students' voices whenever possible in my work. I anticipate the opportunity to have further positive impact on minority student achievement by sharing the voices of the students with more professionals.

It has also been a privilege for me to be able to directly impact school staffs and students. As an elementary school principal, I led a school staff through two years of equity training with the goal of being able to better serve more children in the school. Before leading the staff, I went through a year of training myself with an equity consultant as part of my job as a principal in the district. With support from the school district, I created a school equity team consisting of a district coach, two teachers, and myself. Together, the four of us led the equity work at the building level. We provided general training on equity for the staff, as well as created opportunities for staff to have courageous conversations about race and equity. As a school, we began to examine achievement data and school decisions through an equity lens. Grade-level and team discussions included conversations on race and equity. Although it was challenging and slow work, the training and actions taken as a result of the equity work positively impacted all students in the school environment. The results were evident in the school achievement and climate data, as well as in positive comments from parents and students. In addition, teachers developed and facilitated book study groups focused on race and equity. Students directly benefited from the work of the staff.

I have also been involved with numerous secondary-level student forums addressing diversity issues. The student forums had several purposes,

including listening to the students' voices and building leadership in the minority student population. Students, district administrators, school board members, and parents felt that this past year's forum had an especially powerful impact on the community and provided great hope for the future. As part of the forum, students had an opportunity to share their concerns about the current achievement gap and provide suggestions about what students, schools, and staffs can do to support minority students. The information that the students shared was extremely powerful and helpful to district educators. After leading the highly successful student forum this year, I was asked to colead the diversity work for the school district for the following year.

As coleader of the diversity work, I am in charge of facilitating (1) the equity training for all district administrators; (2) a mentoring program for minority staff; (3) the student forum (including continuing to build student leadership within the school district); and (4) the Parent Diversity Committee. District administrators have already had an opportunity to hear from a panel of students who participated in the student forum. In addition, administrators will have an opportunity to discuss race and equity this year during meetings of principals. A team of district administrators will also be going to the National Staff Development Conference to talk with a consultant about providing more intensive equity training for staff throughout the district. As a coleader of the diversity work, I have helped to develop a mentoring program for minority staff. We have provided each minority staff member with a mentor, and we are meeting quarterly to discuss and solve problems that arise throughout the school year. The hope is to be able to retain more minority staff by providing support and an avenue for discussing and dealing with concerns. We are also in the process of organizing a team of leaders across the secondary schools who will help to plan the student forum for this year. We will be meeting monthly with the school leaders to plan the forum and to develop plans for supporting minority students that the school leaders can take back to their respective schools and implement. My final responsibility is to coordinate with the Parent Diversity Committee. I meet monthly with the Parent Diversity Committee to support it in accomplishing its mission of supporting and embracing diversity in the school district. The diversity work is difficult because of the many facets of the task; however, I continue to embrace the opportunity to positively impact minority students, particularly the Black male students.

As evidenced by the work that I have been involved with over the last several years, the action research project has profoundly impacted my daily work with children. I have purposely chosen to take on administrative leadership roles to address issues of equity in the field of education.

I intend to continue to accept opportunities to educate and lead education leaders on equity issues. I feel strongly about the work and am committed to doing my part in helping others understand the importance of addressing inequities in the educational system in order to support all students to be successful. I hope to be able to connect with other leaders across the country who are doing similar work in order to strengthen my ability to impact greater numbers of minority students. My next step is to communicate on a greater scale about the work that I am doing in my current school district and collaborate with other leaders. I believe that it is essential to build a network to continue the important work that we are all doing.

The research project continues to shape me as an administrator, educator, and role model daily. I often think of the Black male students whom I interviewed. I hear their voices in the students with whom I currently work. I hope to continue to help more students through all that I am doing with social justice and equity.

APPENDIX: SURVEY INTERVIEW/QUESTIONNAIRE

Name _____	Date _____
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1. How would you describe yourself? Peers describe you? Parents describe you?
2.
 - a. Tell me about your elementary school experience.
 - b. Tell me about your middle school experience.
 - c. Tell me about your high school experience.
3.
 - a. You have demonstrated excellence in academics (or the potential) . . . what factors have contributed to your success? Describe them briefly.
 - b. What factors have made it difficult for you to be successful? Deterred you from success? Describe them briefly.
4. What are your goals? What do you need to do to achieve your goals?
5. Describe your peer group. Who are they? What kinds of things does your peer group like to do?
6. Describe your relationship with your teachers, counselor, coaches, and/or mentors.
7. Describe your relationship with your parent(s) or guardian(s).
8. Describe any community involvement you have (job, church, community center, and so on).

9. What advice do you have for younger boys who may be struggling to achieve in school? (What difficulties have you encountered in school and how did you overcome them?)
10. Do you have any questions for me?

REFERENCE

Search Institute. (2006). Retrieved January 5, 2007, from www.search-institute.org/assets/