



Perceptions of Academic Achievement and Educational Opportunities Among Black and African American Youth

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Abstract

Research focusing on disparities in academic achievement among Black, African American, and other youth has largely examined differences in quantitative risk and protective factors associated with levels of achievement. Few interpretive studies of academic achievement by race or ethnicity have considered how the context of young people's lives impact their perceptions of academic performance. Furthermore, the lived experiences of Black and African American youth have rarely been considered. This study examined perceptions of academic achievement among a sample of Black and African American elementary and middle school students living in four public housing neighborhoods in a Western US city. Twenty-five Black and African American youth participated in the study. Fourteen youth were in grades 4 and 5, and 11 youth were in grades 6, 7, or 8. Sixty-four percent of participants ($n = 16$) were male and 36% ($n = 9$) were female. Four themes emerged regarding participants' perceptions of academic achievement: (1) (in)equity and the internalization of messages; (2) teachers as gatekeepers; (3) family and community factors promoting and inhibiting academic success; and (4) cultural considerations—language, stereotypes, and difference. Implications for improving academic outcomes and reducing the achievement gap among Black, African American, and other students are noted.

Keywords Academic achievement · Public housing · Qualitative methods · Children and youth · Black and African American students

Introduction

Black and African American students have historically encountered significant barriers to receiving an equitable and high-quality education (Diemer, Marchand, McKellar, & Malanchuk, 2016; Wiggan, 2008), although there are considerable gaps in the research in understanding the mechanisms impacting success. Throughout the last several decades, Black and African American students are reported to underperform in academic settings, and research often focuses on racial disparities in education outcomes, rather than taking context, such as community and family, into consideration (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007).

Unfortunately, research targeting outcomes has failed to offer successful initiatives for improving academic progress for Black and African American students (O'Connor et al., 2007). These barriers include enrollment in underachieving schools, limited community resources, poverty, and the lack of prosocial and economic opportunities (Patton, Wooley, & Hong, 2012). Consequently, many Black and African American students have underperformed on standard measures of academic achievement, such as grades and standardized tests (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Williams, Davis, Saunders, & Williams, 2002).

Prior studies of disparities in academic achievement among Black, African American, and other students have focused largely on differences in quantitative risk and protective factors (e.g., Awad, 2007; Williams et al., 2002). Findings from these investigations have led to a better understanding of individual, classroom, and school level characteristics associated with differences in academic achievement among students. More important, prior studies have seldom considered how the context of young people's lives, including community and familial level factors, impact

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their perceptions when interpreting disparities in academic achievement. Furthermore, the lived experiences of Black and African American youth have rarely been considered in prior research (Patton et al., 2012; Williams & Portman, 2014).

This study examines perceptions of academic achievement among a sample of Black and African American elementary and middle school students. Participants were recruited from four public housing neighborhoods in a large Western US city. The study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that promote and inhibit academic achievement among low-income Black and African American students. Special emphasis is placed on participants' perceptions of early literacy training, and its relationship to academic achievement.

Youth Perceptions of Educational Attainment

Prior qualitative studies of educational attainment assessed through the perceptions of young people have led to the identification and discussion of factors across individual, school, and community levels of influence.

Individual and Family Level Factors

Personal beliefs and attitudes associated with perceptions of educational attainment have been identified and described in several studies of low-income Black and African American youth. Individual attitudes regarding the importance of academic achievement are found in samples high school students (Williams & Portman, 2014). Findings from previous studies have also demonstrated that Black and African American students with high levels of educational aspirations and commitment to school fare better academically than students with low aspirations and levels of commitment to school (Awad, 2007; Ford & Harris, 1996).

Parental involvement in children's education is a key factor identified in studies of academic achievement among low-income Black and African American youth (Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams & Portman, 2014). Active parental support in school reinforces the importance of education, and involved families are more likely to have higher expectations for academic achievement for their children than parents who are less involved (Thomas, 2009). Investigators have also found that effective parenting skills, such as actively engaging in dialogue around school with their children, are linked closely to academic achievement (Williams & Portman, 2014). For example, a qualitative study of college sophomores found that parental monitoring of school progress and consistent rewards for earning good grades at school were key elements in academic achievement

(Williams & Bryan, 2013). Therefore, it is important to create supportive environments for Black and African American students in building the intrinsic capacity towards educational attainment, while fostering spaces for active parental involvement in their children's academic success.

School Level Factors

Teachers play a significant role for students' academic success. Young people are impressionable, and teachers are a substantial source of guidance in early education (Lumpkin, 2008). Teachers often hold unrecognized racial biases, which may impact Black and African American youth (Lumpkin, 2008). Several qualitative studies have examined the characteristics and qualities of classroom teachers as perceived by Black and African American students. In one study, investigators found that Black youth from 58 high schools in Maryland reported lower levels of teacher caring and had fewer supportive adult relationships than White students (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016). A qualitative study examining African American and Latino students' perceptions of barriers to academic achievement in a Midwestern school district reported similar results; students in this investigation indicated that their teachers often did not care about the lessons they were teaching and provided little support to help them learn (Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015). When asked how they define an effective teacher, Black and African American youth have also noted that effective instructors are caring, empathic, and make classroom learning relevant and engaging (Bottiani et al., 2016; Howard, 2002; Vega et al., 2015; Wiggan, 2008).

Black and African American youth often identify the importance of having teachers who pay close attention to issues of cultural relevance and inclusivity (Wiggan, 2008). Many students of color report that schools focus heavily on culturally dominant narratives, and as a result, fail to adequately address the needs and lived experiences of non-White students (Wiggan, 2008). Similarly, studies have found that students find school more interesting when they learn about the experiences and histories of people who share their ethnic and racial backgrounds (Ford & Harris, 1996). Furthermore, evidence suggests that culturally relevant school curricula increases school engagement among Black and African American students. However, many students of color continue to feel that their schools and educational experiences are not culturally relevant (Nash & Miller, 2015).

Positive school climate and non-discriminatory educational policies have also been identified by Black and African American students as keys to academic success (Vega et al., 2015). Black students generally perceive their schools to have a less positive climate than White students (Bottiani et al., 2016). Youth of color also report that inconsistent

implementation of school policies, illustrated by applying rules and guidelines based on race or ethnicity, has an adverse effect on academic achievement (Vega et al., 2015).

Prior research indicates that school climate, and especially the role of teachers, are integral for Black and African American students in educational attainment. Furthermore, it is important for schools and teachers to address issues regarding cultural inclusivity, discriminatory policies, and developing an appropriate curriculum that reflects the experiences of these students. Research demonstrates that these factors have positive effects for academic achievement for Black and African American students.

Community Level Factors

Black and African American youth have identified several community level factors that influence academic achievement. Findings from one qualitative study indicated that more than half of youth participants reported feeling unsafe in their neighborhoods, and they perceived this lack of safety to be an obstacle to positive educational experiences (Vega et al., 2015). In addition, youth have also commented on the important role of the community in creating opportunities for Black and African American youth to spend time outside of school in safe places that limit their involvement with gangs and drugs (Williams & Portman, 2014). Black and African American youth have stated that they believe education is a collaborative effort that can be improved by intentional and well-implemented partnerships between students, their families, schools, and the entire community (Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams & Portman, 2014).

Summary

Available literature points to several elements affecting individual, family, school, and community factors that influence academic achievement among Black and African American students. These factors include personal motivation to learn, parental involvement in education, high-quality and committed classroom teachers, and the presence of a supportive community. These characteristics provide an important context and background for the current investigation. The aim of this study was to add to the existent literature, as well as to provide a greater insight into the perceptions of Black and African American students around academic attainment.

The Current Study

Few studies have explored Black and African American youths' perceptions of educational attainment in the U.S. The majority of studies examining these phenomena involved students in high school or college, and often involved students'

perceptions reflecting back to their earlier educational experiences (Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams & Portman, 2014). Even fewer studies have incorporated the voices of elementary and middle school students who confront social and economic adversity in their neighborhoods and schools, leaving researchers to define their experience (Langhout & Thomas, 2010).

Critical theory and positive youth development (PYD) perspectives inform this study. Critical theory values the agency of individuals and communities over their own circumstances with acknowledgement of structural issues of power, oppression and inequality (Creswell, 2013; Fook, 2002). Additionally, consistent with our phenomenological approach, a critical perspective underscores the importance of knowledge generation that is grounded in the social realities of those who live the experiences (Fook, 2002). The key principles guiding PYD include respecting and identifying youth strengths, engaging and motivating youth to support change through these strengths, working with youth as collaborators, avoiding victim mindsets, and harnessing resources that exist in the environment (Jenson, Alter, Nicoitera, Anthony, & Forrest-Bank, 2013; Lerner et al., 2005). The practice of PYD suggests that youth, families, communities, and systems can take proactive roles in the positive development of future generations.

The aim of this study is to explore the complexities associated with academic achievement experienced by elementary and middle school Black and African American youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. To that end, qualitative study methods are used to examine the perceptions and lived experiences of a sample of Black and African American students residing in public housing neighborhoods in a large Western city. The influence of race and ethnicity, as it affects academic achievement and school engagement, is examined through the voices of students in grades 4–8. The current study focused on the research question of what factors facilitate or hinder Black and African American students' early academic success. The research questions considered in this study are as follows:

1. How do Black and African American youth describe their perceptions of academic achievement?
2. How do Black and African American youth make meaning of their experiences of academic achievement?
3. What role does race play in Black and African American youth's perceptions of academic achievement?

Method

Procedure and Setting

The study was conducted using a phenomenological approach (PA). A PA strategy examines phenomenon at a

latent level by examining the lived experiences of participants. It aims to provide a deeper understanding or meaning of concepts and phenomena based on participants' unique experiences (Saldaña, 2013). In the current study, the investigators were interested in identifying and assessing students' perceptions of academic performance, and in uncovering potential variations between respondents, and within the existent literature. The study's goals and methods are congruent with a PA framework (Josse-Eklund, Jossebo, Sandin-Bojö, Wilde-Larsson, & Petzäll, 2014; Saldaña, 2013).

Phenomenological analysis is a “bottom-up” approach in which researchers are active learners and not the experts. PA uses flexible guidelines regarding research design, and incorporates a reflexive perspective; generated research questions aim to address what it feels like to “walk a day in the shoes” of the respondents (Padgett, 2012; Saldaña, 2013). The intention is to capture the quintessence of young people's experiences, perceptions, and beliefs regarding academic attainment.

Participants attended an afterschool program located in a public housing neighborhood in a large Western city. Students in these neighborhoods live in conditions of poverty. According to the local housing authority, at least 52% of families in the study neighborhoods are experiencing extreme poverty, with the average income for a family of four reaching just over \$14,500 annually (redacted for peer review). Families experience extreme poverty when they live at 50% of the federal poverty rate (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). The 2017 federal poverty rate is \$24,600 annual income for a household of the same size (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017).

Participants

The study used a purposive sample to select participants who were enrolled in an afterschool program in an urban public housing neighborhood. Twenty-five Black and African American youth participated in the study, several of whom were first-generation African refugees from Kenya and Somalia. Fourteen youth were in grades 4 and 5, and 11 youth were in grades 6, 7, or 8. Sixty-four percent of participants ($n = 16$) were male and 36% ($n = 9$) were female (see Table 1). Parent consent and youth assent were obtained and human subjects approval was awarded by the Institutional Review Board of the University of (redacted for peer review).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was achieved by conducting two focus groups with students in grades 4 and 5 and two focus groups with students in grades 6–8. Focus groups used a

Table 1 Participant characteristics by gender and grade

4th and 5th girls	6th–8th girls	4th and 5th boys	6th–8th boys
Aziza	Danielle	Abdul	Ali
Fatin	Nimo	Aden	Eli
Naema	Rayah	Amir	Esau
Salena	Zahra	Farhan	Hamadi
Zaria		Mahamud	Isaiah
		Mike	Musa
		Noor	Salem
		Raymond	
		Sheiknoor	

Participants' names are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality

semi-structured format that included open-ended questions and lasted approximately 45 min. Sample questions included: (1) How do you think your teachers and your schools help you succeed at school; (2) How do you think Black and African American students in schools are expected to succeed in relation to other kids; and (3) How does your family, your school, or your community feel about reading and literacy? Focus groups were led by two investigators who had knowledge of the afterschool program. Focus groups were audio taped using a digital recorder and each session was transcribed and rechecked to maintain accuracy. All transcriptions were analyzed using Atlas.ti software package, and then coded. Analytic memos were also recorded throughout the process.

The analysis of data was an iterative process. In the initial, open-end coding phase, items of interest were noted throughout each transcript. In the next phase, words and short phrases were patterned or combined to provide an inventory of common themes that emerged from the interviews (Saldaña, 2013). The final cycle included theming the data, where previously patterned codes were analyzed and organized into larger constructs as part of an effort to attribute meaning to emerging response patterns of the youth. Theming the data is consistent with a phenomenological approach, where data are examined at a latent level, providing insight into the realities of complex phenomenon (Saldaña, 2013). Final items were checked for consistency between the two lead investigators, and were condensed into four main themes. The generated major themes were then systematized according to the study's key research questions.

Findings

The participants' responses reflect their perceptions of academic achievement as Black and African American youth living in a public housing neighborhood. After analyzing the data, four main themes emerged regarding participants'

perceptions of academic achievement: (1) (in)equity and the internalization of messages; (2) teachers as gatekeepers; (3) family and community factors promoting & inhibiting academic success; and (4) cultural & societal considerations—language, stereotypes, and difference. The following themes represent the perceptions of respondents in the study, depicting dialectical factors both facilitating and hindering academic attainment. Brackets were inserted within the quotations by the authors to provide additional clarity.

(In)Equity and the Internalization of Messages

The world is comprised of an influx of information about how we, as humans, operate within our internal and external existence. Located within media, news reports, family, peers, and various institutions, we are inundated with how we *should* act and be in the world. The underlying intent and impact of these messages, directly, and indirectly, affect how we see ourselves, and the world around us (Dye, 2016). We come to identify with the visual representations enveloping, purchasing the latest trends, altering our behaviors to correspond with our surroundings, and performing to the standards set forth by those with authority (Dye, 2016; O'Connor et al., 2007). This is particularly relevant for low-income Black and African American students who must navigate the influx of information surrounding their daily lives within an educational context. Findings from this theme pointed to the detrimental impact negative messages have for participants in this study, although some students demonstrated resilience and the capacity to overcome inequitable academic conditions.

Respondents in this study struggled with the impact of race and ethnicity on the perceptions of academic achievement among Blacks and African Americans, as well as the expectations that are placed on them as students. For example, Hamadi, a middle school boy, said,

Can I not be smart and Black at the same time?... White people are racist...because [White people believe] Black people don't think about their future. When they [White individuals] look at us they see a dumb Black person.

Zahra, a middle school girl shared a similar sentiment,

Non-Black people think they're better than Black. They think they're better than Black people because they're not colored.

The internalization of various messages shapes our development, one's sense of self (Bayram Özdemir & Statin, 2014). Young students are in the process of developing a sense of agency, and the impact of this reinforcement impacts the development of youth (Lu & Horner, 2013). These very notions impact the internal and external

perceptions of youth regarding academic achievement. When academic expectations for youth success in schooling are directed from external entities, young individuals may internalize the messages surrounding them.

The predominance of White culture also influenced participants' perceptions of equity and academic achievement. For example, when asked if Black and African American students are expected to do well in school, Nimo, a middle school student said,

I think that a lot of people have a stereotype where they think Black people are not as smart as for example as Asian or other students. They think we can't do the work at school and treat us differently...that makes me think that like we might not succeed eventually we might like drop out of school or something.

The internalization of various messages became especially pertinent when participants turned the focus group questions back to the (White) research team. Nimo, one of the more outspoken girls in the group, asked,

Why do you guys think writing and reading is more harder for us?... What do you guys think Black people are mostly good at in school?"

Despite the impact of negative messages received, some youth illustrated positive orientations towards future academic achievement regardless of the realities of inequity. Participants also demonstrated their resilience and capacity to move beyond the adverse messages they received in their lives. For example, Hamadi said,

I think about the future and right now I'm currently in school and I have higher grades than almost all the white kids and it doesn't matter. We are equal. I know I can do the work and will get a good job one day.

Similarly, Amir, an elementary school boy, shares a similar perception as to why Black and African American Students should achieve at the same standard,

Because everybody has the same freedom as others.

While many focus group participants detailed the negative impact negative messages have on their academic attainment, some adopted a similar positive outlook of the future as the one expressed by Hamadi. Regardless of internalized messages of (in)equality, students saw a bright future for themselves. One possible explanation is that most these students are involved in an afterschool program focusing on strengthening academic attainment.

Teachers as Gatekeepers

Teachers serve as an important early developmental figure in the lives of students (Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges,

2004). These figures have the power to influence early success of students, and this may manifest in a positive or negative manner. The role of teachers is pivotal in creating a conducive learning environment, one that fosters the unique talents, abilities, and skills of each student (Nye et al., 2004). Unwittingly or not, teachers impact students' learning with their own biases, beliefs, and worldviews (Milner & Laughter, 2015). Participants in this study pointed to the important roles that teachers often played in supporting or inhibiting their academic success. Reflecting on her elementary school teachers, Nimo shared that her best teachers,

Push me to do my hardest... like sometimes when I wasn't having good days...they always say that don't base your thinking on what others are doing because it might bring your own work down.

Zahra, a middle school classmate, echoed this sentiment by saying, "teachers keep pushing us to read a lot so we can be successful."

Elementary school participants shared similar experiences to older students. Fatin, a 5th grade girl said, "my teachers want me to succeed in school because they want me to not have a hard life when I'm older." Mike, a 4th grader, shared a similar positive message about his current teacher, simply saying, "my teacher, she wanted me to be successful."

Interestingly, elementary-aged students tended to have more positive perceptions of teachers than middle school youth, where younger respondents expressed positive experiences on 15 occasions, as opposed to older youth (9). Many of the middle-school boys described experiences of substantial racial tension that appeared to magnify perceptions of difference, stereotypes, and bias. Hamadi felt like the bias that he sometimes felt from peers also impacted his relationship with teachers. He said,

What I think about the schools is there's some students are racist but some teachers are racist as well. They don't see our point of view like what we have to say about the world, like what we have to live through every single day. They act as if—we're going to go ride in a car and shoot you people while smoking weed.

Other middle school boys felt like their teachers often ignored Black and African American students and that they had to work extra hard to be noticed by their teachers. Eli said,

They're [teachers] like "this kid's going to fail the test because this kid's dumb and Black"...then you actually ace the test then they get to be like "how did you do that?" And they ask have you been paying attention in class and you'll be like "yes, I have I've been sitting right there right next to you" and then they'll be like,

"oh I didn't even know you were there." They act like you're the ghost in class.

The perceived quality of the school attended by participants was also an important factor in understanding academic achievement. Perhaps unintentionally, teachers' reflections on the quality of schools the students attend may impact the motivations of the students in these schools. Naema, a fifth-grade student shared,

My teachers said that our school is the baddest one because we didn't know the standards...I feel sad because it hurts my feelings and it gets other people in my class mad.

In response to whether her school expects her to succeed, her classmate Fatin said,

My teacher said that all the other schools were getting higher scores, but our school was not based on the standard grade [level of proficiency].

These responses suggest that teachers play a pivotal role in early academic success for Black and African American students. For these youth, differentiated expectations based on race, gender, and larger school performance, were identified as factors in academic achievement. Teachers have the capacity to support marginalized youth in a myriad of ways, and their indirect or direct actions can greatly impact these students' investment in learning. Understanding the complex dynamics between Black and African American students and their teachers will be beneficial in informing schools in how to best support diverse youth. Just as these teachers are instrumental as gatekeepers in academic achievement, community and familial factors also serve as facilitating or inhibiting elements.

Family and Community Factors Promoting and Inhibiting Academic Success

In addition to the influence of teachers and schools, families and communities are influencing factors in the academic achievement of Black and African American youth. These various elements have the potential to influence the perceptions students hold regarding the importance of schooling (Wiggan, 2008), serve as detractors to investment in academic success (Vega et al., 2015), and provide opportunities to receive additional learning (Williams & Portman, 2014). Participants described the important role that their family plays in the context of academic achievement. The youth also noted the role of neighborhood and community influences, which may both, impede and promote academic success.

Eli, a middle school student talked about the importance that his mother places on reading, saying,

My family really wants me to learn, especially my mom. I guess like she really wants me to read. Like in my room I have a whole drawer full of books that she wants me to read. So it's really important to my mom that I have books read.

Students in this study acknowledged that their parents lacked educational opportunities due to the unique circumstances regarding immigrating to a new country, issues around the English language, and poverty. Students within these families, suggested that their parents pushed them to succeed in school. Rayah explained it this way,

My parents are pushing us because we're getting opportunities they didn't have. My dad is strict about school. He pushes me hard. My whole family they want me to learn because they didn't know English so I started going to school and learning.

Nimo echoed her peers, saying,

I think that my family thinks that literacy is important and that it can have a huge impact on life and like when my family first came to America like they didn't know like no English that like made that hard for them and now like we get like to learn...and like it will just help us better in the future.

Participants also talked about the barriers to education that are present in their neighborhoods and communities. Respondents explained that community-level risk exposure greatly impacts their ability to learn and focus. Mahamud, an elementary school student shared that, *there's bad things in my neighborhood like shootings*. Esau, a middle school boy, expanded on these concerns and how he experiences the impact his community has on education, saying that,

Our community, I don't think people know how to read. Like some people they're in gangs, smoking, doing gangs, trying to kill people, smoking weed, drinking liquor, having fights.

Exposure to these various societal risks directly impacts how young individuals value education (Vega et al., 2015). In addition, the identified barriers also detract from students' capacity to focus, maintain safety, and avoid delinquent behavior (Busby, Lambert, & Ialongo, 2013).

At the same time, participants also discussed opportunities in their neighborhoods that positively influenced their academic success. Nimo said, *In this neighborhood, there's a lot of actually opportunities*. Esau gave an example of one of his peers who achieved academic success with support from a community program, saying,

He [peer] had to take special classes 'cuz he was behind us, behind everybody. But then once he came to [afterschool program], he was getting up high.

Hamadi detailed the importance of afterschool resources impacting his own success,

I was behind everyone and it took time for me to catch up. Then I would have to go get a tutor and take special classes, but then when I went with [afterschool program]. I passed ahead of everyone...now I'm ahead of everyone.

Finally, Danielle noted the advantage of living in an urban environment, saying,

When I went to the elementary school they let the [professional football] players come read to us and that they also had like [a community-based program] and you could come in and get books in the summer and then you could take them home with you.

As demonstrated in prior research, positive family support is important in promoting academic success, and this was evident in the responses of participants in this study. This point may be especially salient for respondents in this study, as many are refugees from African countries, and families arrived with little to no perceived opportunity. In addition, youth in the current study detailed the ways community context either facilitates or hinders educational attainment. While low-income communities generally experience greater exposure to risk, there are often opportunities in these neighborhoods that oppose the environmental factors and positively influence academic success. For example, afterschool programs play a substantial role in supporting young individuals through efforts such as tutoring (Hanlon, Simon, O'Grady, Carswell, & Callaman, 2009), and this may have contributed to the positive responses of students in this study. Furthermore, resources such as community centers and parks provide places for low-income youth to engage with peers outside of the school environment.

Cultural Considerations: Language, Stereotypes, and Difference

The messages received from peers may impact how young individuals come to believe in their own ability to succeed in school. Adverse peer-to-peer relations on the "playground" result in bullying, discrimination, and promote negative representations of difference (Fisher et al., 2015). Additionally, while some students overcome the racial prejudices of their peers and continue to thrive in an academic environment, others struggle with the perception that they are less than, due to their ethnicity (Fisher et al., 2015). The perceptions of participants in this study provide additional insight into how factors of racial discrimination shape their educational experiences.

Language, in the context of this study, manifested in two ways. First, the lack of English-language proficiency for

some children and parents appeared to create a substantial educational barrier for participants. This was particularly true for immigrant children who were new to the community. Second, respondents reported that language is often used in hurtful ways and that this leads frequently to discrimination and bullying behavior from peers. Fatin, an immigrant student, reflected on her experience when she first arrived in the United States, expressing the isolating nature of difference,

When we first come to America and we don't really speak good English...we couldn't make friends that much because some people don't want us to be friends with people... They be like 'oh Africans are scared of dog'... they scare us with dogs and they bully us about our culture and they say 'let's go bully those Black Africans.

Additionally, Naema addresses how bullying due to difference impacts her ability to focus in school,

It makes it harder for me in school because I don't learn easily and then they bully me and get mad at me. These responses demonstrate the ways that language, specifically around English, serves as a potential obstacle for academic success. Differences in language and culture can also be a method of creating difference (Kayira, 2015), and may lead to increases in bullying (Fisher et al., 2015).

Most participants appeared to be aware of inequitable distributions of power based on race and ethnicity. For example, Danielle asked, "How do White people get to have so much authority?" Participants also asked questions about the larger societal issues that face Blacks and African-Americans. Nimo asked, "How did this like this whole stereotype thing about race start?" Finally, Danielle asked the difficult question, "How come every time a Black person does something wrong it becomes a whole big deal...?". For students in this study, issues of racial tensions and power differentials frequently manifested through language, and impacted success for these students.

Discussion

This study examined the perceptions of academic achievement and educational opportunities among Black and African American 4th–8th grade students living in an urban public housing neighborhood. Participants' responses led to four identified themes that described the lived experiences of Black and African American students who live in low-income neighborhoods. The current study adds to existing literature by using the voices of younger students to better understand the current perceived educational challenges faced by Black and African American children and youth. In addition, this study demonstrates that younger Black and African American students have high

expectations for academic success, despite internalized negative messages they receive from various elements. Furthermore, the younger students in this study expressed more positive perspectives towards teachers, possibly indicating a developmental component that may change over time.

Many of the experiences noted in the four themes found in this study are like those expressed by older students in prior investigations, although results from the study provide additional societal and community level context of Black and African American student experiences. Previous research with high school and college-aged students reported perceptions of inequitable access to academic attainment (Williams & Bryan, 2013). However, findings from this study indicate that youth begin developing a sense of racial tension between themselves and their environment at an early age. Findings from this study indicate the importance conveyed by students about a perceived power differential between themselves and their teachers, peers, schools, and society, often resulting in the internalization of negative messages. Interestingly, the guiding questions from this study did not specifically address issues of race, yet respondents frequently identified racial inequities as substantial barriers conducive to learning.

Perhaps not surprising, participants stressed the importance of teachers acting as agents in inhibiting or facilitating their own academic achievement, and expressed concern over teachers holding inherent beliefs over perceived gaps in educational attainment for Black and African American students. Interactions between students and teachers are frequently immersed in power dynamics; at the heart of this relationship is the core idea that students are dependent on their teachers to learn and grow as young people (DeJong & Love, 2015). The quality and the perception of the student–teacher relationship can substantially impact learning for Black and African American students, positively or negatively (Milner & Laughter, 2015). Findings reinforce the need for teachers to be mindful and aware of their positionality in relation to Black and African American students.

Many participants expressed a concern about feeling *invisible*, and at times, implied that they were attending schools and living in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of intolerance or racism. Some students believed that their teachers cared less about them than other students, a finding that has been reported elsewhere, although in research with older students in high school or college (Bottiani et al., 2016). Whether this perception is solely due to the student or the teacher, or to a combination of the two, the resulting dynamic produces a difficult learning environment for Black and African American students. Strong student–teacher relationships maximize investments in learning and commitment to education (Bayram Özdemir & Stattin, 2014; Milner & Laughter, 2015). The absence of

such relationships poses a significant challenge to academic achievement among Black and African American students.

Students' views of their neighborhood and community also affected their perceptions of academic achievement. Perhaps influencing the success of the participants in this study, several of these students discussed the importance that parents place on education and academic achievement, which has been found to be a critical factor for strong Black and African American academic achievement (Williams & Bryan, 2013). Additionally, similar to past findings, students noted that antisocial and illegal behaviors in their communities had an adverse effect on their education (Vega et al., 2015). Yet, a few students also noted the positive impact of special classes and afterschool programs in aiding their academic success. One reason posited is that immigrant families tend to stress the importance of academic attainment more so than native-born parents (Thomas, 2009), which is representative of many students in this study. Despite neighborhood, school, and community challenges, and perhaps supported by family and neighborhood resources, many participants expressed a sense of hope and optimism for the future.

The findings of this study demonstrate that context matters, and often manifests in dialectical manners, where students residing within the same neighborhood differently perceived opportunity. The results of this study promote increased knowledge of the factors impeding or facilitating educational success, and considering the continual lower academic achievement for Black and African American students, understanding these aspects in greater detail can aid educators, practitioners, and families in providing context-specific support. Lastly, increased information of individual factors bolstering resilience among Black and African American students amid high-risk communities provides additional insight into unique circumstances of effective spaces to intervene. This study aims to provide this greater sense of understanding.

Implications

Findings suggest that young people of Black and African American descent living in low-income neighborhoods may be at elevated risk of internalizing negative messages about their own academic potential and achievement. Furthermore, these negative messages and perceptions may be reinforced by institutional structures such as schools and educational centers. In this regard, it is imperative that practitioners, educators, researchers, and policy makers are aware of adverse messages that are sent to, and reinforced in, young Black and African American students. Interventionists should also help support youth to create a more positive counter-narrative to these challenges. In addition, findings from this

study indicate that young people have unique insights into the pressures of academic achievement at an early age. To fully understand and evaluate the impact of social, political, and economic influences on youth, it is important to continue to provide young people with an avenue to express their expertise on their own experiences. Finally, study findings suggest that community-based youth development programs are well-positioned to support Black and African American students. To promote the potential of Black and African American youth, comprehensive community-based programs must focus on creating supportive opportunities for youth to engage in navigating potentially challenging neighborhoods.

Finally, several study limitations should be noted. Both investigators leading the focus groups in the study previously held roles within the host agency, and were known to respondents in varying capacities. This may have increased social desirability among participants (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, both focus group facilitators were White and this may have affected participants' responses about issues of race and culture. Additionally, the convenient sample size of respondents from low-income public housing neighborhoods limits the generalizability of the results. Lastly, all respondents voluntarily participated in the afterschool program, which may alter their investment in the academic attainment, and therefore, impact their responses to the focus group question. No follow-up focus groups or individual interviews were conducted.

Conclusion

Throughout the last several decades, research focused on educational disparities among Black and African American students (O'Connor et al., 2007). These youth, specifically those residing within low-income communities, encounter disproportionate rates of risk exposure (Vega et al., 2015), which greatly impacts their ability to learn in school. In addition, prior research has focused on the perceptions of high school or college Black and African American students (Williams & Bryan, 2013). This study concentrated on the views of elementary and middle school students, primarily to provide a greater understanding into the current issues surrounding academic attainment for these students. Based in a phenomenological approach, the focus group responses generated from youth in this study depict a dialectal reality; sources of fostering or impeding success were varied and contextual dependent. While some youth detailed supportive opportunities within the personal, familial, educational, and societal variables, many of these young individuals discussed the enormity of factors inhibiting their academic success.

Study findings suggest that Black and African American students perceive and encounter negative perceptions and stereotypes surrounding their academic potential that are rooted in race, socioeconomic status, and their environment. Additional research that uses the voices and perspectives of young people to understand the relationship between race, ethnicity, and academic achievement is needed. Practitioners and educators should pay close attention to issues of race and ethnicity in community and school settings.

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