Perceived Barriers to African American Male Education Completion

Ebonesha Graham

The College at Brockport

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Abstract

In efforts to inform future school counseling and educational practices, the following research paper was constructed to determine "What are the perceived barriers to African American male education completion?" This paper seeks to expose roadblocks and define the role father absenteeism plays in the educational experience of inner city African American males. Themes of household makeup and parental substitutions, exposure to risk factors, and the formation of identity were explored. Both a literature review and research study were conducted. The findings revealed numerous barriers such as a patterned cycle involving father absence, past failures, identity formation, generational behaviors, and the breakdown of the African American community.

*Keywords*: absent fathers, fatherless, African American males, education, barriers

**Introduction**

Over the past five years the Rochester City School District's (RCSD) graduation rate has remained constant and has had very little change. The graduation rate for students completing high school after four years hovers around 44% and the number of African American male graduates decreases each school year.

RCSD has made numerous attempts to address the declining rates of African American male graduates and low graduation rates district wide. Solutions and interventions have included hiring a new superintendent, staff alterations on the Board of Education, closing failing schools, combining educational facilities, and creating learning programs to assist students who are in danger of not receiving a high school diploma. All City High School, New Beginnings, Youth and Justice Academy, Young Mothers facility, bilingual schools, extended day programs, and the creation of college preparatory sites are examples of the RCSD's initiatives to improve graduation rates. The implementation of these interventions serve as strengths for the district. However, there are limitations to the implemented interventions. Limitations includes RCSD's constant changing of approaches to direct solutions, limited time given for interventions to be successful, a lack of consistency throughout the district, and inadequate quantities of staffing to assist students.

In efforts to improve graduation rates and place focus on the African American male population a study was conducted within a RCSD program school. The purpose of this study was to obtain African American male students' perspective on barriers that impede high school completion and to learn what supports are needed to secure a diploma. The aim of this study was to collect data to inform both RCSD and school counseling practices in order to address and eliminate obstacles while properly supporting African American male students. The method

used for data collection in this study comprised of five focus groups with twenty African

American males.  This study was important because it shed light on the perceptions and lived

experiences of African American male students.  The use of focus groups allowed for open and

honest conversations regarding what is needed to adequately serve and improve African

American male graduation rates.  Before executing this study, a wider aspect of the problem and

a review of the literature was conducted to examine previous conclusions regarding African

American males' and education.  The next section of this paper presents a broader view of the

issue pertaining to education completion of African American males.

**Presentation of the overall problem**

In the United States of America it has been proven that obtaining a high school diploma

is the first step required to succeed on a social, civil, and economic level.  However, the Schott

Foundation for Public Education reports that African American males in public education are

least likely to secure a regular diploma four years after beginning high school (The Schott

Foundation, 2012).  Further, New York State is ranked 50$^{th}$ (out of 50) in regards to African

American males graduation rates.  Results from the 2009-2010 school year revealed that African

American males in New York State had a graduation rate of 37%.  In contrast, White males had a

graduation rate of 78%, which shows a 42% gap between the two.  Aside from New York State

being ranked 50$^{th}$ among the states for African American male graduation rates, the Rochester

City School District (RCSD) was the lowest ranked district in the country with an African

American male graduation rate of 9% (The Schott Foundation, 2012).

Past research shows that African American male adolescents' poor academic

performance has been associated to a lack of positive role models, low self-esteem, hopelessness,

productivity dysfunction, and low expectations by the schools, communities, and society at-large

(Gardner 1985; Kunjufu, 1984; Lee & Lindsey, 1985; Majors, 1986; Majors & Billson, 1992; Morgan, 1980 as cited in Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Although many of the studies listed were conducted more than 20 years ago, the information gathered is still very relevant today. Current studies show that minority populations continue to be underserved when it comes to advanced educational courses. They are taught by under qualified teachers and have fewer resources for instruction (Grimmett, 2010). In addition, African American male adolescents continue to struggle with identity development (Grimmett, 2010) and have beliefs that directly affect motivation to prepare for graduation or attain careers that are satisfying and rewarding (Turner & Ziebell, 2011). Grimmett (2010) stated that "urban youth are also typically underserved or unattended to because of a historically racist United States social system" (p.74).

Although the information gathered above is relevant, it does not address paternal influence on the educational experience of African American males. In the traditional model of fatherhood, a father is defined as a man that plays a dominant role in the lives of their children. They assumed a broad range of responsibilities in their children's lives from defining and supervising development, being a provider, and nurturing their children while residing in the same home. In addition, fathers play a major role in the marital satisfaction of their wives (Manhas, 2014). Although these are the roles that fathers are supposed to play within their families, the traditional model of a father is not always practiced in African American homes. The 2013 United States Census report showed that 49% of African American children under the age of 18 reside in single mother households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The 2013 report also shows that African American male children outnumber African American female children in single mother households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

After reviewing the alarming graduation rates, the 2013 U.S. Census report, and being left with additional questions, a literature review was conducted on the topic of African American male's education obtainment and paternal involvement.  This study focuses on the role father absenteeism plays in the educational experience of inner city African American males.  It also aims to address the following research question, "What are the perceived barriers to education completion of fatherless African American males?"

For the purpose of this paper, the term "fatherless" applies to African American males who live in a home where the father is a non-residential parent.  The term "absent" relates to fathers who are not in their sons' lives.   The themes of household makeup and parental substitutions, formation of identity, and exposure to risk factors will be explored.

## Review of the Literature

### Household Makeup and Parental Substitutions

#### Absent and non-residential fathers.

The reasons for African American fathers living outside the home and being away from their children can be linked to external factors of unemployment, imprisonment, high death rates, and the imbalance of the male-female ratio (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1997).  Since the 1960's joblessness among African American men meant separation from their families in order for mothers to qualify for state aid and welfare benefits (Willis & Clark, 2009).  African American males have always been incarcerated at a higher rate than those of White males (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1997).  Further, African American men die prematurely at twice the rate of White men and traditionally the number of women has been greater than the number of men.  Therefore, some children are born to women who do not expect to marry the fathers of their children. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2013), the top five causes of death

among Black males in the United States are heart disease, cancer, unintentional injuries, stroke, and homicide. These causes of death contribute to African American males being raised without a father. However, the main factor of a father's absence has to do with his choice not to be an active father in the child's life. Regardless of the reason for the father's absence, his presence leaves an empty space in the home.

Aside from the void that a father's absence leaves in the home, his absence can have a bearing on his son's educational experience at an early age (Joe & Davis, 2009). For example, children who grow up in fatherless homes have a greater risk of experiencing challenges in their lives than those youth who grow up with a father at home (Manhas, 2014). According to DeBell (2008), absent father status has been associated with a reduction in the child's well-being. DeBell (2008) described well-being in terms of worsened health, lower academic achievement, negative educational experiences, and less parental involvement in school activities. Joe and Davis (2009), found that a fathers presence, based on their academic beliefs and behaviors, was associated with an increase in school readiness of African American boys entering kindergarten. Both positive academic achievement beliefs and parenting behaviors, such as discussing science topics, reading books, helping the child with homework, and attending parent-teacher conferences, were found to be most effective in facilitating school readiness and early achievement (Joe & Davis, 2009).

**Single mother homes.**

In addition to fathers influence on their children's well-being, fathers also play a positive role in the family as a nurturer of his wife and kids (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1997). When discussing single mothers, research often overlooks the imprint that absent and non-custodial fathers leave on single mothers. This imprint can have effects that trickle down from the mother

to the relationship with her son.   Some researchers have examined the relationship between maternal happiness or personal well-being and marital happiness, and found that women who were married reported greater life satisfaction (Manhas, 2014).  Robinson and Werblow (2012) report that African American single mothers are more likely to experience stressful events, making them more at risk for emotional distress, which increases the likelihood of making poor parenting decisions.  According to Robinson and Werblow (2012), single mother parenting can directly affect the educational outcomes of their sons.  Examples of the direct effect were not provided in the literature.

Due to the absence of the father, mothers are often left to raise their sons.  Not only are single mothers faced with the responsibility of providing for their sons financially, physically and emotionally, but they also have an impact on their son's education. According to Robinson and Werblow (2012), most African American mothers value their children's education, and they encourage them to do well in school.  Common traits of single mothers that encourage high school completion of their African American sons includes the mother's positive attitude towards education, involvement in their son's school and personal activities, knowledge and skills to navigate the educational system, and their use of a number of parenting strategies to assist them in raising their sons (Doherty & Craft, 2011; Gantt & Greif, 2009; Robinson & Werblow, 2012). However, African American mothers often receive blame and criticism for school failures, problematic behaviors, and negative characteristics of their sons (Robinson & Werblow, 2012).

**Male substitutes in the community**.

A well-known African Proverb states, "It takes a village to raise a child" (African Proverbs, 1998).  This is essentially what happens when fathers are absent from their son's lives.

Raising the child becomes a communal effort and African American boys tend to seek out male role models or mentors from the community.

In the past young African American males used to look up to the "old heads" of the community for support and guidance in place of absent fathers.  Typically an "old head" was a socially and economically stable man who preached and practiced the values of hard work, family orientation and obligation, and being active in the church (Willis & Clark, 2009).  It was an "old heads" duty to act as surrogate fathers and mentors for young African American males who needed attention, care, and moral support.  "Old heads" also served as an example of a devoted worker, lover, husband, citizen, and church member (Willis & Clark, 2009).

Changes in the African American community regarding the roles of fathers, economic instability, and the decreased impact of the church have taken place.  The "old heads" have now been replaced by the "new old heads" (Willis & Clark, 2009).  The "new old head" does not support or positively influence young African American males.  Instead the "new old head" opposes family values and has a string of multiple women and children whom he feels no obligation toward.  The new old head displays success through material things such as flashy cars, clothes and jewelry.  Often the "new old head" obtains his money through illegal activities. The "new old head" leads young males in the opposite direction of school and emulates a lifestyle that does not focus on education or career success (Willis & Clark, 2009).  The stature of the "old head" has diminished.  Young males no longer look to "old heads" for guidance because they view them as being "outdated and irrelevant" (Willis & Clark, 2009, p. 553).

To combat the glorified lifestyle of the "new old head" and to reinforce the values once taught by the "old head," many community leaders and school districts attempt to implement enrichment initiatives geared towards the success of African American males within the

educational system as well as society (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Depending on the school district, academic enrichment programs take place after school, on weekends, and in the summer. In addition, many African American mentors try to engage African American young men in activities designed to build a positive self-identity (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Activities include spending time with adult African American mentors, studying African and/or African American history, in school lessons focused on famous African Americans and highlights of the African American culture, and participation in community service projects. Program directors and community leaders believe that the development of a positive identity acts as a preventive measure against drug use, gang involvement, and poor academic performance (Bailey & Paisley, 2004).

**Formation of Identity**

**Attachment Style**.

Research suggests that educational success depends on childhood development. Specifically, studies have linked paternal care to child development (Irving & Hudley, 2008; Joe & Davis, 2009; Thomas, Krampe & Newton, 2008). In male children, school adjustment and performance, graduation, personality disorders, higher self-esteem, and hyper masculinity are all influenced by the presence of a father. In addition, a son's relationship with his father plays a key role in shaping the attachment style of the child (Willis & Clark, 2009). Personal attachment and attachment styles are formed during childhood (Willis & Clark, 2009). Involved African American fathers who are perceived as being warm and supportive tend to raise sons who have a secure attachments style. Males with secure attachments style form relationships easily, are comfortable depending on others and having others depend on them, and they do not fear abandonment. In contrast, African American males who develop an avoidant attachment style is

characterized as being uncomfortable in developing close relationships or bonds with others. This attachment style is hypothesized to be the result of inconsistent or absent parental care from fathers.  African American males who have a secure attachment style were found to better adjust to entering school during childhood than males who have avoidant attachments.  Examples include having a higher comfort level in the classroom, initiating contact with peers, and easily forming friendships with classmates (Willis & Clark, 2009).

Although attachments are formed in childhood, attachment theorist have found that personal attachment has implications well into adulthood (Willis & Clark, 2009).  Weak ties between fathers and sons in one generation may make it more difficult for sons to form stable bonds as adults and in adult relationships.  Sexual and relationship habits of the father are often adopted and imitated by the son.  For example, instead of entering into monogamous relationships, the son of an absent father may adopt the behaviors of his father.  This includes thinking it is acceptable for a man to be uncommitted to his sexual partners and children.  As a result, this may lead to a cycle of unattached fathers and sons, which leads to single female headed households and the potential substitution of the "new old head" for the father (Willis & Clark, 2009).

**Identity, Culture, and Society**

Traditionally a male's first role model or life guide is his father.  Males who come from fatherless homes are frequently left to "figure" out who they are by themselves.  Being fatherless and residing in a single mother home produces an added burden for young African American males in their search for their identity (Joe & Davis, 2009).  Joe and Davis (2009), highlighted the importance of fathers' racial and ethnic socialization efforts for young African American males.  The reason is that this population is often troubled with identity issues connected to racial

stereotypes and low academic expectations.  According to the study conducted by Joe and Davis

(2009), fathers who frequently discussed the racial and ethnic heritage of their family with their

sons positively influenced school readiness and early academic achievement of their sons.  This

finding supports existing evidence that indicates the importance of developing a positive ethnic

identity for higher cognitive scores in reading, greater factual knowledge and better problem-

solving skills, and higher levels of academic placement and outcomes for African American

youth (Joe & Davis, 2009).

 A review of the research shows that most African American students and parents are

aware of the importance of education (Irving & Hudley, 2008).  However, society and the media

focus on school failure, high rates of educational dropout, over-representation in special

education classes, and low standardized test scores to reflect a problem of educational

underachievement among African Americans.  Less focus is placed on studies involving African

American males that reveal a positive relationship between racial mistrust and oppositional

cultural attitudes (Irving & Hudley, 2008).  Instead focus is placed on an inverse relationship

between outcome expectations, outcome values, and academic achievement.  Racial mistrust is a

major predictor of academic achievement.  As African American males' mistrust of White

teachers and the school system increases, their academic outcome expectations decrease.  The

study concluded that African American males who have high racial mistrust, oppositional

cultural attitudes, and a low value for educational outcomes have lower expectations of

educational success (Irving & Hudley, 2008).

 In addition to society's and the media's negative focus on African American males'

school failures, educators also assist in creating barriers to their educational experience.  It has

been supported that when African American male students from urban areas come to school with

different values and perspectives than those of their non- African American teachers and administrators, cultural collision is likely to take place (McCray, Beachum &Yawn, 2015). McCray et al (2015), defines cultural collision as "the clash that often occurs in urban schools between students of color from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and educators who reside in different communities and bring a middle-class value system to the educative process" (p. 347).  African American male students are able to recognize when the school climate or culture is not conducive for them to achieve at high levels.  Results of the research show that instead of inner city students being empowered to achieve, they feel disempowered as a result of their keen interpretation of how middle class school officials perceive them and their struggles them (McCray, Beachum &Yawn, 2015).

Beachum and McCray (2011) noted that when educators view students of color and students from the inner city as inherently flawed, suspect, and corrupt, they treat them as having nothing of value to offer or contribute to the learning process.  As a result of these beliefs and cultural collision, there is an overuse of suspension and expulsion toward African American students (McCray, Beachum &Yawn, 2015).  McCray et al (2015) reveals that schools that serve high percentages of poor minority males are more likely to have a higher rate of suspension than schools that serve higher socioeconomic status white male students.  Although black students receive more disciplinary referrals and have higher rates of suspensions and explosions, there was no evidence or findings that African American males engage in more deviant behaviors in comparison with other students.  "This is an indication of the high level of deficit thinking that many educators bring with them to the educative process in regard to African American males" (McCray, Beachum &Yawn, 2015, p. 353).  In addition McCray, Beachum, and Yawn's research found that school suspensions and expulsions does not correct "bad behavior" and they have the

exact opposite impact on students. It is suggested that out-of-school suspensions may be linked to several negative educational outcomes including continued academic failure, grade retention, negative school attitudes, and increased dropout rates (McCray, Beachum &Yawn, 2015).

**Exposure to risk due to being fatherless**

      **Income level.**

Socioeconomic status plays a major role in American families. Over the last several decades, changes have occurred in almost all American families because of economic factors. Jobs have been outsourced, companies have been down-sized, and entire industries have been mechanized (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1997). Economic factors such as those previously listed often create financial hardships for American families and place them at risk of being exposed to poverty. Capra (2009) explains that poverty does discriminate. In America, 24.7% of the African American population and 20.7% of the Hispanic population are below the poverty line compared to only 10.2% of Caucasians who fall below the poverty line. Not only does the African American population experience poverty more often than Whites, but the income of an African American single mother household is less than half of the income of a two parent African American household (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The U.S. Census Bureau reports that a married two parent African American household earns an average of $65,914 annually, but a single African American mother only earns $25,594 annually (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The research shows that absent fathers place single mothers and their children at further risk for living in poverty when he does not contribute to the home financially.

Children who are raised in single mother homes are worse off financially than those raised by both parents (DeBell, 2008). Most single mothers are employed at some level outside the home in efforts to support the family (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1997), which reduces the time

spent to care for her children.  In addition, it is increasingly difficult for one parent to earn a living wage to support an entire family.  The poverty levels of families, the strain of coping in families who are viewed differently from those in the mainstream, and the discrimination associated with educational systems of African Americans have resulted in major gaps in the educational achievement of Black children (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1997).  Emanique Joe and James Davis (2009) found that there is a strong effect of socioeconomic status on children's school readiness.  They indicated that children from less affluent families are less likely to be prepared for kindergarten (Joe & Davis, 2009).  The recommendations of the study emphasized the importance of parents' engaging in academic activities with their children at home to offset some of the negative effects of socioeconomic status on children's academic performance (Joe & Davis, 2009).  Examples of these academic activities were reading books with children, practicing letters and sounds, discussing nature or engaging in science projects, and explaining ethnic heritage (Joe & Davis, 2009).  This recommendation may pose a problem for parents of African American males due to the father being absent and single mothers working to provide for the home.

African American males living in poverty usually attend public inner city schools where a quality education is not easy to obtain.  Aside from the efforts and attitudes of their parents, African American students face challenges inside the school due to their economic status. Theresa Capra (2009) reveals:

"As a community college professor and recent high school teacher and administrator in low-performing, economically depressed urban schools, I have witnessed the many obstacles associated with preparing students for college. Advanced courses are rarely offered in these schools due to a lack of perceived eligible students, and most

instructional time is spent on remediation and preparation for standardized tests.

Creativity is not highly valued; instead, obedience and repetition are applauded.

Practically all of these students live in households where no one has any experience of

higher education; thus, the expectation of attending college is not as important as the

message to "stay out of trouble" and "finish high school (p. 75)."

**Criminal involvement.**

Studies show that African American males who live in poverty are often involved in

criminal behaviors.  Wright and Younts (2009) analyzed data from the National Youth Survey

containing 1,314 African American males and reported that 52% of African American males

between the ages of 11 and 17 self-reported involvement in property, violent, drug, service, and

disorder crimes.  When looking at the relationship between race and crime, it was found that

there is an increase in criminal behaviors among African American males who come from single

parent homes when they are also faced with other negative variables.  Negative variables include

low educational attainment, an unimportant view of marriage, low social class, parents' approval

of crime, peers approval of crime, and residing in crime ridden neighborhoods.  On the other

hand, exposure to positive variables have been shown to decrease criminal behaviors among

African American males.  These variables are religious importance and attendance, parental

bonds, time with family, educational importance, employment importance, attitudes that reflect it

is wrong to commit crimes, repercussions for committed crimes, low alcohol consumption, and

alcohol disapproval (Wright & Younts, 2009).

According to Wright and Younts (2009), children who come from fatherless or "broken

homes" (homes without two parents) may engage in criminal behaviors for various reasons.

Reasons include reduced formal and informal social control, increased socialization to

aggression, and decreased fear of consequences.  Increased criminal behaviors can be associated with broken homes, however strong social bonds are reported to decrease criminal behavior involving African American males.  African American adolescents who reported strong family relationships committed less overall delinquency (Ruggles, 1994).  African Americans use strong family ties to adapt to their disadvantaged position in society and family ties are a way of coping with poverty and high rates of single parenthood (Ruggles, 1994).  In addition, aspirations of educational and occupational success can be considered as survival strategies within the African American community.  High levels of aspirations represent stronger commitment to conventional society, which in turn decreases criminal behavior (Wright & Younts, 2009).  Wright and Younts (2009) reported that 56% of African American males with low educational aspirations committed crimes.  However, only 38% of males with high educational aspirations participated in delinquent acts.  Wright and Younts' (2009) study found educational and occupational aspirations to be strong predictors of decreased self-reported criminal behavior.

**Adult responsibilities**

While some fatherless African American males get involved with crime in the "streets," others transition into "the man of the house."  The role of "man of the house" takes place when young males in single mother homes become partners in household management (Messina, Smith & Waters, 2014).  The term "man of the house" is used by family members to compel boys to help out with their families and in the household.  The need for a man of the house arises due to the departure or absence of the father and it is passed down to the next oldest male in the home, no matter the male's age.  According to Messina, Smith and Waters' qualitative study, African American men reported being "the man of the house" meant "acting like an adult" by contributing financially, caring for their mothers and younger siblings, cooking meals, household

management, and providing discipline and emotional support to family members inside the home (Messina, Smith & Waters, 2014). These men explained that the position of "the man of the house" "fell into their laps" and they sought to fill the void of an absent father who was unable or unwilling to be the man of the house (p. 57). While some mothers encourage their sons to take on adult responsibilities, other mothers initially resisted (Messina, Smith & Waters, 2014).

Although being "the man of the house" appears to be a positive role for some young males, the title often comes with negative consequences. Expectations from mothers can be vague and open to interpretation. These unclear expectations can lead to contradictions that have important implications and difficulties in later years. Future difficulties experienced by single mothers may include not being able to control their son's behaviors both in the home and at school. Young males in this role receive few of the privileges given to parents and other grown-ups, such as clear lines of authority, respect from other adults, or even privacy (Messina, Smith & Waters, 2014). The role of "man of the house" gives young males a sense of authority that is often taken away in the presence of their mothers or when their mother begins a new relationship with a man. This transition can be hard and confusing for young males to understand. Some males began to defy their mothers and disregard her rules, develop a lack of respect for adults, become involved in illegal street and gang activities to support the family, or prematurely start their own families before really understanding the role of a man (Messina, Smith & Waters, 2014).

The "man of the house" role may also impact some young males' educational experience. Due to the role inside of the home allowing young males a form of authority, young males may view themselves as equals with other adults including teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. Some young males lose respect for these adults and their loss of respect

may demonstrated their behaviors.  Other young males develop an attitude that showcases

themselves as an adult and they may believe that adults do not have the right to tell them what to

do.  Both of these types of attitudes prevent young males from being successful in the classroom.

Also the role of "man of the house" offers young males additional responsibilities.  Very often

school is either missed or no longer considered a priority when young males are needed to be a

caregiver to younger children, manage the household, or financially provide for the family

(Messina, Smith & Waters, 2014).  Therefore, some young males' educational experiences are

negatively impacted due to the circumstances of the family as a result of an absent father.

**Major Findings**

The above review of the literature was originally conducted to discover, "What are the

perceived barriers to education completion of fatherless African American males?"  The

literature reveals that barriers faced by fatherless African American males that may impact their

educational experience includes being raised by single mothers and male substitutes, forming

their own identity and culture, learning to navigate society as an African American male alone,

being exposed to risk factors of living in poverty and criminal involvement, and taking on the

role of "man of the house."  The research presented evidence that all of these barriers could

impact the educational experience of African American males well before high school.  The

research also states that fatherless African American males experience a reduction in well-being,

school readiness, early achievement, school adjustment and performance, and graduation rates.

Although findings seem appropriate and provide an answer to the proposed question, the

research failed to clearly explain how or why these reductions occur.

However, the review of the research was able to highlight the fact that African American

males are impacted both inside and outside of the school by the absence and/or non-involvement

of their fathers.  Not only does a father alter the make-up of the household, but he also contributes to the up-bringing of his son whether or not he is active in the child's life.  A lack of paternal presence can have a bearing on the son's level of supervision, choice of role models, socioeconomic status, views of themselves as a part of society, and their role within the household.

Absent and non-residential fathers impact the community and have a major effect on single mothers.  Unattached fathers alter the community by moving away from the traditional path of an "old head" and adopt the lifestyle of the "new old head".   As previously explained, "old heads" helped to build communities while stressing hard work and educational success. However, the "new old head" promotes to opposite.  Instead the "new old head" glorifies a negative life style that distract young males from their educational paths.  Fathers who are absent affect single mother's well-being and income level, which directly affect the child.  In addition, the research revealed a cycle of behaviors that have contributed to the breakdown of the African American community.  The cycle impacts African Americans as a whole and it develops from father's absence, single mother homes, low educational attainment, challenges in identity formation, and generational behaviors.  The cycle can be labeled as fatherless males fathering fatherless males.

In regards to the original question of "What are the perceived barriers to education completion of fatherless African American males?", the literature review above shed light on the many challenges and exposure to risk factors faced by African American males. Poverty, self-identity, household make up, role models, the educational system, and the media can alter an African American male's attitude towards education success.  It is possible that African American males' educational experience and high school non-completion rates could be

impacted by and attributed to one, many, or all of these factors.  Therefore, the current study

below sought to address the following research question, "What are the perceived barriers to

education completion of African American males?"

**The Current Study**

This study aimed to provide an opportunity for African American male students to share

their experiences and perceptions of barriers to on-time graduation, high school completion, and

the role fathers and other supports play in the educational experience of inner city African

American males.  Intended outcomes of this study were to give voice to African American male

experiences and reveal information needed to inform school counseling and educational

practices.  This study is important because the information collected is vital in supporting

students, improving graduation rates and assisting African American male students in

overcoming barriers to education completion.  A qualitative approach using focus groups was the

method for data collection and the data was analyzed using grounded theory.

## Methodology

**Setting, Recruitment, and Participants**

After gaining approval from the Rochester City School District's Institutional Review

Board on the first submission, data collection took place in an inner city non-traditional program

school.  The school is considered a non-traditional school because it is an alternative learning

program that allows students to have access to their traditional high schools.  The program

school caters to students in grades $10^{th}$ -$12^{th}$, between the ages of 17 and 21 years old.  Education

completion is the sole focus of the school and it fosters a supportive learning environment for

mature students with minimal distractions.  Currently there are 645 students enrolled in the

school program.  The population consists of 309 males, 226 of the males are African American,

and majority of the African American males are 19 years in age.  In regards to upcoming

anticipated graduation of the African American male population, 44 are eligible to graduate in

June 2016 and 11 are eligible to graduate in August 2016.  Of the 226 African American males

enrolled in the school, only 74 have father's contact information listed in their Power School

record and 23 have some other male contact information listed.

Recruitment for this study was ongoing and it took place through personal visits in

classrooms, hallways, and the cafeteria.  Also, an informational banner was placed outside of the

counselor's office.  The study required the participation of 20 African American males.

Therefore males of other races and all female students were excluded.  All African American

male students in the school were eligible for participation, students were selected based on their

willingness to participate by placing their name on a sign-up sheet and being in attendance

during the scheduled meeting time.  A written informed consent form was signed and obtained

from males age 18 and over.  Participants under the age of 18 were required to return a signed

parental consent form and signed assent form.

Twenty African American male students enrolled in grades 10th, 11th, and 12th

participated in the study.  They ranged in ages from 17 to 20 and they have anticipated

graduation dates of June 2016, August 2016, and January 2017.  Nineteen of the participants will

be graduating outside of their cohort.  This means they are graduating more than four years after

the year they entered into the 9th grade.  One participant will be graduating on time with his

cohort.  Additional data regarding participants can be found in the chart below.

## Information about Participants
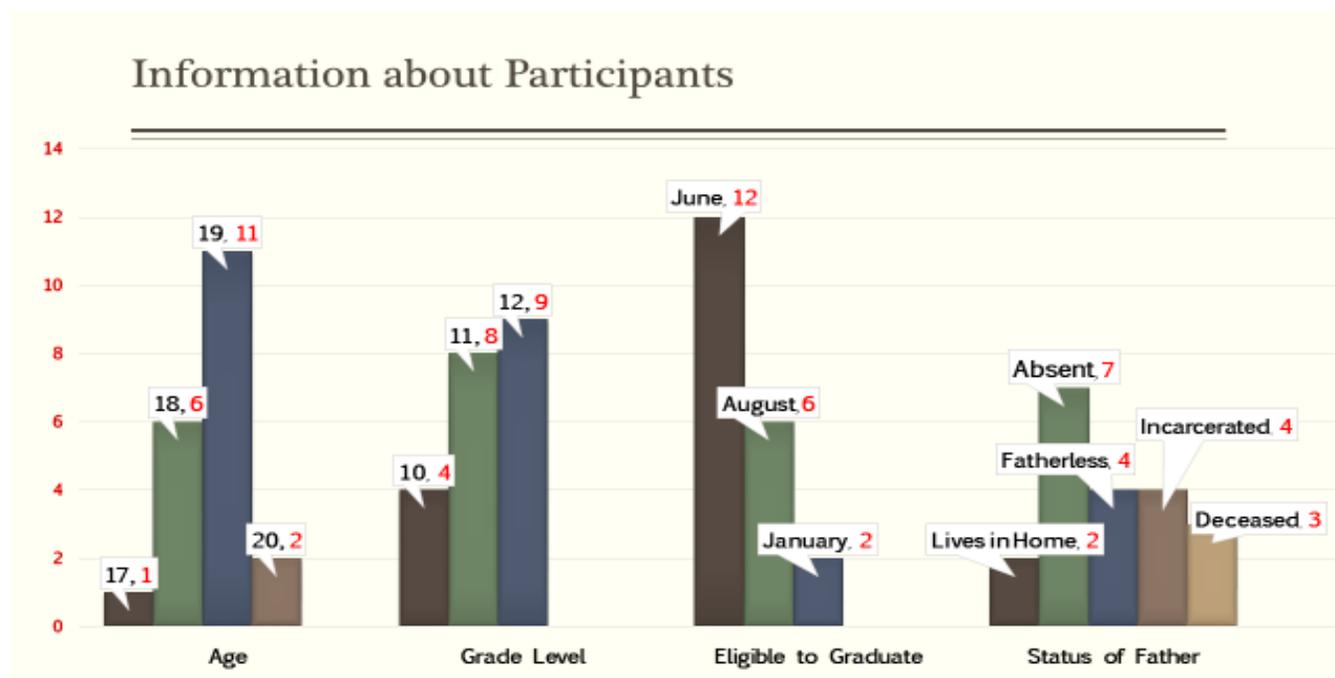


**Data Collection**

Data was collected through the use of focus groups.  Five focus groups were conducted. Focus Group One contained 5 participants, Focus Group Two contained 5 participants, Focus Group Three contained 3 participants, Focus Group Four contained 4 participants, and Focus Group Five contained 3 participants.  The focus groups ranged in durations of 15 to 27 minutes. Focus groups took place in the counselor's office during students lunch period.

Based on the findings of the literature, six opened ended questions were created and posed to participants.  Each question was asked to solicit different types of data: 1) experience/background (What do you think got in the way of you completing high school on time?); 2) significance of school (What keeps you coming to school? What are your reasons for not dropping out of school?); 3) opinion/value (What role, if any, does education play in helping you to succeed in your life?); 4) paternal involvement (Explain your relationship with your father?  How has your father impacted or not impacted your educational experience?); 5) family/community supports/needs (How have personal and/or community supports assisted you

(or not) in your educational experience? What personal and/or community supports are needed to assist you in completing high school?); and 6) school supports/needs (In what ways does the staff at school provide you with support? In what ways can the staff at school support you differently? What more would you like from the staff at school?).

All six questions were posed to the entire group. Each participant was given the opportunity to answer the questions and dialogue amongst participants was encouraged. Participants answered all questions and engaged in conversations that offered more in depth information than what was asked in the original question. The focus groups were audio recorded and stored by the researcher. After each focus group the researcher processed the experience with participants. A debrief team containing school counselors and the school social worker were available after each focus group in case males needed to individually process their thoughts and emotions further. All participants declined to meet with the debriefing team.

**Data Analysis**

After focus groups were completed, responses were analyzed using grounded theory. Grounded theory is a general research method used to guide data collection for data analysis (Grounded Theory Institute, 2014). It is the systematic generation of theory from a set of orderly research procedures leading to the emergence of conceptual categories. In qualitative research coding is the main categorizing strategy (Grounded Theory Institute, 2014).

Cluster coding was used to analyze the data gathered from the focus groups. The data was then examined through four cycles of coding. The first cycle of coding produced key words and phrases, the second cycle produced categories, the third cycle produced narratives, and themes emerged from the fourth cycle of coding.

<div align="center">

**Results**

</div>

The aim of this study was to directly learn about obstacles that got in the way of African American male high school completion and to understand what supports were needed for these males to secure a diploma. In addition, there was a focus on the role fathers play in these males educational experience. Not only did findings reveal that African American males are aware of both internal and external factors that have played a role in their journey towards graduation, but they place a high value on the importance of education. The results of this study consist of verbatim responses from the participants. The responses were categorized. The results of this study have implications for school counselors and school districts to assist with African American male high school completion. The three recurring themes among the participants were a sense of accomplishment, personal struggles and choices, and life and environmental factors.

**Sense of accomplishment**

### Goal-oriented

Succeeding at graduating from high school was at the forefront of these African American males minds. All participants expressed it was their personal goal to complete school obtain a high school diploma. It was apparent that receiving a high school diploma served as far more than fulfilling education requirements. Instead the diploma symbolized achievement, the ending of failure, a way to make families proud, a tool to open doors, and one less reason for society to "look down on" them as an African American male. Above all obtaining a high school diploma represented a start to a better life. Although participants may not be graduating on time, they continue to attend school and they expressed that dropping out to get a GED was not an option.

Supporting Narratives:

- "That diploma is a certificate of completion. And like yes it will open doors for me but it's also my way of shuttin' up everybody up who said I couldn't do it."

- "The reason I come to school 'cause it ain't nothing out there in the streets. Like it's nothing, it's boring. I already witnessed that already. It's boring not coming to school. And the reason I haven't dropped out yet is because I don't want to become another statistic. I don't want to be dead or in jail. I want to be a graduate somewhere."

- "Getting' my diploma means a lot to me because I can be stripped of everything but they can't take my education from me."

- "I need this diploma so I can go to college. And really the only way to get out of Rochester is if you go to college somewhere else just for you to leave. If I don't finish (school) I cant just up and leave. And I just need to leave here."

**Expectancy**

There was a sense of expectancy when participants discussed their beliefs about graduating. Goals of receiving a diploma were explicit and forced participants to expect more from themselves. Repetitively, it was shared that not accomplishing the task of completing high school requirements would make these males think less of themselves. Participants emphasized that they "have to finish" and they will allow anything less from themselves.

Supporting Narratives:

- "I'm not getting no GED. I ain't waste all this time for nothing".

  - Respondent: "Right. Niggas ain't trying to get no Good Enough Document (slang phrase for GED)."

- "I keep coming to school because I gotta get this diploma.  I'm tired of messing up in my life so coming out with a diploma means a lot to me and my mom 'cause I gotta do this."

- "I just want to finish to say I graduated.  Not many can say they did it. But I will definitely be on that stage in June (does dance in his chair)."

- "The reason why I come to school is 'cause I want to graduate and I have plans that require me to graduate.  And plus, when you come to school it's always something that's gonna happen.  So it's like A. I go to sleep, or B. I come here and do a lil work and then see what else happens."

In addition to expecting more from themselves, participants' families have high expectations of them as well.  The families' expectation of participants to obtain a high school diploma served as both a motivator and a source of stress.  Although participants felt comforted by the concerns of their families, these same concerns placed pressures on the participants to succeed.  Participants stated they are expected to graduate and if they were to fail, they would be failing everyone who expected them to succeed.

Supporting Narratives:

- "I know that graduating will make my mom happy.  It's all she talks about. So I'm getting my diploma for her."

- "Right now my brother in the streets (selling drugs) taking care of me and my mom. He won't let me touch nothin' (sell drugs) so I don't have no choice but to make it in school."

- "I'll be the first one of my mom kids to get a diploma.  None of my grandmother grandkids got a real diploma."

- o  Researcher: "Sounds like you will be the first one to break the cycle and graduate?"

- o  Participant: "Facts!  I'm really gonna be the one to do it in my family.  That's why I been on my shit and I'm not trying to mess up."

## Life and Environmental factors

### Support System

Support plays a pivotal role in African American males' lives and they are looking to be supported at home, school, and their surrounding environments.  Male participants' view support as the equivalent to having someone caring about them.  Support and encouragement can be shown by asking them about school and life, helping them with life challenges, and taking time to communicate with them in a positive way.  Family, teacher, and peer support served as a motivator for these males to complete school.  Per participants, family support generally comes from their mothers, grandmothers and aunts.  However, one of the participants explained that his support comes solely from his father and others recalled moments when their fathers encouraged high school completion.  These males added that the staff at the program school provides them with help and support which leads to them wanting to succeed in this environment.  Participants communicated their need for positive reinforcement and praise as a form of support.

Supporting Narratives:

- -  "I feel that graduating is important, but everybody around me feels like it's more important.  It's not mostly me wanting to come (to school).  It's the people around me tellin' me they wish they would still be in school and everything.  So I kinda listen to them to do better 'cause the people who tell me that, they don't got nothin' and I'm not tryin' to replace them."

- "Yo my mom and aunts been tellin' me I can do it and making sure I come to school. But I was just playing around and wasting time. My grandma even be praying for me to finish school and do something with my life."

- "My older homies (friends) they like ["damn"], 'cause when I was out of school they would see me like hustlin' and I wasn't doing nothing with my money. They was like, ["I see what you doing but you gotta stay in school. I see you got it (selling drugs) down packed. But if you stay in school you will have way more money than what you got. You can do it"]."

    o Researcher: "The homies who were encouraging you, did they finish school?"

    o Participant: "Naw, they just told me, ["I don't wanna see you out here like I am"]. They may be in the street and not be living all positive in stuff, but they (his homies) the ones who kept tellin' me I can make it."

- "Some teachers here go out their way to help me if im behind. They give me a chance to catch up. Plus they actually care about me making it. They are not just fronting (pretending)."

Unfortunately, majority of these males lacked support from previous educators and their fathers. The absence of support in previous school settings included negative attitudes from teachers, directly stated belittling comments within the learning environment, not delivering help when it was sought out, and refusing to take the students home and personal life into consideration. Absent and non-involved fathers were not present to provide these males with support. Fathers who chose to have no role in their sons' education failed to support these males by asking about learning and school experiences, aiding in their sons' educational progression, acknowledging academic struggles and failures, or celebrating participants' educational

achievements.  A lack of support caused African American male participants to develop an uncaring attitude towards others, themselves, and their education in the past.  However, it now serves as a promoter for participants to prosper.

Supporting Narratives:

- "My dad died when I was like 7.  But I feel like if he was here I would have been graduated because he woulda wanted me to be doing more.  He woulda helped me, not really helped me but motivated me to get done.  He woulda been tellin' me like, ["Come on man, you got it"].  If he was here things woulda been a lot different."

- "If my dad wasn't in jail my life would prolly be different right now.  I would be in college somewhere.  But then again maybe not 'cause he still taking about doing dumb shit and he aint even home yet."

- "I've lived with my father my whole life and we've never bonded.  We just started communicating more because we both have something in common which is not a good thing (laughter).  But as far as my education, that's not something that we even discuss."

  o Researcher: "Does your father have a high school diploma?"

  o Participant: "Yes. But he got his so hes not worrying about me getting mine."

- "Some teachers be like that's your loss.  They don't even care, they are just here for that paycheck.  Like they just sit there and look at you when you ask for help.  That makes me feel like whats the point of being here? They act like they were born with their stuff together."

  o Respondent #1: "They be actin' like they shit don't stink.  Like you ain't have it all when you first started.  You know what Im sayin? So when people act

like they can help nobody out I make it happen on my own. And that's not

just teachers and white people. It majority of people in this world."

- o Respondent #2: "It's like people want you to care about yourself but they

  don't even care about you."

- o Respondent #3: "With me its different, if nobdoy cares about me I don't care.

  I just still care about myself."

- o Researcher: "Do you think you use that as motivation?"

- o Respondent #3: "Yeah. I like when people think I'm not gonna be nothin' so I

  can prove them wrong. I'm always gonna do my own thing."

- "To be honest I don't need nobody because they haven't been there. I just look in

  the mirror sometimes and tell myself, ["you need to get on your shit and stop playing

  around"]."

Males in this study were unable to fully assess what supports were needed from their

communities. This was due to participants expressing that they did not feel connected to their

communities but instead they only saw themselves as being a part of their neighborhoods and

those they had relationships with within their neighborhoods. However, there was a consensus

that the "black community" needs to come together and help each other rather than talking about

what needs to be done in the "black community". The "black community" was viewed as black

people in general.

Supporting Narratives:

- "We need more preacher's to come around and pray for us. This one dude use to

  make us close our eyes and pray for us right on the corner. Things like that ease my

  mind."

- " As far as community, we gotta get one first. (Laughter). Kids are not gonna listen to someone who is not their parents."

- "I tried to have a mentor at a "rec" (recreation) center I went to, they assigned us one. But it was nothin', he came to the school and talked to us and we watched a couple basketball games with him. But then he just stopped hittin' us up. And that's bad because you're supposed to be our mentor. I mean just having a mentor would have supported me."

- "We need eachother in the community or nothing is gonna get better. All blacks do is talk and don't do anything about it. The community is watching everything happen instead of trying to help us."
    - Respondent: "Blacks just add to the negitivity and looking for something to complain about."

**Physical environment**

The physical location and environment of the school served as a barrier to African American male education. School placement impeded progress due to student's being assigned to schools on the opposite side of town or outside of their residential neighborhoods. This created comfortability and safety concerns for males. Participants commented on territorial gangs and frequent gang activity that takes place in schools which often resulted in participants missing school to stay home or close to their neighborhoods where they felt comfortable. Conversely, the central downtown location of the program school appears to contribute to the learning of participants.

Supporting Narrative:

- "I'm glad this school is right downtown 'cause now people aint tripping about what "set" (gang territory due to location) the school belongs to. Don't get me wrong, I ain't ever worried about nobody pressing (confronting) me. I just don't got time for that non-sense right now."

    o Respondent #1: "You just saying that because them "Hudson boys" (gang from the east side of town) ran you up out of Franklin (City school located off Hudson Avenue on the east side of town)." (Laughter)

    o Participant: (in a serious tone) "Never boy!"

    o Respondent #2: "Niggas trying to graduate and they still on that kid shit."

    o Participant: "Right."

    o Respondent #1: "You niggas getting sensitive because y'all know them boys were running yall school."

Residential neighborhoods and regulation within the home also functioned as an obstacle to on time high school completion. It was often easier for participants to leave home with intentions of attending school but instead they found themselves "hanging on the block". All participants resided in different parts of the inner city and they explained that "hanging on the block" was seen as normal in their neighborhoods. "Hanging on the block" meant congregating on a street corner with other males and females who resided within the neighborhood. Frequently the selling of drugs took place on the "block" and these males engaged in these activities at times when they were supposed to be attending school. Although participants were allowed to "hang on the block" during school hours, some were persuaded by peers and older males "on the block" to return to school.

Supporting Narratives:

- "I was walking to school when I used to live with my mom.  It wasn't close so I would just dip off and go somewhere else.  Like ["fuck it. I'm going somewhere else]."

- "I got up in the morning to go to school but a lot of times I would meet up with my "mans" (friends) and smoke.  So instead of going to school we would just be high and chilling on the block.  If we was too fucked up (high off of drugs), them niggas would get mad and tell us to move but we didn't care."

- "I used to miss the buss on purpose so I had a reason to go back in the house."

Male students were regularly allowed to skip or stay home from school with parents or guardians knowledge.  Instead of reporting to school participants never left the home and they were not forced to leave.  Participants explained that parental figures were too busy to enforce school attendance due to caring for younger children, having to report to work, or tending to their own personal lives.  Some parental figures became tired of pushing the issue of school attendance and "gave up" once participants formed a habit of not attending school.

Supporting Narratives:

- "My grandmother got tired of telling me to go to school.  She would ride right by me standing outside when she was on her way to bingo."

- "When I was living with my mom I didn't come to school.  I was with my girl and we would just skip school at my house."

- "As long as I didn't bother my mom when I was home she wouldn't make a big deal about me not going to school.  She didn't like it but it wasn't anything she could do about it."

**Attitudes of others**

The opinions and attitudes of society and peers weighed heavily on African American males. Throughout the focus groups participants expressed their perceptions regarding society's negative view of African American males. Participants labeled "society" as majority of white people, black people who made it and forgot where they came from, people who were born wealthy, and people who think "their shit doesn't stink". These perceived negative views made participants realize life's realities for African American males and clouded their thoughts of achievement. Male participants expressed that they are bombarded by society's negative views of African American males on a daily basis through television and media, stares from white people in public, the frequent stops and harassment by police officers, and audible comments from those described as society above.

Supportive Narratives:

- "I can't drop out 'cause I don't want people to think any more less of me because I didn't finish."

- "Life is all about what other people think of you. But after you complete high school they can't say as much."

- "As black males we get looked down on all the time."

  o Researcher: "Who do you believe looks down on you?"

  o Participant: "Who doesn't look down on us? Black people be thinking they too good for us and always got something smart to say. White people think we some welfare hoodlums. And if another white lady look at me like I'm gonna do something to her, I just might."

  o (Laughter from other participants)

  o Participant: "Yo Im so serious."

- "It's important to get a high school diploma because it will look good on my resume and record."

    o Reseacher: "Explain more about how it will look good on your record?"

    o "Because if I am stopped by the police, they can look up that I have a diploma so they wont think Im just a black dude up to no good."

    o Respondent #1: "Word because they stay stopping us right across the street when we be waiting for the buss home."

    o Respondent #2: "And they do not care when you tell them we go to school here.  They just be violating for no reason."

    o Respondent #1: "Nigga it's because we black."

The attitudes of other African American male students created a stumbling block for both progress and success.  Focus groups revealed that African American males had to battle the opinions, threats, and combative attitudes from peers who looked like them.  Instead of there being unity among African American males in schools, they were divided and some males were singled out.  The divide of males often takes place due to popularity status, macho male attitudes, material possessions, affiliations with other students, and appearance.  The divide and lack of unity amongst African American males resulted in verbal disagreements, fights, bullying, suspensions and expulsions, isolation of students, negative attitudes towards school, unproductive use of educational time, course failure, and the transferring of students to alternative schools.

Supporting Narratives:

- "I was bullied a lot because I was like shorter or whatever.  You know what I'm sayin'? And I was like real quiet so they always like messin' with me so I always had

to defend myself and I ended up fighting a lot and getting suspended a lot so I didn't

graduate on time.  Ms., I'm not a bad kid but I don't like for nobody to talk to me any

kind of way so I had to defend myself because nobody else would."

- "Y'all talking about the teachers, shit coming here to deal with black people is worse.

Like seriously, it's always a problem between black dudes for nothing.  I hate coming

here and having to deal with niggas popping off at the mouth (talking to them in a

negative way) and worrying about who I might have to fight today."

**Personal struggles and choices**

### Lack of focus

School and education was not a top priority for African American males.  Instead, their

focus was other things both inside and outside of the school.  Male students were frequently

more focused on forming relationships with girls, walking the hallways instead of attending

classes, being popular, making money, "hanging on the block", "being lazy", and tending to

problems at home.  Failing classes, repeating grade levels, and graduating outside of their cohort

became the result of these males not being focused on school and their education.

Supporting Narratives:

- "I was just bs'ing, I wasn't going to my classes.  I had already passed all my tests so I

just stayed home sleeping.  I knew my teachers would care that much."

- "After I failed a couple times, I just never really cared.  I would just walk the halls so

nobody would think I failed because I wasn't able to do the work."

- "I missed like a couple months of school in a row like, I was just playing around not

going to school. I just didn't go."

o Researcher: "And when you weren't going to school what were you doing?"

- o "I was just hustling to be honest."

- o Researcher: "Can I ask, when you were hustling were you doing it to help your family?"

- o "Naw, it was something I got into. Like I wanted to make money on my own. I got tired of asking my mom for stuff. I just got it on my own."

**Attitudes of self**

A recurring pattern of course failure, repeating grades, and being thought of as less than others by families, teachers, peers, and society resulted in participants forming negative feelings and attitudes about themselves. These negative feelings and attitudes prevented African American males from being productive in the classroom because they were unable to look past their failures. Some males predicted a negative future for themselves based on the failures of their parents and generational patterns within their families. Participants explained that their perception of themselves began to change due to someone believing in their abilities, recognizing that their goals were attainable, or getting tired of their negative image.

- "I don't want to be out here looking stupid without no diploma. I'm already too old to be in high school".

- "Family members didn't know it but I used to feel like shit when I would run into them and they ask me when I'm gonna finish school. That feeling gave me a reminder that I gotta do this."

- "See this how it is on my dad side, all we know is shooting niggas and selling drugs. But I don't be shooting nobody (laughter). But my older brother be trying to push me to do better. He graduated from high school and hes in college, but he has his own dad. He got his smarts from his dad side."

- o Researcher: "Hmm, I'm wondering how you came to that conclusion?"

- o Participant: "Because it's the truth. My mom dropped out in the 11th grade, so

  I know his dad side gave him his smarts, he has a different mind. If he had the

  same dad as me, he woulda at least touched a jail cell by now. I got my dad

  bloodline so I already know what's waiting for me."

**Discussion**

The twenty African American male participants have never been formally asked about

their beliefs on what has delayed them from attaining their high school diploma. However, they

were very aware and vocal regarding their experiences and realities. They owed their responses

and offered deeper insight into their experiences. In relation to the review of the literature, the

information gathered from the focus groups contained both similarities and differences in the

findings.

Just as the review of the literature could not determine the role father's play in African

American males' educational experience, neither could the findings from the focus groups.

Participants with absent fathers stated that they would hope their educational experience would

have been different if their fathers were present. However, they were not able to confidently

believe their father's presence would have produced alternative or positive outcomes. Nor were

they able to articulate the barring their absent father had on the current position of their

educational career. Instead the research study revealed that African American males are looking

to be supported by various people on their journey towards success.

In regards to the males living in the home with their father, only one out of the two males

reported their father plays an active role in his education. The participant explained his father's

active role in terms of monitoring school attendance, providing transportation to and from

school, communicating with teachers, and attending school based functions. The research by Joe and Davis (2009) reported that African American students with active fathers tend to be better prepared for school and have favorable educational outcomes. This finding appears to be accurate within this sample of participants because the only male with a father active in his education will be graduating on time.

The term "single mother" was not addressed in the focus groups. Participants generally spoke positively about their mothers and other female relatives involved in their lives. When participants shared negative experiences that included their mothers, they quickly followed up the statement with comments such as, "she did the best she could do", "she tried", or "she's not a man so it is not her fault". Mothers were frequently on the participants list of supports and among those who expected participants to complete high school regardless of past failures. However, there was no mention of how mothers support African American males in the home, at school, or in everyday life.

As previously highlighted, Willis and Clark (2009) explained the breakdown of the African American community and less emphasis on education in the community as a result of the phasing out of "old heads", the emergence of the "new old head" and the cycle of fatherless males fathering fatherless males. While this is an important concept, it did not exactly fit the description or situation of the males in the focus groups. In regards to fatherless males fathering fatherless males, all of the participants in the study are actively in pursuit of receiving a diploma and each of the males are childless at this time. Therefore, this cycle do not pertain to participants. However, participants emphasized generational cycles of school dropout, living in undesirable neighborhoods, and being incarcerated for crimes involving drugs. African American males looked to break these generational cycles, but the cycle seems to be unavoidable

at times due to living below the poverty line and being exposed to illegal opportunities. Although participants made it clear that older males "on the block" influenced their decisions to either skip or attend school, it is unclear if these males can be considered "old heads" or "new old heads". However, these males noted the limited number of high school graduates in their families, neighborhoods, and in the black community. Participants did not view the breakdown of the African American community in the same manner as previous researchers, but their observations within the black community demonstrates that they are aware that a collapse had occurred. In addition, African American males in this study recognized a cycle of division within the black community due to black people not supporting each other or sharing information on pathways to success.

Both the literature review and focus groups revealed African American males' perceptions of how they are viewed by society. Unlike the literature which was vague in describing who society consisted of, participants were vocal regarding naming the members of society who they perceive to hold negative views of them as African American males. These members include both black and white people who have a higher socioeconomic status than the African American males in the study. Males expressed society's view bothered them because many of the negative views of African American males are experienced in their direct and surrounding environments. Drug and alcohol usage, selling drugs, incarceration, reliance on social service system, residing in public housing, a lack of education, and fathers not taking care of their children are examples of participants' direct experiences that are perceived negatively by society.

In addition to combatting society's negative view of African American males, there is also a struggle within the African American male population. Participants revealed that they

often deterred from attending or completing school due to the negative attitudes and behaviors of their peers rather than the perceptions of white educators.  Examples of these attitudes and behaviors of African American peers included intimidating stares, public humiliation, and being bullied because of physical size, judgement due to the lack of name brand clothing and shoes, peer affiliation, social status, and other non-identified reasons.  Outcomes of African American peer struggles lead to a lack of focus on educational achievement, social withdrawal, a lack of self-confidence, and participation in physical altercations.  Results of the focus groups determine that African American males are more concerned with the views of their peers than the staff at the program school.  Male students have hopes of African American males becoming unified instead of continuing to be divided. In contrast, positive experiences with white teachers at the program school were reported and African American male students felt more supported than when in previous schools.  These findings identify other African American males as being a barrier to high school completion rather than white educators which was presented in the literature.

In the review of the literature being "man of the house", living in poverty, and criminal involvement were highlighted due to African American males taking on adult responsibilities in the home, single mothers having to work, and a limited income in the household due to fathers' absence.  Participants did not engage in dialogue regarding their roles in the home, responsibilities within the family, or their family's socioeconomic status.  This was mainly due to the way in which questions were created and structured.  Focus group questions were not designed to specifically solicit this information.  In regards to criminal activity, the only illegal behaviors reported in the study was selling drugs.  Males admitted to selling drugs "on the block" due to it being exposed to the opportunity in their neighborhoods and families as a way to

make money. However, the selling of drugs was done to make money for personal reasons and not out of necessity of bringing income into the home or lack of parental supervision. Instead, males chose to sell drugs as an alternative to attending school and as an opportunity to make money to afford personal things labeled as "needs".

Highlighted in this discussion was an abundance of experiences presented by African American participants as roadblocks to their success. After using the literature review as a guide and conducting the research study containing African American males, the research question of "What are the perceived barriers to African American male education completion" was able to be answered. It apparent that life circumstances and life events served as barriers to African American male education completion. African American male circumstances within their homes, household make up, neighborhoods, educational settings, peer groups, and themselves lead to their setbacks. However, these same experiences sprung forth their resilience and determination to complete high school and work towards receiving their high school diploma.

**Limitations**

The research study was able to define that life circumstances and life events as barriers to African American male education completion. However, there were gaps in both the literature and the study. The major holes revolve around parental support and educational involvement. Single African American mothers raising their sons' in poverty were presented in a negative manner in the research. The literature spoke about the lack of parenting due to single mothers having to work and the failures of African American sons were often placed on single mothers. The research stated that single mothers directly affect the educational outcomes of their sons. However, supporting evidence was not provided to support this claim. Nor was there any evidence provided to support that father absence or being fatherless places African American

males at risk for not completing high school.  In contrast, male participants in the research study

praised their mothers and many are pursuing their education to make their mothers happy.

African American male participants frequently mentioned that their mothers were a source of

their support but it was unclear of how this support was offered.  The findings also lacked

evidence of how participants' mothers were considered as being supportive and their active

fathers were considered as being unsupportive.

Limitations to the research study arose due to it being conducted in the program school.

The program school enrolls and removes students from their roster on a daily bases.  Therefore,

some of the males who agreed to be a part the study were unable to participate because they had

to return to their home school.  Other males showed interest in becoming participants in the

study but they were deterred when it was announced that focus groups had to take place during

the student's lunch period.  Lunch time is the only scheduled break in the student's schedules.

Some males did not want to give up their break time to be a part of the study.  Conducting focus

groups themselves also posed as a limitation to the study.  During the focus groups sharing and

personal disclosures were limited at times.  This was due to male participants not wanting to

fully expose their experiences to other males in the groups.  Both laughter and off topic

comments in the groups prevented participants from further describing their thoughts, feelings,

and experiences.

The sex of the researcher also served as a limitation within the focus groups.  The

researcher in this study was a female who differed in age from male participants.  The

researcher's sex functioned as a limitation because at times male participants restricted their

responses because they felt the researcher was unable to relate to their experiences based on her

sex and age.  This was made apparent due to males stating, "Ms., you wouldn't understand",

"Things are different for us", and "You probably never heard of that".  It was also made obvious

when participants would say things under their breath or to other participants, but when the

researcher would ask what was said the males would respond, "Never mind" or "It's nothing".

In addition, the researcher is not an African American male, nor is she an expert on African

American males or their experiences.  The findings and conclusions regarding male students

derived from data collected from African American male participants and the researcher's

interpretations of the data.

**Future Research and Implications**

Due to the identified limitations of the study, additional future research needs to be

completed to explore this topic further.  Suggestions for furthering this study includes conducting

one on one interviews to promote a deeper level of sharing, dissecting participant views on

society's' perception of African American males and how it creates a stumbling block for these

males, explore supportive behaviors of African American mothers in order to gain an

understanding of her role, and explicitly ask about "old heads" and "new old heads" to identify

supports within the community.

The information gathered from the focus groups also offered an abundance of data to

inform school counselors and school districts with future implications to assist African American

males.  Implications for the Rochester City School District and School Counselors are presented

below.

Suggestions for the Rochester City School District:

- **Be mindful the physical location of buildings when combining schools**

Combining schools can open the door to safety concerns for students who attend buildings on

the opposite side of town than their home location.  When schools are merged from two

different sides of town it causes a barrier to education services because some males refuse to attend school for this reason alone.

- **Make an effort to provide consistency for all students**

Consistency is often times the key to student success. Currently students are lacking a stable level of support from teachers and administrations. If students were to be supported by staff uniformly, it would alter the culture of the district and change student's perceptions regarding the support they receive from the district as a whole. Staff trainings, polices regarding student support, and routine forums for student input are examples of interventions to achieve consistency for all students.

- **Incorporate the use of role models from the community in the school district**

African American males are not always exposed to positive experiences with adults in their lives. By incorporating role models from the community throughout the district, males will have access to a visible person and lifestyle that could influence their perception of achievement and success. In addition, community role models would also serve as an additional way to support students.

Suggestions for School Counselors:

- **Involve students and guardians when recommending high school and transfer placements**

New school placements can cause stress and anxiety for some students. Also, as previously stated building transfers may lead to safety issues. By including student and guardian input in the placement process it would allow for an involved, planned, and informed transition for students.

- **Develop curriculum, groups, assemblies, and activities geared towards young men**

By creating interventions and opportunities specifically for males reduces the stigma attached to males attending counseling.  It also fosters a supportive environment that is open to receiving male specific issues.

- **Incorporate engagement from student's support system**

African American males require support in many different areas of their lives.  By incorporating students' support system in their educational affairs, it would create an encompassed support system that assists the student with high school completion.

- **Integrate encouragement and achievement celebrations regularly**

By encouraging and celebrating students on a regular bases, counselors are modeling behaviors that supports and uplifts students.  Like all students, African American males are seeking to be praised and offered some positive reinforcement.   Incorporating these actions regularly would benefit students an also assist in changing the climate of school and school district.

- **Allow for open and honest conversations beyond the student's graduation requirements**

African American males are generally willing to discuss their thoughts, beliefs, and circumstances in life.  A lot can be gaining from giving the students the opportuinity and space to have honest conversations beyond what is needed for them to graduate.

**Conclusion**

This study was successful in providing answers to the research question, "What are the perceived barriers to African American male education completion".  It also presented vital information to inform future implications for school counselors and the Rochester City School District to best support African American males.  The study highlighted recurring themes of a

sense of accomplishment, personal struggles and choices, and life and environmental factors which created roadblocks for male students.  It is possible that African American males' educational experience and high school completion could be impacted by and attributed to one, many, or all of these barriers.  Although there needs to be more research conducted to better understand the educational and life experiences of African American males, it was apparent from the research conducted that life circumstances and life experiences play a major role in African American male education completion.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

1. What do you think got in the way of you completing high school on time?

2. What keeps you coming to school?  What are your reasons for not dropping out of school?

3. What role, if any, does education play in helping to you succeed in your life?

4. Explain your relationship with your father?  How has your father impacted or not impacted your educational experience?

5. How have personal and/or community supports assisted you (or not) in your educational experience? What personal and/or community supports are needed to assist you in completing high school?

6. In what ways does the staff at All City High School provide you with support?  In what ways can the staff at All City High School support you differently? What more would you like from the staff at All City High School?

Appendix B

Key Words translated into Themes

| Key Words found in all Focus Groups | Category | Theme |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | | |
| Drugs | Lack of focus | Personal struggles and choices |
| Friends | Support system | Life and environmental factors |
| Lack of motivation | Lack of focus | Personal struggles and choices |
| Support | Support system | Life and environmental factors |
| Pressure to perform | Expectancy | Sense of accomplishment |
| Streets, Block, Corner | Physical environment | Life and environmental factors |
| Money | Goal oriented | Sense of accomplishment |
| Bullied | Attitudes of self | Personal struggles and choices |
| Others | Attitudes of others | Life and environmental factors |
| Opinions | Attitudes of others | Life and environmental factors |
| 1st to graduate | Expectancy | Sense of accomplishment |
| Hopes | Goal oriented | Sense of accomplishment |
| Dreams | Goal oriented | Sense of accomplishment |
| Lazy | Lack of focus | Personal struggles and choices |
| Connections | Support system | Life and environmental factors |
| Responsibilities | Attitudes of self | Personal struggles and choices |
| Safety | Physical environment | Life and environmental factors |
| Location | Physical environment | Life and environmental factors |
| Peers | Attitudes of others | Life and environmental factors |

Appendix C

| Narrative Placements from Focus Groups | |
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| | |
| Narrative Placement Code | Narratives used in Research Paper from Focus Groups |
| | |
| T3Q1 | "That diploma is a certificate of completion.  And like yes it will open doors for me but it's also my way of shuttin' up everybody up who said I couldn't do it." |
| T1Q2 | "The reason I come to school 'cause it ain't nothing out there in the streets.  Like its nothing, it's boring.  I already witnessed that already.  It's boring not coming to school.  And the reason I haven't dropped out yet is because I don't want to become another statistic.  I don't want to be dead or in jail.  I want to be a graduate somewhere." |
| T1Q3 | "Getting' my diploma means a lot to me because I can be stripped of everything but they can't take my education from me." |
| T1Q3 | -        "I need this diploma so I can go to college.  And really the only way to get out of Rochester is if you go to college somewhere else just for you to leave.  If I don't finish (school) I can't just up and leave.  And I just need to leave here." |
| T4Q2 | -        "I'm not getting no GED.  I ain't waste all this time for nothing". |
| | o  Respondent: "Right. Niggas ain't trying to get no Good Enough Document (slang phrase for GED)." |
| T5Q2 | -        "I keep coming to school because I gotta get this diploma.  I'm tired of messing up in my life so coming out with a diploma means a lot to me and my mom 'cause I gotta do this." |

| T4Q3 | - "I just want to finish to say I graduated. Not many can say they did it. But I will definitely be on that stage in June" (does dance in his chair). |
|---|---|
| T1Q2 | - "The reason why I come to school is 'cause I want to graduate and I have plans that require me to graduate. And plus, when you come to school it's always something that's gonna happen. So it's like A. I go to sleep, or B. I come here and do a lil work and then see what else happens". |
| T5Q5 | - "I know that graduating will make my mom happy. It's all she talks about. So I'm getting' my diploma for her." |
| T3Q5 | - "Right now my brother in the streets (selling drugs) taking care of me and my mom. He won't let me touch nothin' (sell drugs) so I don't have no choice but to make it in school". |
| T4Q1 | - "I'll be the first one of my mom kids to get a diploma. None of my grandmother grandkids got a real diploma." |
|  | o Researcher: "Sounds like you will be the first one to break the cycle and graduate?" |
|  | o Participant: "Facts! I'm really gonna be the one to do it in my family. That's why I been on my shit and I'm not trying to mess up". |
| T1Q3 | - "I feel that graduating is important, but everybody around me feels like it's more important. It's not mostly me wanting to come (to school). It's the people around me tellin' me they wish they would still be in school and everything. So I kinda listen to them to do better 'cause the people who tell me that, they don't got nothin' and I'm not tryin' to replace them." |
| T3Q5 | - "Yo my mom and aunts been tellin' me I can do it and making sure I come to school. But I was just playing around and wasting time. My grandma even be praying for me to finish school and do something with my life." |

| T5Q2 | - "My older homies (friends) they like ["damn"], 'cause when I was out of school they would see me like hustlin' and I wasn't doing nothing with my money. They was like, ["I see what you doing but you gotta stay in school. I see you got it (selling drugs) down packed. But if you stay in school you will have way more money than what you got. You can do it"]." |
|---|---|
| | o Researcher: "The homies who were encouraging you, did they finish school?" |
| | o Participant: "Naw, they just told me, ["I don't wanna see you out here like I am"]. They may be in the street and not be living all positive in stuff, but they (his homies) the ones who kept tellin' me I can make it." |
| T1Q4 | - "Some teachers here go out their way to help me if I'm behind. They give me a chance to catch up. Plus they actually care about me making it. They are not just fronting (pretending)." |
| T3Q4 | - "My dad died when I was like 7. But I feel like if he was here I would have been graduated because he woulda wanted me to be doing more. He woulda helped me, not really helped me but motivated me to get done. He woulda been tellin' me like, ["Come on man, you got it"]. If he was here things woulda been a lot different." |
| T2Q6 | - "If my dad wasn't in jail my life would prolly be different right now. I would be in college somewhere. But then again maybe not 'cause he still taking about doing dumb shit and he ain't even home yet." |
| T1Q4 | - "I've lived with my father my whole life and we've never bonded. We just started communicating more because we both have something in common which is not a good thing (laughter). But as far as my education, that's not something that we even discuss". |
| | o Researcher: "Does your father have a high school diploma"? |
| | o Participant: "Yes. But he got his so he's not worrying about me getting mine." |

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| T5Q6 | - "Some teachers be like that's your loss. They don't even care, they are just here for that paycheck. Like they just sit there and look at you when you ask for help. That makes me feel like what's the point of being here? They act like they were born with their stuff together." |
| | o Respondent #1: "They be actin' like they shit don't stink. Like you ain't have it all when you first started. You know what I'm sayin? So when people act like they can help nobody out I make it happen on my own. And that's not just teachers and white people. It majority of people in this world." |
| | o Respondent #2: It's like people want you to care about yourself but they don't even care about you |
| | o Respondent #3: "With me it's different, if nobody cares about me I don't care. I just still care about myself". |
| | o Researcher: "Do you think you use that as motivation"? |
| | o Respondent #3: Yeah. I like when people think I'm not gonna be nothin' so I can prove them wrong. I'm always gonna do my own thing." |
| T1Q6 | - "To be honest I don't need nobody because they haven't been there. I just look in the mirror sometimes and tell myself, ["you need to get on your shit and stop playing around"]." |
| | - "We need more preachers to come around and pray for us. This one dude use to make us close our eyes and pray for us right on the corner. Things like that ease my mind." |
| T3Q5 | - "As far as community, we gotta get one first. (Laughter). Kids are not gonna listen to someone who is not their parents." |
| T1Q5 | - "I tried to have a mentor at a "rec" (recreation) center I went to, they assigned us one. But it was nothin', he came to the school and talked to us and we watched a couple basketball games with him. But then he just stopped hittin' us up. And that's bad because you're supposed to be our mentor. I mean just having a mentor would have supported me." |

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| T2Q5 | - "We need each other in the community or nothing is gonna get better. All blacks do is talk and don't do anything about it. The community is watching everything happen instead of trying to help us." |
| | o Respondent: "Blacks just add to the negativity and looking for something to complain about." |
| T4Q6 | - "I'm glad this school is right downtown 'cause now people ain't tripping about what "set" (gang territory due to location) the school belongs to. Don't get me wrong, I ain't ever worried about nobody pressing (confronting) me. I just don't got time for that non-sense right now." |
| | o Respondent #1: You just saying that because them "Hudson boys" (gang from the east side of town) ran you up out of Franklin (City school located off Hudson Avenue on the east side of town)." (Laughter) |
| | o Participant: (in a serious tone) "Never boy!" |
| | o Respondent #2: "Niggas trying to graduate and they still on that kid shit." |
| | o Participant: "Right." |
| | o Respondent #1: "You niggas getting sensitive because y'all know them boys were running y'all school." |
| T1Q5 | - "I was walking to school when I used to live with my mom. It wasn't close so I would just dip off and go somewhere else. Like ["fuck it. I'm going somewhere else]." |
| T3Q2 | - "I got up in the morning to go to school but a lot of times I would meet up with my "mans" (friends) and smoke. So instead of going to school we would just be high and chilling on the block. If we was too fucked up (high off of drugs), them niggas would get mad and tell us to move but we didn't care." |
| T5Q1 | - "I used to miss the buss on purpose so I had a reason to go back in the house." |

| T3Q1 | - "My grandmother got tired of telling me to go to school. She would ride right by me standing outside when she was on her way to bingo." |
|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| T1Q5 | - "When I was living with my mom I didn't come to school. I was with my girl and we would just skip school at my house." |
| T3Q1 | - "As long as I didn't bother my mom when I was home she wouldn't make a big deal about me not going to school. She didn't like it but it wasn't anything she could do about it." |
| T1Q2 | - "I can't drop out 'cause I don't want people to think any more less of me because I didn't finish." |
| T5Q5 | - "Life is all about what other people think of you. But after you complete high school they can't say as much." |
| T2Q2 | - "As black males we get looked down on all the time." |
|      | o Researcher: "Who do you believe looks down on you?" |
|      | o Participant: "Who doesn't look down on us? Black people be thinking they too good for us and always got something smart to say. White people think we some welfare hoodlums. And if another white lady look at me like I'm gonna do something to her, I just might." |
|      | o (Laughter from other participants) |
|      | o Participant: "Yo I'm so serious." |
| T1Q1 | - "It's important to get a high school diploma because it will look good on my resume and record." |
|      | o Researcher: "Explain more about how it will look good on your record?" |
|      | o "Because if I am stopped by the police, they can look up that I have a diploma so they won't think I'm just a black dude up to no good." |

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| | o Respondent #1: "Word because they stay stopping us right across the street when we be waiting for the buss home." |
| | o Respondent #2: "And they do not care when you tell them we go to school here. They just be violating for no reason." |
| | o Respondent #1: "Nigga it's because we black." |
| T2Q1 | - "I was bullied a lot because I was like shorter or whatever. You know what I'm sayin'? And I was like real quiet so they always like messin' with me so I always had to defend myself and I ended up fighting a lot and getting suspended a lot so I didn't graduate on time. Ms., I'm not a bad kid but I don't like for nobody to talk to me any kind of way so I had to defend myself because nobody else would." |
| T4Q6 | - "Y'all talking about the teachers, shit coming here to deal with black people is worse. Like seriously, it's always a problem between black dudes for nothing. I hate coming here and having to deal with niggas popping off at the mouth (talking to them in a negative way) and worrying about who I might have to fight today." |
| T2Q1 | - "I was just bs'ing, I wasn't going to my classes. I had already passed all my tests so I just stayed home sleeping. I knew my teachers would care that much." T1Q1 |
| T5Q1 | - "After I failed a couple times, I just never really cared. I would just walk the halls so nobody would think I failed because I wasn't able to do the work". |
| T5Q2 | - "I missed like a couple months of school in a row like, I was just playing around not going to school. I just didn't go." |
| | o Researcher: "And when you weren't going to school what were you doing?" |
| | o "I was just hustling to be honest." |
| | o Researcher: "Can I ask, when you were hustling were you doing it to help your family?" |

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| | o  "Naw, it was something I got into.  Like I wanted to make money on my own.  I got tired of asking my mom for stuff.  I just got it on my own." |
| T1Q3 | -        "I don't want to be out here looking stupid without no diploma.  I'm already too old to be in high school." |
| T1Q4 | -        "Family members didn't know it but I used to feel like shit when I would run into them and they ask me when I'm gonna finish school.  That feeling gave me a reminder that I gotta do this." |
| T2Q2 | -        "See this how it is on my dad side, all we know is shooting niggas and selling drugs.  But I don't be shooting nobody (laughter).  But my older brother be trying to push me to do better.  He graduated from high school and he's in college, but he has his own dad.  He got his smarts from his dad side." |
| | o  Researcher: "Hmm, I'm wondering how you came to that conclusion?" |
| | o  Participant: "Because it's the truth.  My mom dropped out in the 11th grade, so I know his dad side gave him his smarts, he has a different mind.  If he had the same dad as me, he woulda at least touched a jail cell by now.  I got my dad bloodline so I already know what's waiting for me." |