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WHERE'S THE STAYING POWER?  
FACTORS INFLUENCING DROPPING OUT AMONG BLACK STUDENTS

by

JUDY TOUZIN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

(2015)

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

2015

JUDY TOUZIN

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This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## **Abstract**

### **WHERE'S THE STAYING POWER?**

#### **FACTORS INFLUENCING DROPPING OUT AMONG BLACK STUDENTS**

by

**JUDY TOUZIN**

Advisor: Professor Juan Battle

Statistics show that the odds of transitioning from school before graduating are much higher for Black students than their white counterparts (NCES, 2011). In 2006, the national high school graduation rate for Black students was 51% with females at 58% and males at 44%. Such dismal figures speak to the need to study the various factors that influence the likelihood that Black students will drop out of school. This study considers several demographic, aspirational, and school culture variables and their value in predicting whether Black students will drop out.

The data used in this study are taken from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Multiple regression analyses were utilized to determine which independent variables have the greatest impact on predicting dropping out among a nationally representative sample of Black students.

The theoretical framework for this study will include discussions of structure versus agency, social and cultural capital theory (Bourdieu), as well as psycho-social aspects of individual and collective identity development (Bronfenbrenner and Ogbu).

For Black students overall, aspiration level variables were the greatest predictors, with students' expectations for themselves being robust throughout. For Black males, urbanicity was also a significant factor in predicting drop out, along with school level variables for "not being put down" and knowing rules.

The findings from this study will increase an understanding of the factors that affect the academic achievement of Black students and other vulnerable populations. This dissertation will inform intervention strategies as well as future policy initiatives designed to improve those outcomes.

## Acknowledgements

I stand in awe at the awesomeness of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as I write this. I know that this is truly a miracle, and I am humbled and grateful for the strength and “second wind.” I honor you.

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I am equally grateful to my committee members, Stephan Brumberg and Mario Kelly for their willingness to share their knowledge, resources, and their time. I hope that this dissertation reflects what I learned from you and my gratitude as a student to you.

This project would not be complete if it were not for the support and statistical genius of Vernisa Donaldson. Her skills made Chapter Four complete. I wish you much success in your future endeavors.

They say that children learn what they live. I have been blessed to live a life of endless encouragement. From my mother who told me to go to school, work hard, and ask questions; to the educators of the East Ramapo Central School District (1986-1999); to my undergraduate mentor Carole Guss Mulligan. I have consistently received the message that I could and would be great. I owe finishing this dissertation to all of you and pray that I too am communicating unwavering faith in others as I continue this journey. To Norma’s 7 (especially Norma’s 7<sup>th</sup>) and all of my neglected friends...I hope

to initiate more phone calls, schedule more dinners, and overall be a more present sister and friend. Thank you for loving and supporting me through this process.

To the Organization of Fabulous Fellows (Joshua Hall, Shamell Bryant, Joseph Perez, and Khalil Smith)...you are why I began this journey so many years ago. Please know that I think of you often, and, as promised, I look forward to using what I've learned in service of young men (and women). Here we go...



## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	viii
List of Tables.....	xii
List of Figures.....	xiii
Chapter One: Introduction and Background.....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.1.1 Statement of the Problem.....	1
1.1.2 Rationale.....	2
1.1.3 Contribution to the Field.....	5
1.2 Background.....	6
1.2.1 Theoretical Framework.....	6
1.2.2 Literature Review.....	12
1.3 Methodology.....	15
1.3.1 Procedures.....	15
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	18
2.1 Introduction.....	18
2.2 Theoretical Framework.....	18
2.2.1 Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory.....	18
2.2.2 Ogbu’s Cultural Ecological Theory.....	21
2.2.3 Bourdieu’s Cultural Capital Theory.....	26

2.2.4 Bandura’s Self Efficacy Theory.....	30
2.3 Literature Review.....	32
2.3.1 Demographic Factors.....	37
2.3.2 Aspiration Factors.....	43
2.3.3 School Culture Factors.....	48
2.3.4 Socioeconomic Status.....	54
2.4 Contribution of the Field.....	57
Chapter Three: Methods.....	59
3.1 Introduction.....	59
3.2 Dataset.....	59
3.3 Analytic Samples.....	61
3.4 Measures.....	61
3.4.1 Dependent Variable.....	62
3.4.2 Independent Variables.....	63
3.4.2.1 Domain I-Demographic Variables .....	63
3.4.2.2 Domain II-Aspiration Variables .....	64
3.4.2.3 Domain III- School Culture Variables .....	66
3.4.2.4 Domain IV- Socioeconomic Status.....	68
3.5 Analytic Strategy.....	68
Chapter Four: Results.....	71
4.1 Introduction.....	71

4.2 Univariate Analysis.....	72
4.2.1 Dependent Variable: Dropout .....	72
4.2.2 Independent Variables .....	72
4.2.2.1 Demographic Variables.....	72
4.2.2.2 Aspiration Variables.....	73
4.2.2.3 School Level Variables.....	75
4.2.2.4 Socioeconomic Status.....	77
4.3 Bivariate Analysis.....	79
4.3.1 Pearson’s Correlation.....	79
4.4 Multivariate Analysis.....	82
4.4.1 All Black Students .....	82
4.4.1.1 Demographic Variables.....	82
4.4.1.2 Aspiration Variables.....	82
4.4.1.3 School Level Variables.....	83
4.4.1.4 Socioeconomic Status.....	84
4.4.2 All Black Male Students.....	84
4.4.2.1 Demographic Variables.....	85
4.4.2.2 Aspiration Variables.....	85
4.4.2.3 School Level Variables.....	85
4.4.2.4 Socioeconomic Status.....	86
4.4.3 All Black Female Students .....	87

4.4.3.1 Demographic Variables.....	87
4.4.3.2 Aspiration Variables.....	87
4.4.3.3 School Level Variables.....	87
4.4.3.4 Socioeconomic Status.....	88
Chapter Five: Discussion .....	92
5.1 Introduction.....	92
5.2 Demographic Variables.....	92
5.3 Aspirational Variables.....	99
5.4 School Level Variables.....	103
5.5 Socioeconomic Status.....	106
5.6 Theoretical Connections.....	107
5.7 Summary.....	110
Chapter Six: Conclusion.....	112
6.1 Introduction.....	112
6.2 Limitations.....	115
6.3 Implications.....	120
6.4 Future Research.....	125
References.....	131

## List of Tables

Table 4.1. Means, Standard Deviations, Ranges, and Description of Variables for ELS Black Student Sample.....	78
Table 4.2 Pearson’s Correlation.....	81
Table 4.3 Stepwise Logistic Regression Analysis of Dropout Status in the Black Student Sample .....	89
Table 4.4 Stepwise Logistic Regression Analysis of Dropout Status in the Black Male Student Sample .....	90
Table 4.5 Stepwise Logistic Regression Analysis of Dropout Status in the Black Female Student Sample .....	91

## List of Figures

Figure 1.1. Logic Model. Theoretical Framework .....	11
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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION and BACKGROUND**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this dissertation is to determine which variables have the greatest value in predicting the likelihood that Black students will drop out of school. This chapter's subsequent sections explain why dropout rates are a problem and why this topic is worthy of analysis and discussion.

#### **1.1.1 Statement of the problem**

The national high school dropout rate has long been a matter of public concern. While the dropout rate has been on the decline for decades, differences persist between racial groups. After years of educational reform and amid current rhetoric that boasts college and career readiness for all, statistics show that the odds of dropping out of school before graduating remain much higher for Black<sup>1</sup> students than their White counterparts (Holzman, 2010). As such, the educational difficulties that a subset of Black students face are alarming at local and national levels. While there are schools and systems that are striving to improve outcomes, such as high-performing minority male academies (Eagle Academy in Newark and New York; Urban Prep in Chicago; Miller-McCoy

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this text, we will use the term Black to refer to people of African Diaspora, and to such populations that reside within the United States. To some, Blacks are a subgroup within the larger Black community. Since our discussion purposely includes those who may be first-generation immigrants or who, for whatever reason, do not identify as Black, we employ the term "Black." Furthermore, we capitalize it to distinguish the racial category and related identity from the color. Similarly, we capitalize the word White when referring to race.

Academy in New Orleans) or the coeducational North Star Academies of Newark, New Jersey, significant work remains to be done if Black students are to experience greater success within the nation's schools (Holzman, Jackson, & Beaudry, 2012).

In 2006, the national high school graduation rate for Black students was 51% with females at 58% and males at 44%. Such dismal figures speak to the need to study the factors that influence Black students to exit school early. Specifically, this study considers the predicative value that several demographic, aspirational, school culture, and socioeconomic variables have on whether Black students will drop out.

### **1.1.2 Rationale**

Statistically speaking the life chances of Black male children and adults continue to fair less well than their White male counterparts and their Black female peers. According to data from the 2000 Census, 44.8% of Black males aged 16-64 were unemployed. In that same year, the arrest rate for Black males was 18,575 per 100,000 (Maguire & Pastore, 2001). The 2005-2006 four-year high school graduation rate for Black males in New York City was 39% (Jackson, 2008). Studies have found that low graduation rates are correlated with high unemployment and incarceration rates (City University of New York, 2005).

As a demographic group, Black male students are overrepresented in special education and remedial courses while simultaneously underrepresented in honors and accelerated programs. They consistently receive the lowest grades and test scores. Further, Black males are more likely to be suspended, expelled, or to drop out altogether (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Raffaele-Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Taylor & Foster, 1986). Concerning post-secondary outcomes, Black males are less likely to enroll in college than



their White male counterparts. Underlying factors such as race, gender, socio-economic status, family status, and neighborhood life have all been found to be correlated in varying degrees with issues of academic performance (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

The above statistics paint a bleak picture of the potential academic and life trajectories of Black males. Not surprisingly, there has been an outpouring of research and policy prescriptions from various fields (educational, socio-political, etc.) in the last two decades whose primary focus has been to detail factors related to observable differences in educational performance and to put forth proposed interventions to improve performance and life prospects for Black students, specifically Black males.

An unintended consequence of the intense focus on the academic performance of Black males is the limited attention afforded to studies concerning Black females. Indeed, when included, accounts of Black females are often juxtaposed to statistics for Black males to show just how dire the Black male plight is. Over the past twenty years, numerous studies have highlighted that Black females graduate from high school and attend college at higher rates than their Black male counterparts (Hefner, 2004, Mickelson & Greene, 2006). Similarly, studies show that Black females report a greater investment in school and schooling (Saunders, Davis, Williams, & Williams, 2004). But what is obscured by these “better” statistics is that Black female students, like Black male students, are underperforming when compared to their White counterparts. With educational outcome statistics a few percentage points above the very low numbers posted by Black males Black females continue in a vulnerable position worthy of research and reform efforts.

Studies consistently show that the adverse effects of dropping out are many, regardless of demographic background (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Chung, 2014; Orfield, Losen, & Swanson, 2004). One of the greatest challenges faced by those without high school diplomas is an increased rate of unemployment. In 2008, the rate of unemployment among Blacks without a high school diploma was 22%. The rate for those who had at least obtained a diploma was half that, at 11%. (Aud et al., 2010). Joblessness often results in increased dependency on government assistance programs and at times increased involvement in criminal activity (Wilson, 1997).

Individuals who drop out of high school often manage to obtain some form of employment. That said, they are often relegated to lower paying jobs and may need to rely on supplemental assistance to make ends meet, making them members of the working poor. Findings from a recent report by the United States Department of Education assert that Black males who did not have a high school diploma earned just over \$27,000 while those who held a diploma earned slightly more at \$32,000. On average, those who held a Bachelor's degree earned roughly \$50,000, nearly twice the earnings of high school dropouts. On average, White male students who dropped out earned \$32,000; this is the same amount that Black male high school *graduates* earned. This statistic highlights the significance of completing school especially for Black males. For Black females the education to income link is even more concerning. In 2007, the average income for Black females who dropped out of high school was \$20,000. High school graduates earned slightly more at \$25,000. Black females who obtained a Bachelor's degree took home approximately \$45,000, more than twice the earnings of their peers who had dropped out (Aud et al., 2010).

As the above statistics demonstrate, level of educational attainment has a significant impact on individual income. The economic burden of dropping out poses challenges not just for the individual but also for society at large. Dropping out has been associated with criminal activity, incarceration, drug use, and higher rates of unemployment (Catterall, 1987). Prison operating costs and the funding required to support social welfare programs factor into the nation's budget. According to Vanderbilt University economist Mark Cohen (1998), intervening to save a high-risk youth translates into lifetime savings of \$1.7 to \$2.3 million per youth, suggesting it is well worth the initial investment to develop and implement preventative measures to support the academic success of all students, and Black students in particular.

### **1.1.3 Contribution to the field**

With the diminution of life chances for Black males being so statistically evident, it is not surprising that a plethora of research has focused exclusively on Black males. There has been far less attention paid to Black female students, their academic outcomes, and more important the insights that can be gained from research that addresses their experiences in school. Few large scale studies have been conducted that analyze the predictive value of demographic, aspirational, and school level factors on the likelihood that Black students will drop out. This study will fill this gap by analyzing dropout rates among all Black students as well as Black males and females.

Knowledge gained from this study may ultimately serve to inform local as well as national reform efforts designed to improve the academic and societal life course trajectories for Black students.

## **1.2 Background**

This section considers the following four theories: a) Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory; b) Ogbu's cultural ecological theory; c) Bourdieu's theory of disparate capitals; and d) Bandura's self-efficacy theory. Each of these theories contributes to an understanding of factors that affect dropping out among Black students.

### **1.2.1 Theoretical Framework**

#### *1.2.1.1- Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory*

Russian-born American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined five distinct environmental systems that have a direct or indirect influence on the development of a child. The first, the micro system, is the system with which the child has the most immediate and direct contact. This system is composed of the family, the community, and the school. The progression of the child's development will be due in large part to the nature of interactions that the child has with his or her parents and siblings, neighbors, and peers.

The second system, the mesosystem, encompasses the interactions between events and conditions of two or more microsystems. The exosystem refers to social systems that are linked to the developing child but in which the individual has no direct role. The macrosystem refers to the cultural context in which people live. Issues of race, class, and other categorical ascriptions and perspectives are all a part of the macrosystem. The norms, expectations, and values of a society at the macrosystem level will influence the exosystem and ultimately be reflected in the microsystem. Finally, Bronfenbrenner acknowledges that transitions (both normative and non-normative) influence familial

processes that are employed in the microsystem, thereby indirectly affecting the development of the child. He refers to this system as the chronosystem.

In Bronfenbrenner's systems theory is inherently a mesosystem model, which calls attention to how events in one system affect conditions and events in another. His theory is relevant to the academic outcomes of Black students because academic achievement has been shown to be correlated with influences within the school and home (microsystem) as well as shaped by the values, expectations, and beliefs of society as a whole (macrosystem).

#### *1.2.1.2 Ogbu's Cultural Ecological Theory*

John Ogbu (2004), a Nigerian-American anthropologist, conducted some of the most notable research in the area of race and academic performance. He argued that one cannot study "...Black students' attitudes and behaviors in the school context, divorced from Black history and community" (2004, p. 2).

Ogbu, working with Signithia Fordham in 1986, conducted research based on the premise that societal discrimination, though significant, was not enough to explain the substantial differences in academic performance among minority groups. Their studies indicated that besides discrimination Black Americans share a common identity that is shaped by two factors –a cultural frame of reference and a language frame of reference. Each of these aspects has had an impact on school performance. The key element, Ogbu and Fordham argued, was that Blacks, like all minority groups, share a collective identity. According to Ogbu (2004), experiences that shape the Black collective identity extend as far back as slavery. Ogbu asserts that the cultural frame of reference for Black Americans

is a common expectation of the way Blacks are supposed to act or be. Similarly, there is a language frame of reference that involves a shared understanding of the way Blacks are expected to speak. The minority group establishes both the cultural and language frames of reference.

Ogbu writes that over time, Blacks “accepted the need to behave and talk like White people for education, upward social mobility, equality and acceptance by White people” (2004, p. 15). The ways in which individual Blacks managed this “burden of acting White” was by no means uniform. Of all of the possible coping strategies, Ogbu suggests that resistance or opposition is most significant when considering the academic performance of minority groups.

### *1.2.1.3 Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory*

The work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) explicates how individuals are shaped and affected by the fields in which they operate. Bourdieu, a leading sociologist of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, focused largely on the interactions between individuals and society and the role that power played in such interactions. He posited that individuals operate within fields taking advantage of the capital that they possess. Capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1984), refers to the assets that an individual or group possesses and can take several forms (economic, cultural, social). Fields, best described as organized social spaces with their own norms, patterns of domination, and accepted opinions, are not neutral. Rather, these fields serve as sites of reproduction, valuing and reifying the capital of the dominant or ruling class while simultaneously devaluing the capital possessed by subjugated groups and individuals. To Bourdieu, education served as the main field by which social reproduction occurred.

Bourdieu and his colleague Jean-Claude Passeron (1990) studied differences in academic achievement among children in France. They theorized that those differences could be best understood as a result of the enactment of cultural capital in the educational setting. Bourdieu and Passeron suggested that families of privilege equip their children with the social and cultural capital necessary to be successful in school when they teach their children the knowledge, habits of mind, dispositions, as well as patterns of speaking that are school friendly. Oftentimes, children of lesser-privileged backgrounds are not equally equipped. The students who possess “valuable” capital experience a more fluid transition to and through school, one that reaffirms their sense of self and reinforces their idea that they can “do” school. Conversely, their peers who enter the school context lacking the capital that the school setting requires for success struggle to transition and must often learn and conform to the expected patterns of thought, speech, and behavior, if they are to be successful. The capital that many Black students possess and bring to school is often devalued, generally making the school experience more challenging for them than for their peers.

#### *1.2.1.4 Bandura’s Self-Efficacy Theory*

The theory of self-efficacy stands at the core of Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory. The central tenet in social cognitive theory is that an individual’s ways of being and thinking are influenced by the actions observed in others, similar to Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem. Self-efficacy is shaped by lived experience and self-perception. It determines how individuals will perceive and respond to obstacles and setbacks, interpret successes and failures, and approach new challenges (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Student’s sense of self-efficacy is influenced by the actions of other

actors in their lives (microsystems) as well as the messages they receive about their intelligence and capacity from society at large (macrosystems). Students who persist and succeed in school are those who are confident in their ability to do so. They believe that their actions and their choices are instrumental in the realization of desired outcomes.

There are several factors that influence self-efficacy. One factor is direct experience. Simply stated, each personal success serves to strengthen one's sense of self-efficacy while each failure serves to weaken it. Those who persist through setbacks, challenges, and perceived failed attempts and finally succeed ultimately end up increasing their self-efficacy exponentially. A second factor is modeling. When an individual observes another's success, that individual's sense of self-efficacy also increases. Similarly, when an individual observes people failing, his or her self-efficacy decreases. This concept is especially true when the individual considers him/herself similar to the person being observed, or the model, which may explain why so many young Black males aspire to be hip hop artists and athletes. Indeed, the image of the accomplished rapper or baller is one of the few images regularly projected in society. The image of Black males as academically inclined is far less common. Self-efficacy theory has also been used to explain the underrepresentation of women in professions typically dominated by men, such as careers in science, engineering, and mathematics. It is challenging to pursue and persist in spaces where there are negative ideas about the group one identifies with (e.g., women in STEM professions). Modeling has proven beneficial for individuals who lack self-confidence.

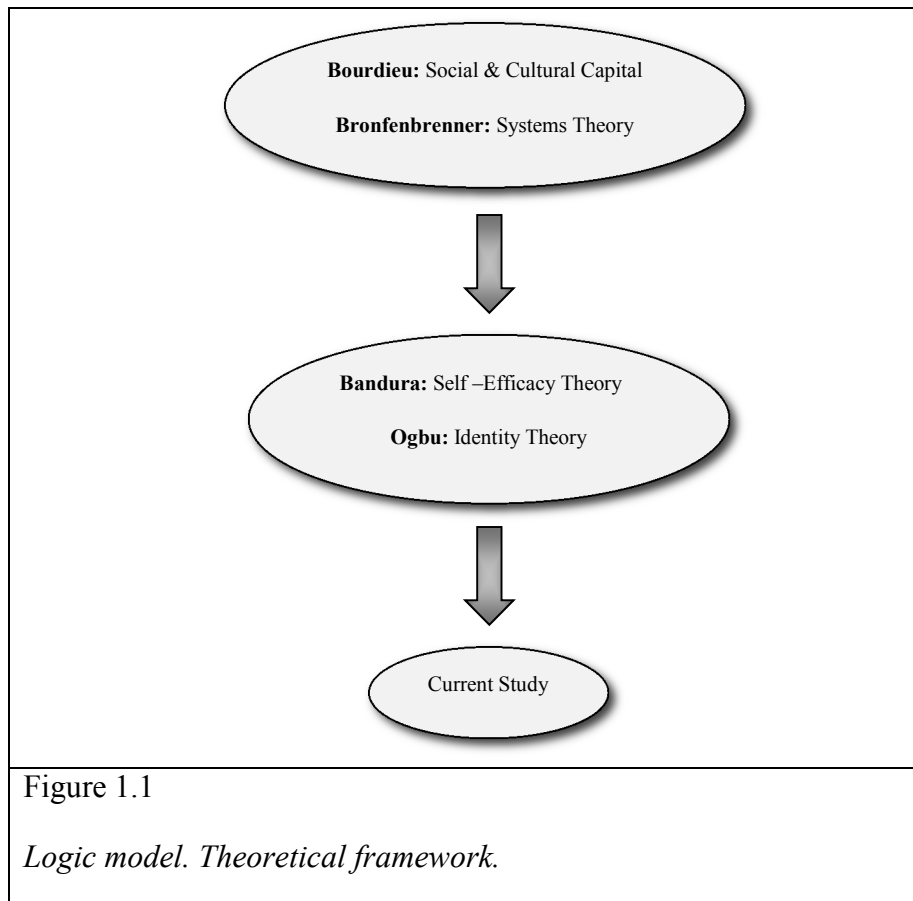
Bandura et al. (1996) also stresses the role of parental self-efficacy in shaping self-efficacy in children. Parents who have high aspirations for their children and believe



in their children's academic potential, ultimately create children who share those same beliefs. This engenders a sense of academic self-efficacy in children, which, in turn, leads to academic achievement.

In general, people with higher self-efficacy tend to believe that they have control of their lives. They believe that their outcomes are directly linked to their choices and their actions. Students with high self-efficacy have higher academic outcomes. They view their academic success as within their control as opposed to outside of it. They tend to participate more frequently and apply themselves to their studies.

In sum, these theories suggest various angles and perspectives from which to analyze dropping out among Black students. I will elaborate on each in Chapter Two.



### **1.2.2 Literature Review**

There is a growing body of scholarly research focused on making sense of the academic performance of Black students and factors that are correlates of their scholastic outcomes. Studies consistently suggest that particular factors have a strong predictive value in determining which students are most at risk of exiting school prior to completion and which are most likely to persist and succeed (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000; DiMaggio, 1982; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003).

Race, gender, and urbanicity are a few of the demographic factors that have been studied. Earlier research sought to attribute differences in academic performance among races to factors that they believed were inherent to the different racial groups. Subsequent studies challenged the accuracy and validity of such science resulting in the waning use of this explanation (Gould, 1981; Sowell, 1973).

Later studies suggested that differences were due to environmental or cultural conditions as opposed to genetic factors. White students were considered more academically inclined as a result of coming from homes that fostered a greater aptitude and appreciation for learning and schooling (Clark, 1984; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, & Roberts, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Stevenson, Chen, & Uttal, 1990). Black students coming from homes that held a lower regard for education and schooling were ill prepared for school and less interested, factors that naturally resulted in their lower levels of performance.

There is also a growing body of research looking more closely at what it means to be Black and female and how membership in two historically oppressed groups may

affect academic achievement (Crenshaw 1991; Collins, 2000). Further factors such as teenage pregnancy, the cultural of familism, and low academic self-concept may all factor into a Black female student's decision to drop out (Rumberger, 1983).

Urbanicity has also been correlated with lower levels of performance, especially among Black males. Everyday life on the streets has a major influence on the psychosocial development and life course trajectories and transitions of Black males. As such, they can be and often are just as powerful as other more conventional socialization institutions (Oliver, 2006). Streets meet the needs of the marginalized by providing them with a space in which they can gain respect. Still other studies focused more closely on the challenges of urban communities, particularly communities of poverty (Kozol, 1995). The Comer Model, which became popular during the 1980s and 1990s, promulgated the idea of wrap around or community schools. Those schools offered children and their families, in one place, academic, physical, social emotional, medical, mental health, and other forms of support (Comer & Woodruff, 1998).

A large and still growing body of research on general academic performance focuses on the role of aspirations and expectations (Fan & Chen, 2001; Fuligni, 1997; Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1984; Weiner, 1985). In their text on motivation, Maehr and Braskamp (1986) write that "...we are what we are expected to be and we do what the task and our significant others allow and demand" (p. 35). Students will aspire to be and achieve that which they believe those closest to them expect them to achieve. Research suggests that Black students hold high aspirations for themselves yet their aspirations do not always translate into academic accomplishments (Kao & Tienda, 1998).

In the current literature, aspirations are often qualified by a desire to attend college. Students with higher aspirations consistently performed at higher levels (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Jenks, Crouse, & Mueser, 1983).

School culture, often researched separately, also plays a significant role in fostering academic achievement and supporting students in the development of high aspirations and expectations. The degree to which students feel safe, believe their school practices are fair, that the content is relevant and that their teachers care about them all factor into how students approach school and learning (Deal and Peterson, 1999; Nieto, 1992; Renchler, 1992).

In *The Culture of Education* (1996), Jerome Bruner suggests that the low academic performance of Black males can be interpreted as a manifestation of the low expectations that those who are responsible have for helping Black males realize their academic potential. Further, students who endure failure and retention, sometimes repeatedly, receive the message that school is not for them. And when certain students “fail” to meet standards, the assumptions and constructs that are held by educators and society at large are affirmed. In his text *The Trouble with Black Boys* (2008), Pedro Noguera suggests that media representations shape how Black males are perceived and unfortunately come to perceive themselves. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) suggests that Black males and Black students in general, are underperforming because educational offerings are irrelevant. To apply themselves in school, children must see themselves as learners, as possessors of valuable knowledge, capable of sharing that knowledge and acquiring new and meaningful knowledge through interactions with others.

While all of the factors discussed above play a role in the academic performance of Black students and students in general, this dissertation will ascertain which factors – demographic, aspirational, school level, or socioeconomic –are most likely to predict incidents of Black students dropping out.

### **1.3 Methodology**

Educational researchers and reformers continue to work and write about the need to improve graduation outcomes for all. Indeed the order of the day is ensuring that students graduate with a high school diploma that indicates solid preparation for the rigors of college study and the demands of a career. Reform initiatives rely on studies to support their efforts.

#### **1.3.1 Procedures**

The data in this study are taken from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). ELS is a nationally representative panel study that followed the same cohort of American tenth-graders for ten years as they progressed through high school and beyond. ELS consists of a base year study conducted in 2002, and three follow-up studies. NCES selected 750 schools for participation in the ELS. The ELS includes questionnaires administered to school principals, parents, and math and English teachers for each student in the survey.

The first follow-up was completed in 2004 when the students, if making typical progress would be in the twelfth grade. NCES “freshened” the ELS:2002 sample in 2004 by giving seniors who were not a part of the base year study of 2002 the opportunity to participate. The second follow-up came in 2006. Respondents included any members

who had participated in ELS:2002 or ELS:2004. The third follow-up, conducted in 2012, analyzed college enrollment and employment histories for study participants. Data were also collected concerning marital status and level of community involvement. Data from ELS:2012 were not yet available for inclusion in this study.

Since the focus of this current project is the drop out status of Black students, only Black respondents were included in the study. Preliminary analysis indicates that data from 1,835 Black students are in this study. Multiple regression analyses will be utilized to determine which independent variables have the greatest impact on predicting dropout rates among Black students.

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter Two will expand on the chosen theoretical framework and review the literature concerning dropping out and the demographic, aspirational and school level variables under consideration. Chapter Two will consider how individuals and collectives are shaped by their interactions within systems and how such interactions come to shape expectations of self, expectations of others, and ideas of how one may approach and “do” school and schooling. The work of Bourdieu, Bronfenbrenner, Ogbu, and Bandura will be highlighted in this chapter.

Chapter Three explains the methodology for this dissertation, which considers how well demographic, aspirational, and school culture variables predict Black students will drop out of school. Chapter Four enumerates the statistical findings specific to this study and will discuss the demographic, aspirational, and school culture variables that are statistically significant in predicting the likelihood of dropping out among Black students. Chapter Five will discuss Chapter Four’s findings and draw parallels between the

analysis, literature, and theoretical perspectives detailed in the Chapter Two. Chapter Six will present conclusions, implications, recommendations, and suggest future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

Chapter One, Introduction and Background, presented current literature and relevant statistics concerning Black students and their academic performance. The current chapter presents various theories and aspects of each that relate to the question of academic performance and dropping out among Black students. After discussing each theory in detail, I will review the literature related to demographic, aspirational, school culture, and socioeconomic variables. Finally, this chapter will describe the role that these variables may play in encouraging Black students to drop out of school.

#### 2.2 Theoretical Framework

Specifically, this chapter considers the following four theories: a) Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory; b) Ogbu's cultural ecological theory; c) Bourdieu's theories of capital; and d) Bandura's self-efficacy Theory. Each of these theories contributes to an understanding of factors that affect dropping out among Black students.

##### *2.2.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory*

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) defines five distinct environmental systems that have a direct or indirect influence on the development of a child. The first, the micro system, is the system with which the child has the most immediate and direct contact and is composed of the family, the community, and the school. The progression of the child's development relies on interactions that the child has with his or her parents and siblings, neighbors, and peers. The individual child is an active participant in the microsystem, helping to define and create the context.



The second system, the mesosystem, is defined as the interaction between events and conditions of two or more microsystems. For example, a child who is neglected by his siblings at home (one aspect of the microsystem) may appear to be introverted or withdrawn in school (another aspect of the microsystem). Similarly, a child who is teased or mistreated in school may then act more aggressively towards siblings at home or friends in the community.

The exosystem refers to social systems that are linked to the developing child but in which the individual has no direct role. For example, the work lives and social circles of caregivers are environments external to the developing child. Nevertheless, according to Bronfenbrenner, what happens in both environments possesses the potential to influence how affairs are conducted in the child's immediate environment.

The macrosystem refers to the cultural context in which people live. Issues of race, class, and other categorical ascriptions and perspectives are all a part of the macrosystem. The norms, expectations, and values of a society at the macrosystem level will influence the exosystem and ultimately be reflected in the microsystem.

Finally, Bronfenbrenner acknowledges that transitions (both normative, such as starting school or experiencing puberty, and non-normative, such as experiencing the unexpected loss of a loved one) influence familial processes employed in the microsystem, thereby indirectly influencing the development of the child. He refers to this system as the chronosystem.

In Bronfenbrenner's systems theory, the family remains the principle context through which the development of the child is interpreted. This systems theory does not,

however, limit its view to intrafamilial processes alone but considers how those processes are affected by extrafamilial conditions. Put differently, it is inherently a mesosystem model, which calls attention to the idea that the processes occurring in different systems encompass conditions and events in another. To limit one's analysis of intrafamilial processes to the microsystem alone without considering how those processes are influenced by or have an influence on extrafamilial systems and conditions is to act as if development occurs in isolated pockets of experience. Bronfenbrenner's systems theory stresses that experiences and conditions external to the child affect, whether slightly or profoundly, the child's development.

While Bronfenbrenner's system theory, with its focus on the interaction between systems, adds depth and dimension to the conversation of child development, it presents a challenge. If, as Bronfenbrenner suggests, each context is considered unique, then it becomes increasingly difficult to generalize findings. In spite of this weakness, Bronfenbrenner defines environmental systems and suggests how the interactions of these systems on multiple levels shape the experience of the child.

Bronfenbrenner's theory is relevant because Black academic achievement has been shown to be correlated with school and home (microsystem) influences as well as being shaped by the values, expectations, and beliefs of society as a whole (macrosystem). Critical race theory, a macrosystem theory, suggests it is indeed impossible to have a conversation about opportunities afforded to and the realized accomplishments of subjugated groups in America without candidly discussing the role that race plays in shaping those opportunities (Caton, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Howard, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; 2012).

### 2.2.2 Ogbu's Cultural Ecological Theory

John Ogbu conducted some of the most notable research in the area of race and academic performance. While a professor of anthropology at the University of California, he engaged in a series of ethnographic studies to determine the effect that race identification had on an individual's academic performance. Ogbu (2004, p. 28) argued that one cannot study "Black students' attitudes and behaviors in the school context, divorced from Black history and community...Black students are products of Black history and members of the contemporary Black community. They face the same dilemma, due to the same oppositional collective identity and frames of reference characteristics, as members of their community." In this view, one cannot understand the academic attitudes and performance of Black students without considering their social and historical backgrounds.

Working with Signithia Fordham in 1986, Ogbu found that societal discrimination, though significant, was not enough to explain the substantial differences in academic performance among minority groups. Two additional factors had an impact on school performance. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argued that Blacks, like all minority groups, share a collective identity. According to Ogbu (2004):

Collective identity refers to people's sense of who they are, their "we-feeling" or "belonging." People express their collective identity with emblems or cultural symbols which reflect their attitudes, beliefs, feelings, behaviors, language or dialect. *The persistence of a group's collective identity depends on the continuity of the external (historical and structural) forces that contributed to its*

*formation... Collective identity usually develops because of people's collective experience or series of experiences (p. 3, emphasis added)*

Individuals come to share collective identity not as a racial identity but as a shared experience; experiences that are often brought about by external forces. The experiences may involve race and therefore become considered racial experiences. Further, as long as the experiences or forms of experiences that create the collective identity remain, then collective identity will endure as well.

Ogbu argues that Black students' collective identity and its effect on school performance depend on the formation and maintenance of the Black American collective identity. According to Ogbu, the experiences that shaped the Black collective identity extend as far back as slavery. "Black Americans began to develop their sense of collective identity and of belonging together during slavery. Collective experience of oppression and exploitation caused them to develop the sense of a Black community which embodied their collective racial identity" (2004, p. 8). Status problems such as ongoing mistreatment reinforce the collective identity. Members of minority groups experience the mistreatment independent of factors that may make them different from other individuals in the group. For example, an "educated," middle-class Black person may receive the same treatment in a high-end department store as an "uneducated," lower-class Black. Membership in the group is not conditional on many levels. As a result, the group may respond in ways that reinforce collective identity while simultaneously defining itself in ways that put it in opposition to the dominant culture that has attempted to define it. In the case of Black America, the dominant culture is White America.

The collective identity created by shared experience involves an understanding of correct ways of behaving and speaking. Ogbu (2004) asserts that the cultural frame of reference for Black Americans is a common expectation of the way Blacks are supposed to act or be. Similarly, the language frame of reference involves a shared understanding of the way Blacks are expected to speak. Both the cultural and language frames of reference are established by the minority group. To be sure, Ogbu's theory suggests that as the minority group is responding to mistreatment or experiences imposed upon it by the dominant group, the inclination is to develop a frame of reference in opposition to the dominant group. When one racial group endures mistreatment at the hands of another racial group, behaviors become racialized. For example, "proper" English is White speech instead of the speech of the dominant culture. "Bad" English or "slang" becomes Black English, instead of the speech of the colonized or minority group.

During slavery, Blacks became "bi-cultural and bi-dialectical." With collective identity somewhat established, Blacks learned to act one way among themselves and to act the way Whites expected them to act when around Whites. According to Ogbu, notions of talking White and talking Black existed during the slavery years. The difference was that talking White then referred to speaking in the manner in which Whites *expected* Blacks to speak. In time, talking White came to mean speaking Standard American English (2004, p. 10).

In keeping with the ideas that the collective identity persists as a societal problem and mistreatment persists, Ogbu suggested that the economic exploitation and near complete societal segregation endured by Blacks during the post emancipation period served to reinforce the collective identity. "[T]heir social reality further motivated them

to forge collective solutions to their collective problems that reinforced their oppositional identity” (2004, p. 12). Further, the collective struggle against social ills and misrepresentations of “Blackness” during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the growing intensity of the Black Power Movement further solidified the sense of an oppositional collective identity, or fictive kinship. “The Black Power Movement was particularly important in reinforcing the oppositional collective identity. Its ideology and tactics removed the stigma attached to being Black and increased race pride and provided an appealing slogan “Black is Beautiful” (p. 18).

Over time, Blacks “accepted the need to behave and talk like White people for education, upward social mobility, equality and acceptance by White people” (Ogbu, 2004, p. 15). The ways in which individual Blacks managed this “burden of acting White” was by no means uniform. Some chose to assimilate in terms of behavior, speech, and even appearance. These individuals believed assimilating would help them achieve educational or job related goals. Others learned to code switch their cultural and language frames of reference. They acted one way in the presence of Whites and another way in the presence of Blacks. Still others were “ambivalent.” They accepted that “proper” English was necessary for education and employment but knew that a Black person would always “sound Black.” Further, they believed that no matter how hard one tried to assimilate, the societal ills and mistreatment that they endured would not go away. After all, these status problems existed, not because of the way Blacks spoke but because they were Black, and that was something they were unable to change. Many Blacks resisted embracing White cultural or language frames of reference because they feared that doing so would result in the loss of some of their “Blackness.” Finally, some

groups of Blacks did not entertain the White cultural and linguistic frame of reference because they were “encapsulated” in Black ways of speaking and being. They simply did not know how to “speak White” or “act White” (Ogbu, 2004). Of all of the coping strategies mentioned above, Ogbu suggests that resistance or opposition is one of the most significant contributors to lowered academic outcomes among minority groups.

Bronfenbrenner’s perspective has theoretical affinities with Ogbu’s (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998) cultural ecological theory. Ogbu’s theory starts as a social address model by considering “how the *status* of a group affects its economic progress and academic performance” (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, p. 167, emphasis added). Ogbu theorizes that the history of a group’s incorporation into the United States will largely influence the group’s beliefs *and* behaviors. This assertion deepens Ogbu’s theory and alludes to a mesosystem, where communal/familial processes are influenced by the historical context or exosystem.

Ogbu’s cultural ecological theory leaves little to no room for understanding the individual and how the individual lives within and reacts to a particular context or, more important, the various systems and conditions that typify that context. He addresses difference as deviance, where involuntary minorities who are academically successful yet remain committed to their minority identity appear as rare exceptions. They are opposed to agentic individuals whose responses to similar conditions should also be deeply studied and discussed. Bronfenbrenner’s theory, in contrast, builds upon a person-process-context model. Within such models, the underlying assumption inherent in Ogbu’s work that “...the impact of a particular external environment on the family was the same irrespective of the personal characteristics of the individual family members,

including the developing child” (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p. 725) is challenged. Ogbu suggests that not only will families respond in a predictable way to the same external environment but that entire categories of people will develop collective ways of thinking and being based on a shared historical context. Within his framework, little attention is given to the many ways in which members of a given collective can simultaneously have some environments in common and others not in common. For example, two single parent families may be considered involuntary minorities. A college graduate who is currently employed, however, may head one, and an unemployed high school dropout and recipient of public assistance may head the other. To expect that children growing up in these very different contexts would automatically possess the same dispositions towards school and schooling as a result of their shared status as involuntary minorities is to approach such an analysis in a one-dimensional manner. Ogbu is correct to assert that the historical context of a collective can and likely will affect the beliefs and behaviors of the members of that collective. What he cannot claim (but unfortunately does) is the ability to determine what those beliefs and behaviors will be. Further, Ogbu fails to consider how personalities and proclivities at the *individual* level may sharply influence how one responds to external conditions. Within Bronfenbrenner’s theory, one can perceive the individual from the collective and acknowledge the role that agency can play in how the individual *chooses* to interact with and respond to a given context.

### 2.2.3 Bourdieu’s Cultural Capital Theory

Pierre Bourdieu explicates how individuals are shaped and affected by the fields in which they operate. Bourdieu, a leading sociologist in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, focused largely on the interactions between individuals and society and the role that power played



in such interactions. He posited that individuals operate within fields taking advantage of the capital that they possess. Capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1984), refers to the assets that an individual or group possesses. It can take several forms. First, economic capital is the monetary or financial resources belonging to an individual. Economic capital prepares subsequent generations to maintain and grow it as well. It allows families to provide their children with important resources and experiences that contribute to school success. Families use their economic capital to maintain large home libraries, provide consistent access to technology, and pay for participation in enrichment experiences such as summer programs, test preparation courses, and admission to cultural events or recreational outings.

Building on this concept of economic capital, Bourdieu defined two additional forms of capital, social and cultural. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, education, skills, and credentials that afford access to higher positions within society. Language, material possessions, and academic credentials are various forms of cultural capital. Its value is often defined by the dominant group, normalizing its ways of being and knowing while simultaneously devaluing the capital of others. This normalization often results in subjugated groups internalizing that their capital is less valuable, leading many to strive to acquire the forms of capital that society considers valuable. Further, members of subjugated groups understand the success of their peers that possess valuable capital as the result of innate ability or effort as opposed to the result of normalized inequality.

For Bourdieu, social capital is defined as the resources afforded to individuals as a result of the recognition and significance of group membership or affiliation. Social capital can be leveraged to acquire or compensate for other forms of capital. Social

capital is dependent upon the interconnectedness of members of the group, their commitment to shared values and their willingness to fulfill the requirements of their role as members.

As stated above individuals use their capital (economic, cultural, social) to navigate the fields in which they operate. Fields, best described as organized social spaces with their own norms, patterns of domination, and accepted opinions, are not neutral. Rather, these fields serve as sites of reproduction, where the capital of the dominant or ruling class is valued and reified while simultaneously the capital of subjugated groups and individuals is devalued. To Bourdieu, education served as the main field in which social reproduction occurred.

Bourdieu and his colleague Jean-Claude Passeron (1990), studied differences in academic achievement among children in France. They found that those differences could be best understood as a result of the deployment of cultural capital in the educational setting. Bourdieu and Passeron suggested that families of privilege provide their children with the social and cultural capital necessary to be successful in school when they teach them the knowledge, habits of mind, dispositions, as well as patterns of speaking that are school friendly. Oftentimes, children of lesser-privileged backgrounds are not equally equipped. To be sure, privilege as it is used here does not reflect the author's belief that the backgrounds of some children are inferior to the backgrounds of children of the dominant class but that the capital that these children possess and bring to the classroom is not equally valued within the school context. Students who possess "valuable" capital experience a more fluid transition to and through school, one that reaffirms their sense of self and reinforces their thinking that they can "do" school.

Oftentimes, they develop more favorable relationships with their educators as they are deemed to be smart, capable, and willing to learn. Conversely, their peers who lack the capital that the school setting requires for success struggle to transition and must often learn and conform to the expected patterns of thought, speech, and behavior if they are to be successful. Schools serve as the first seemingly legitimate gateway (or gatekeeper) for determining who gets what there is to get and in what amounts. In this case, school completion often determines future class position, with the children of the dominant group often transitioning to the same status and position as the families that equipped them with the necessary capital to do so in the first place.

In the *Peculiar History of Scientific Reason*, Bourdieu writes that "...science is a social field of forces, struggles, and relationships that is defined at every moment by the relations of power...choices are guided by taken-for granted assumptions...such choices also are shaped by the social capital controlled by various positions and stances" (1991, p. 3). Bourdieu asserts that various fields reify or denigrate ways of knowing. Therefore, opportunities for success within a given field are oftentimes dependent on whether stores of knowledge are considered valuable or not. Unfortunately, some Black students bring resources to school that are seldom viewed as valuable. Rather, their cultural ways of being in the world – whether real or perceived – are seen as contradictory to acceptable ways of “doing” school. They, often lacking the capital necessary to create spaces for change within their field, are forced to negotiate within the parameters that have been established. Some conform while others, as suggested by Ogbu, resist.

Children learn what they live and in turn often live what they have learned. One must be conscious of his or her positionality within the current structures and how that

positionality has worked to shape his or her habitus. Habitus, or frame of reference, is defined as how an individual sees, understands, and acts within the world (Bourdieu, 1991). A dialectical relationship, one's habitus, is shaped by and works to further shape society. More important, habitus defines and (for some) limits the world of possibilities. For example, for some Black students school completion may be absent from their frame of reference. Similarly, the practices and habits one must employ in support of academic achievement may be less familiar to some Black students (Kao and Tienda, 1998).

#### *2.2.4 Bandura's Self Efficacy Theory*

A theory of self-efficacy stands at the core of Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (2010). The central tenet in social cognitive theory is that ways of being and thinking are influenced by the actions observed in others. This principle is similar to Bronfenbrenner's microsystem. Self-efficacy is shaped by lived experience and self-perception. It determines how individuals will perceive and respond to obstacles and setbacks, interpret successes and failures, and approach new challenges (Bandura, 2010). Bandura points out that: "Unless people believe that they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act" (Bandura et al., 1996, p. 1206).

What role does a sense of self-efficacy play in a student's decision to drop out of school? Academic motivations are intimately connected to beliefs in self-efficacy. Put differently, individuals are motivated to do that which they believe they can do. Regarding school and schooling, students are more likely to persevere if they believe that they have the capacity to succeed and that their efforts will result in that success. Further, students must have a goal beyond the classroom that compels them to strive within the classroom (Bandura, 2010; Bandura et al., 1996; Felson, 1984; Kao & Tienda, 1998).

Aspirations do not automatically translate into goal attainment. One must act to realize aspirations. Further, that action must be informed and supported by self-efficacy beliefs. Kao and Tienda (1998) have shown that Black students have comparable or higher aspirations than their peers. Nevertheless, they consistently perform less well academically and have lower rates of school completion. This phenomenon has given rise to the term “aspiration-achievement paradox”.

Parents play a critical role in Bandura’s self-efficacy theory. He writes, “parents who have a high sense of parenting efficacy select and construct environments conducive to their children’s development and serve as strong advocates on their behalf in transactions with educational and other social systems” (Bandura et al., 1996, p. 1216). Such parents take the informed action steps of which Kao and Tienda (1998) speak and ensure that they strategically act in service of the goals they have for their children. Families of greater financial means may be in a position to support their children with additional resources and experiences. Nevertheless, parenting self-efficacy beliefs and the ability to positively affect children’s academic outcomes is not reserved only for families with greater economic capital. “Parents (who) had a higher sense of efficacy promote(d) their children’s educability by fostering their interest in academic activities...monitoring their school work, and keeping them out of trouble...parental valuation of education played a key role in setting the course of their children’s educational development during their formative years” (Bandura et al., 1996, pp. 1218-1219). Student’s sense of self-efficacy is influenced by the actions of other actors in their lives (microsystems) as well as the messages they receive about their intelligence and capacity from society at large (macrosystems).

### 2.3 Literature Review

There is a growing body of scholarly research focused on making sense of the academic performance of Black students and the factors correlated to their scholastic outcomes. Studies range from qualitative to quantitative to mixed methods. Some focus on one gender. They seek to make plain the correlation between academic performance and socioeconomic status, family background, aspirations, social and peer influences, teacher and school quality, and so on. Studies consistently suggest that key factors such as race, gender, school locale and culture, family composition, and socioeconomic status have a strong predictive value in determining which students are most at risk of dropping out of school and which are most likely to persist and succeed (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; DiMaggio, 1982; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003)

Previous research sought to attribute differences in academic performance among races to factors that researchers believed were inherent to the different racial groups. During the 1960s, physicist William Shockley and psychologist Arthur Jensen (Jensen, 1969) separately suggested that differences in academic aptitude and achievement were due to specific genetic variations, a view known interchangeably as genetic determinism or hereditarianism. Such research was largely a binary comparative, defining and describing Black people in relation to their White counterparts. Subsequent studies challenged the accuracy and validity of such science and resulted in the waning use of this explanation (Gould, 1981; Sowell, 1973). The controversial debate, however, raged once again in the mid-1990s when political scientist Charles Murray and, psychologist Richard Herrnstein published *The Bell Curve* (1994). The pair suggested that the variation in IQ scores among Blacks and Whites had its basis in genetic differences.

Members of the academy rallied on both sides. In response, the American Psychological Association assembled a task force to evaluate the findings presented in *The Bell Curve*. In 1995 it published its findings in *Intelligence: Knowns and Unknowns*. The task force concluded that there was no sufficient explanation – be it genetic, cultural, or otherwise – to explain the IQ differential among Black people and White people. Though the school of thought promoted by Jensen in the 1960s and again by Murray and Herrnstein in the 1990s has been largely disputed and dispelled, hints of such thinking linger still in the minds of many today.

The social significance of difference is rooted in racist ideology, ideology that is reproduced in institutions such as schools. It is this dominant ideology that has shaped the meaning of intelligence and controls how it is often measured. Therefore a partial explanation of the “low achievement” of students of color could be described as a self-fulfilling prophecy. False beliefs concerning Black students’ intellectual capacity affect how educators perceive and interact with them and how these students approach the school context. There, “lack of success” serves to validate and reinforce false expectations (Marger, 2006).

In efforts to appear tolerant, there are those who stress the need to be “colorblind,” acting as though one does not “see” racial difference and is therefore not governed by such differences. This view masks the ubiquity of race. Denying the presence of race and its impact does not prove its absence. Indeed, to pretend as if race does not exist (albeit as a social construction) is to disregard the way that racist ideology has become inextricably interwoven with just about every aspect of society, particularly schools (Lewis, 2003). Schools where “objective differences” are tightly linked with

“subjective judgments...play a role in alienating children from their own intelligence”  
Such environments serve to reinforce the social significance of race as defined by dominant views and values. These views often directly and indirectly affect students’ “sense of self” and consequently their “patterns of performance” (Payne, 2008, p. 69).

This is not to suggest intentional racism on the part of any individual. After centuries of programming and debate, race-based views on intellectual ability are simply ingrained in members of society regardless of one’s individual background or what one thinks he or she believes. Pollock (2008) writes:

...we have fallen for the misconception that internal differences, including intellectual ones accompany [these] visible differences. American educators reactivate this cruel programming every time we imagine, even for a fleeting second, that students’ physical appearance signals anything at all about their brain power. Since assumptions of racially distributed intelligence are in the air we breathe, antiracist practice requires actively resisting this notion. (p. 10).

Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson (1995) explained how stereotypes or false assumptions about Black students and their intellectual capacity affected students’ views of themselves as well. In a study involving 44 Stanford undergraduates, Steele and Aronson found that Black students who were asked to identify their race performed less well on an assessment than their peers who were not asked to identify their race and worse than their White counterparts. Steele and Aronson argued that their academic performance was lowered because after identifying as Black they were asked to perform in an area where their capabilities as Black students had often been called into question.



Steele and Aronson defined this phenomenon as stereotype threat and suggested that individuals perform poorly in areas where a negative stereotype exists about a group to which they belong, even if as individuals they are capable of performing at a higher level. Once the threat is removed, either by announcing the assessment is of no value or not requiring individuals to state their affiliation with the stereotyped group, individuals tend to perform at a higher level.

Later studies suggested that differences were due to environmental or cultural conditions as opposed to genetic factors. White students were considered more academically inclined as a result of coming from homes that fostered a greater aptitude and appreciation for learning and schooling (Clark, 1984; Dornbusch et al., 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Stevenson et al., 1990). Black students, coming from homes that had a lower regard for education and schooling were ill prepared for or less interested in school, factors that naturally resulted in lower levels of performance.

Still other studies focused more closely on the challenges of urban communities, particularly communities of poverty. This line of research suggested that economic stability and the access to the resources such stability provided had a large impact on how students experienced and performed in school. Jonathan Kozol (1995), in his hallmark text *Amazing Grace* paints with great detail a picture of the struggle that children, families, and educators face trying to ensure academic success in the South Bronx. The Comer Model, which became popular during the 1980s and 1990s, offered the example of wrap around or community schools. Those schools offered children and their families academic, physical, social emotional, medical, mental health, and other forms of support

in one place (Comer & Woodruff, 1998). Geoffrey Canada's approach with the Harlem Children's Zone is based largely on this idea (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011).

A large and still growing body of research on the matter of general academic performance focuses on the role of aspirations and expectations (Fan & Chen, 2001; Fuligni, 1997; Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1984; Weiner, 1985). For the purpose of this dissertation, aspirations are defined as the hope or goal for the future that one has for him or herself. These aspirations are cultivated through interactions with immediate family, within a community (school, peers, neighbors and neighborhood, extended family, etc.), and on a larger scale through the messages received and internalized from the media and society (Cook et al., 1996). Expectations, while closely connected to aspirations, are defined as how far students actually believe they can go in terms of accomplishing their goals and aspirations.

School culture, often researched separately, also plays a significant role in fostering academic achievement and supporting students in the development of high aspirations and expectations. The degree to which students feel safe, believe their school practices are fair, that the content is relevant, and that their teachers care about them factor in to how students approach school and learning (Deal and Peterson, 1999; Nieto, 1992; Renchler, 1992).

I will provide a comprehensive review of the factors under consideration in the following domains: demographic factors, aspirational factors, school level factors, and socioeconomic factors.

### **2.3.1 Demographic Factors**

The odds of dropping out are much higher for Black students than their White counterparts. In fact, only Latino students have higher dropout rates than Black students. A review of the literature on the demographic factors associated with dropping out among Black students influenced the selection of the variables that follow.

#### *Gender (Female)*

Research indicates that the odds that a Black student will eventually drop out of high school are partly influenced by gender. In 2006, the national high school graduation rate for Black students was 51%, with females at 58% and males at 44%.

Why are Black males dropping out? The “streets” are a place where many Black males, particularly those living in densely populated cities, learn to enact their identity and interact with peers. Socialization is the formal and informal process in which adults seek to instill beliefs, values, and norms that will enable adolescents to adapt as members of society. Typical socialization institutions, which shape identity and behavior, include the church (or other religious organizations), family, the educational system, community-based organizations, and mass media. These traditional spaces can and often do reify normative behaviors, magnifying the “abnormality” of behaviors that are perceived as non-normative. As active participants in the construction of reality, people possess the ability to rewrite narratives so as to create understandings that make aspects of their lived experience read as normal, even when such aspects can be interpreted as deviant or non-normative within the narratives of others (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2008). The need for normalizing what others have deemed abnormal gives rise to alternative sites for socialization. The streets — the net of public and semi-public social settings including

spaces such as “street corners, vacant lots, bars, clubs, after hours joints, convenience stores, drug houses, pool rooms, parks, public recreational places” — function as an alternative socializing institution (Oliver, 2006, 919). They have a major influence on the psychosocial development and life course trajectories and transitions of Black males. As such, they can be and often are just as powerful as other more conventional socialization institutions.

Human nature is to seek respect and social recognition. Macro level institutions such as the political, economic, educational, and criminal justice systems do not afford Black males the same opportunities for the achievement of respect and social significance as their white counterparts. In fact, they deny respect and status to Black males on many levels. Faced with the difficulty of achieving prestige and identity through the “legitimate” or mainstream opportunity structure, the streets are increasingly attractive as an alternate space to pursue significance. It is a means for transcending invisibility and becoming visible (Oliver, 2006, 921).

Streets meet the needs of the marginalized by providing them with a space to gain respect. They represent “the way we are” and “just what we do” by serving as the space where alternative norms are lived, refined, and transmitted to subsequent generations. Academic pursuits and attainments are not written into street narratives. Indeed to “do school” in the traditional sense is often viewed as contradictory to the identity of Blacks, especially Black males. As a result, rampant “anti-intellectualism” (holding traditional intellectualism as the norm) has become characteristic of the street.

There is also a growing body of research looking closely at what it means to be Black and female and how membership in two historically oppressed groups may

influence academic achievement (Crenshaw 1991; Collins, 2000). Further factors such as teenage pregnancy, the cultural notion of familism, and low academic self-concept all factor into a Black female student's decision to drop out (Rumberger, 1983)

### *Public*

Comparing the academic outcomes of students in public versus private educational settings is not a new angle. These comparisons, however, are far from neat and clean. One must consider that students who attend private schools and the families that elect to enroll them in such settings often differ in significant ways from their peers attending public schools. First, private school attendance comes at a cost; tuition at some of the most elite private institutions is similar to the cost of private colleges and universities. Those who attend are able to afford it and value education enough to consider it a worthy investment. Those who attend such schools on scholarship have parents or guardians who were willing and able to seek out such assistance. They are motivated to ensure their children have the opportunity to attend particular schools.

Public school students tend to attend schools based on their neighborhoods, although in some urban centers high school enrollment is open to various application processes. Public schools must rely on local tax base and government funding to develop, implement, and sustain their programs. Further they must adhere to the policy regulations set forth by their governing bodies. Private institutions rely on tuition and other private sources to fund their programs and have greater liberty to implement instructional programs of their choosing. Well over 90% of Black students are enrolled in public school across America. These schools, independent of region, rely on tax payer

dollars to support their programs. But as education reform has swept across the nation, the lines between, public, private, and charter schools have blurred with the result that comparisons across school types have become equally fuzzy.

### *Urban*

The third demographic factor often discussed in studies analyzing Black students dropout rates is urbanicity. Most studies classify according to population density a school setting as urban, suburban, or rural. In 2003, Black students accounted for 17.2% of the national elementary and secondary school enrollment, yet they were nearly 30% of the enrollment in schools in urban centers (KewalRamani, 2007). Not surprisingly then, a significant amount of the research on Black student educational outcomes focuses on the characteristics of living and learning in large cities and what can be done to improve outcomes in such settings.

There are several characteristics of urban centers that may be contributing to the high dropout rates among Black students, characteristics that on the face of them appear to be less about locale and more about socioeconomics. First, studies show that students in urban areas have an increased likelihood of exposure to challenges that may impede the academic process such as limited access to health care, less stable living environments, and higher rates of limited English proficiency (Kozol, 1995; Kena et al., 2014; Noguera, 2003).

Further, urban schools have higher concentrations of students from low-income households and as such a large percentage of students in urban centers attend high poverty schools. Payne (2008) asserts that the “inadequacy of the resource base” that

urban schools have to contend with is no small matter (p. 24). Resource as it is used here encompasses school-based budgets, facilities, as well as qualified, capable, and committed educators. The work of JD Comer and later education reformers stress that resources are needed to support urban schools *as well as* the poor communities in which they are situated (Fruchter 2007; Kozol, 1995; Noguera, 2003, Payne, 2008). It is important to emphasize that many of the failings attributed to location (i.e., urbanicity) may actually be attributable to the challenges of poverty. Indeed, race, class, and location are variables that often seem easy to conflate at best, and inextricably linked at worst, making it difficult to determine decisively the impact that locale has on student learning outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Toutkoushian & Curtis, 2005)

Nevertheless, the impact of urbanicity has been shown to be independent of poverty level (Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). In *Urban Schools: The Challenge of Location and Poverty* (1996), Lippman, Burns and McArthur present a detailed analysis of the similarities and differences of high poverty schools across locales. Using Data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988, they found that high poverty schools contended with absenteeism, lowered rates of graduation, limited resources, and difficulty recruiting and retaining highly qualified staff independent of locale. However, the study highlights that that *urban*, high poverty schools contend with these challenges more frequently than their nonurban high poverty counterparts. Drawing on similar data (NELS 1988), Rumberger and Thomas (2000) determined that Black students were more likely to drop out of schools in urban centers than Black students who did not attend a school in an urban

center.

Considering Black male students specifically, research suggests that the active nature of the “streets” in urban centers serves as an alternative site for affirmation and socialization; this largely contributes to high dropout rates among Black males in urban areas (Oliver, 2006).

### *South*

The final demographic variable selected for consideration in this study is region, specifically the South. It is worth noting that five of the ten states with the lowest graduation rates – Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina – are located in the southeastern part of the United States (Holzman, 2010).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Chapman, Laird, Ifill & KewelRamani, 2011), the national graduation rates for 2008 and 2009 revealed glaring disparities by region. While high schools located in the Midwest and Northwest regions of the United States posted average graduation rates near 80%, rates for schools in the South were nearly a full 20 percentage points lower, coming in at around 60%. Similarly, Southern states accounted for nearly 40% of the nation’s dropouts, while the Midwest and Northeast combined averaged for dropouts was 18.3% (Chapman, Laird, Ifill & KewelRamani, 2011). Because the regional data referenced above is not disaggregated by racial groups, further research is warranted to determine what effect region has on dropout rates among Black students.

Barring thorough research and analysis, one might rush to assume that Black students, who already have a higher dropout rate, would logically experience a higher



dropout rates in the South. Rumberger (1983), however, found that Black students, both male and female were less likely to drop out of school, if they lived in the South.

Similarly, Ekstrom (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986), relying on data from the High School and Beyond longitudinal study conducted during the 1980s, determined that, in the South, Black students were less likely to drop out than their White counterparts.

### **2.3.2 Aspirational Factors**

The motivation to apply oneself is often derived from a sense that one will realize a desired end with persistence (Bandura et al., 1996). Academically speaking, most students aspire to a good post-secondary school and a career that will enable them to live comfortably. School specific aspirations depend on aspirations: a) that students hold for themselves b) that families hold and students believe families hold for them and c) that educators hold for their students and students believe their educators hold for them. The following section discusses the formation and development of aspirations in general and the current role that research suggests for self, family, and educator aspirations specifically. Two additional aspirational variables were analyzed in this study: d) viewing school as a place to meet friends and e) viewing school as a place to acquire skills needed for future employment. Each of the five variables is discussed below.

#### *2.3.2.1 Aspiration Development*

Utilizing data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, Kao and Tienda (1998) found that Black and Hispanic students held aspirations comparable to their peers from eighth through twelfth grade. Having similar aspirations, however, did not necessarily translate into similar academic performance. Kao and Tienda concluded

that the aspirations of minority youth were mediated by their often lower socioeconomic status.

Early research on the development of educational aspirations focused largely on class membership as a predictor of aspirations. There are somewhat competing views on educational aspirations in the status-attainment view (Barr & Dreeben, 1983). One perspective posits that academic aspirations are a manifestation of a mental state that compels students to work towards academic accomplishments. This mental state is influenced by the expectations of parents, teachers, peers, and others close to the developing individual (Kao, 1996; Davies & Kandel, 1981). This view comports with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Bourdieu's ideas of frame of reference and capital discussed above.

Kao and Tienda (1998) found that Black students hold equally high aspirations for themselves as their White counterparts, yet their aspirations do not always translate into academic accomplishments. They term this disparity the *aspiration achievement paradox* and attribute it to resources available to students, not their aspirations or dispositions towards school.

### 2.3.2.3 *Self Aspirations*

Aspirations are largely governed by the individual's habitus, which shapes the world of possibilities. Society legitimizes and normalizes distorted stereotypes of Blacks as intellectually unengaged. This serves to lower academic confidence, which in turn lowers academic aspirations. In the current literature, aspirations are often enhanced by a desire to attend college. Students with higher aspirations consistently performed at

higher levels (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Gorard, See, & Davies, 2012; Jenks, Crouse, and Mueser, 1983). Bandura and colleagues (1996) note that “Students’ firm beliefs in their efficacy to manage their own motivation and learning activities provide the *staying power* and enhance performance accomplishments” (p. 1215, emphasis added).

Solorzano (1992) conducted a study of Black and White eighth graders using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988. He found that females had higher aspirations than their male counterparts, independent of race and SES.

#### *2.3.2.4 Familial and Educator Aspirations*

Existing research suggests that academic outcomes are correlated to personal aspirations as well as the aspirations of family members and educators (Davis-Kean, 2005; Kao & Tienda, 1998; NCES, 2010; Rumberger, 1983; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010).

In their text on motivation, Maehr and Braskamp (1986) write that “...we are what we are expected to be and we do what the task and our significant others allow and demand” (p. 35). Otherwise stated, students will aspire to be and achieve that which they believe those closest to them expect them to achieve. Parent aspirations have been proven to influence academic achievement but only in so much as the child comes to hold those views for him or herself (Spera, Wetzel, & Matto, 2009). Parent aspirations play a significant role in academic performance. Banduara and colleagues (1996) write, “...the educational vision parents hold for their children and the parents’ sense of efficacy that they can help their children realize those aspirations” affects a child’s academic performance (p. 1219).

Studies concerning the effect of teacher aspirations and expectations remain less conclusive (Anyon, 1997; Bruner, 1996; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Rist 1970). In an analysis of 35 years of empirical research on teacher expectations, Jussim and Harber (2005) concluded that self-fulfilling prophecies based on teacher expectations do occur, but that these effects tend to be minimal. They even suggest that the fairly consistent correlation between teacher expectations and student outcomes may be due more to the “accuracy” of the teacher expectations than the self-fulfilling nature of the expectations. Finally, Jussim and Harber’s analysis determined that the correlation between teacher expectation and outcome is apt to be greater among students from stigmatized groups. Brophy and Good (1974) asserted that not all students will interpret and respond to teacher expectations and aspirations in the same way. Their findings are aligned with and reconfirmed by the work of Harper and Tuckman (2006). In a mixed methods study involving 289 students, Harper and Tuckman found that several of the study participants actually used their teacher’s and society’s lower expectations as motivation to excel and dispel notions of inferior academic competence.

#### *2.3.2.5 Meet Friends and Job Skills*

The degree to which a student feels like school is a place to meet friends speaks to a sense of school belonging. It is connected to several aspirational measures—overall motivation to do well in school, how far one thinks he or she will go, effort, and the value placed on schoolwork. Existing research suggests the peer networks play a significant role in shaping school dispositions and academic behaviors (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Finn & Rock, 1997; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Ogbu, 2004 Oliver, 2006). Not all peer networks are qualitatively the same. Positive peer networks promote

high academic aspirations, achievement, and collectively pursue – or at minimum value – school completion. The notion of peer networks speaks to Ogbu’s (2004) notion of collective identity. If Black students buy into what Ogbu terms the oppositional collective identity, it follows that they are more likely to embrace a non-academic identity. Indeed Ogbu suggests that those Black students who choose to go against their racial peer group may have to deal with alienation and seek the we feeling among non-race-based peers and friends. The peer network in this sense is less an intimate circle and more a group with which one finds common membership (i.e., race).

Research on the impact that faith in the opportunity structure has on commitment to school completion has been conducted across fields and disciplines and with a variety of methodologies (Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999; Raffe & Willms, 1989; Wilson, 1997). Nearly all conclude that students who believe that school is a place to acquire the job skills needed to secure future employment are less likely to transition prior to completing.

William Julius Wilson (1997) discusses how the lack of a viable opportunity structure can negatively affect the desire to work at academic pursuits. He suggests that situations like joblessness and high rates of teen pregnancy that permeate and often typify urban existence do not serve to promote the idea that one must work towards establishing a career and family. He further finds that in areas where there are high dropout and unemployment rates, it is difficult to compel individuals to embrace the notion that school based effort will result in the attainment of an established goal.

### 2.3.3 School Culture Factors

In *The Culture of Education (1996)*, Jerome Bruner writes about folk psychology and folk pedagogy. He suggests that the way educators perceive a learner's mind largely accounts for the way they attempt to teach the child. Teachers often adjust their style and expectations based on what they *perceive* the learner's ability to be. This concept of perception is troubling because perception is often based on assumptions about individuals, assumptions which are held about a larger group. Socially constructed views of "self" and "other" greatly influence the interaction between Black students and schooling. This may be especially true for Black males. Bruner suggests that educator interactions with students are partly determined by the thoughts and expectations they have concerning their students. In addition, school experiences are also influenced by the ideas Black males have about themselves as part of a larger group—Black and male—and how that group typically associates with school. The academic expectations that educators hold for Black male students and the expectations they have come to hold for themselves are based on real world experiences as well as the images and ideas portrayed in the media. Even well intended individuals have to contend with the stereotypes regarding others that they have been exposed to through various media outlets.

Media representations of Black males often depict them as athletes, entertainers, or criminals. Such pervasive messaging has at least two debilitating effects. First, it reinforces the stereotypes that exist in the psyches of those responsible for educating Black males and may consciously or unconsciously affect their approach to educating these students. This folk pedagogy, as Bruner calls it is deeply entrenched in certain thinking about Black males and how they "do" school. The poor academic performance

of Black males can be interpreted as a manifestation of the low expectations held for them by those responsible for helping them realize their academic potential. Indeed, it is arguably quite difficult to bring to fruition that which you fail to believe actually exists. Bruner writes that “Schools do not simply equip kids with skills and self-esteem or not. They are in competition with other parts of society that can do this... America manages to alienate enough Black ghetto boys to land nearly a third of them in jail before they reach the age of thirty” (p. 38). Students who endure failure and retention, sometimes repeatedly, receive the message that school is not for them, and when certain students “fail” to meet standards, the assumptions and constructs that are held by educators and society are affirmed.

The second and probably more troubling effect of the portrayals is the role that such widespread depictions play in shaping the identities of many Black males. In his text *The Trouble with Black Boys (2008)*, Pedro Noguera discusses the media representations that shape how Black males are often perceived and unfortunately come to perceive themselves. “The images and stereotypes of Black males that permeate American society compel all Black men and boys to contend with characterizations and images that are propagated in the media and with the perceptions that lurk within imaginations” (p. xiii).

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) suggests that Black males and Black students in general, are underperforming because the educational offerings fail to be relevant. To apply themselves in school, children must see themselves as learners, as possessors of valuable knowledge capable of sharing that knowledge and acquiring new and meaningful knowledge through interactions with others. She calls for culturally relevant

teaching practices that at their core acknowledge and build upon the knowledge and life experiences of their learners and use that to build new learning experiences. Culturally relevant teaching practices are empowering for students because they enable them to develop academic competence and esteem. Such practices include using learner interviews and interest inventories to get to know students backgrounds; using varied instructional strategies to address student styles and needs; allowing students to play an active role in shaping curriculums; and implementing a curriculum that incorporates multiple perspectives, including but not limited to perspectives shared by students.

Sigmund Freud used the term transference to refer to the psychoanalytical process whereby individuals unconsciously (or consciously) make sense of new experiences through the understandings of past conflicts. According to teacher educators Deborah Britzman and Alice Pitt (1996, p. 117), “Recent writing about pedagogy suggests that transference shapes how teachers respond and listen to students and how students respond and listen to teachers...the problem...is when the repetition of transference dynamics are not analyzed.” This notion of transference is similar to Bruner’s concept of folk pedagogy. Folk pedagogy refers to how teachers may knowingly and unknowingly interact with “others” based on their own cultural or experiential beliefs and practices. It is possible that “the knowledge of this concept (transference) would enable teachers to understand and appreciate how students, and teacher, without realizing it, unconsciously join together with each other to enact socially shared processes that relieve them of tension and anxiety (trauma)” (Slavin, 2002, p. 299).

The relief from tension is made possible by a “quest” for continuity. Because individuals make sense of new conflicts through old ones, it is difficult to determine what



other meaning the experience may have held. The insight that is gleaned from the new experience is often in concert with prior understandings, though the new experience itself may not have held that significance. Aspects of the new situation that are contradictory to the internalized meaning are often elided or refused. Britzman and Pitt refer to this lack of congruence between the actual experience and its internalized significance as the “crisis of representation” (2004). For example, if a Black person who has experienced racism and prejudice is made to wait a long time before being assisted by a White salesperson in an upscale boutique, the Black individual may conclude that this is simply another case of discrimination. And it very well may be. There may be, however, other real, plausible explanations for the delay. Similarly, a veteran teacher who has grown accustomed to working with “disengaged” or “aggressive” Black male students may interpret a new student’s lack of participation as a sign of disengagement. Indeed, the unconscious need for continuity may limit her ability to perceive other aspects of the situation that may help her make sense of how the student is participating in the environment.

Just as educators are in a position to make sense of their interactions with Black students based on old insights, Black students are also in a position to make sense of their school experience based on their prior understandings of what it means to be Black and male in American society. Media presentations that portray them as athletically gifted yet not academically inclined, peripheral dealings with government agencies and law enforcement officials, as well as bearing witness to the manner in which their peers approach schooling all may have an effect on how they view their role as students.

Education research has documented the root causes for low achievement, school misconduct, and other social problems that are prevalent in many urban schools. When speaking of low achievement, the conversation often centers on the “achievement gap” that exists between White students and non-White students, with Black students most frequently being the comparative group. Research on school misconduct tends to address the difference between the dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors that minority (sometimes stated as poor, or urban, or ghetto) youth demonstrate and those ways of being that are considered conducive for learning.

Schools are constructed in alignment with dominant values and a racist ideology that intentionally and subconsciously views students of color as less than academically capable and inclined. In schools where student abilities are doubted and ways of being denigrated, “school misconduct can be seen as students seeking ‘their badges of dignity’ elsewhere” (Payne, 2008, p. 110).

Non-white students, especially Black students and certainly Black males, having internalized racist views about their intellectual capacity, may be seeking the affirmation they are denied from educators from other sources. Similarly, they may deride other Black youths for their academic efforts and “successes” and accuse them of acting white or being a sellout. Indeed many students of color who *are* academically “successful” must learn to negotiate their cultural, racial, and academic identities, working to garner the respect and camaraderie of their racial peer group, while striving to demonstrate they possess dominant capital (Fruchter, 2007; Noguera, 2008; Renchler, 1992).

The Black and Latino Male School Intervention Study (BLMSIS) was a five-year study conducted by the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University (Fergus & Noguera, 2010). The researchers sought to ascertain the implicit theory behind the creation and implementation of single sex schools for Black and Latino males. They asked, “What do you do and why do you do it?” The study, which involved in-depth conversations with leaders, teachers, and counselors at five all male schools, identified two overarching theories that served as the unspoken underpinnings of the participating schools.

First, they found that the schools uniformly believed that they had to have an understanding and frame of reference for the social and emotional needs of Black and Latino male students. To be successful in improving the academic life trajectory of students, the schools had to engage purposefully in the work of helping students reconstruct an often misconstrued sense of who they were and who they could be as Black and Latino men. The teams theorized that the media and students’ lived experiences challenged the formation of a balanced identity that incorporates an academic aspect with future possibilities. The five school teams all agreed that it was the teachers’ job to help their students develop a social identity that incorporated an academic identity. The teams found that their students accepted that to be academically inclined or eagerly pursue schooling was perceived as seeking a “raceless” identity. The first theoretical conclusion that the teams put forward concerned the efficacy of identity work, helping students define and redefine who they are, who they believe they can be, and what role they can play in shaping the future.

The second underlying theory identified by the BLMSIS was that schools need to understand how the academic needs of Black and Latino boys have surfaced and what strategies can address those needs. Students attending these schools had gaps in their academic skills due to limited opportunities. The schools worked to teach the basics while simultaneously introducing them to increasingly challenging content. They also found their students were neither college-minded nor college ready. Each school sought to implement a rigorous and relevant curriculum reflective of the high academic expectations they held for their students and their commitment to valuing and building on their students' knowledge and background (Fergus & Noguera, 2010).

#### **2.3.4 Socioeconomic Status**

Some studies suggest that the factors most salient for predicting a student's success are family socioeconomic status and level of parental educational attainment. (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Ogbu, 1990).

In *Urban Schools Public Will*, Norm Fruchter argues that it is not only reasonable to expect schools to find ways to counter the effects of social inequality but that it is in fact a moral obligation. He situates the realities of the urban school experience for many poor children of color within the context of America's dealings with poor people of color. He writes:

How we do schooling in this country, just as how we do housing, healthcare, the distribution of wealth and income, and the provision of justice, is fundamentally inequitable and unjust. This [book] is a small effort to contribute to more equitable and effective education and a more equitable and just society (p. 3-4).

Members of the organization A Broader, Bolder Approach (Morrell & Noguera, 2011) argue that differences in socioeconomic status contribute to the creation of the “achievement” gap well before students enter the school setting and that schools working alone, even the ones that are working hard, will have a difficult time counteracting those real differences. They outline a comprehensive approach, inclusive of quality preschool programs, extended learning opportunities, provision of health services, and a continued focus on improving schools from within.

Urban schools that serve poor children of color are almost always situated in racially and economically segregated communities. Families living below the poverty line are confined to living in close quarters in some of the nation’s most abandoned and neglected areas such as parts of the South Bronx and Harlem in New York City (Kozol, 1995). Research has described in detail how the disappearance of industrial jobs and the shift of middle-class and working-class families from urban centers in the last half century have greatly contributed to the de facto segregation of urban public schools and the dwindling (almost nonexistent) tax base that remains (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Noguera, 2003). Employment opportunities when they do present themselves as part of a government economic initiative are either low-paying for those with minimal skill or technological in nature. Those living in poor urban communities often cannot secure higher paying technical jobs because their educational experiences have left them ill-equipped to do so (Anyon, 1997).

Joblessness and high rates of teen pregnancy that permeate and often typify urban existence do not serve to promote the idea that one must work to establish a career and family. There is no sense of something lost or a dream deferred when one leaves school

before completion of the twelfth grade or becomes pregnant as a teenager and has a child out of wedlock. Indeed, for some, this is the realization of a dream (Wilson, 1997).

Perceptions of the opportunity structure play a role in shaping how poor urban youth, particularly those of color, approach schooling. Poverty, racism, and lack of educational and employment opportunity all have a role in explaining perceived low achievement and school misconduct. Living and working in marginal situations and conditions often leads people within a community to develop collective ways of being, ways that often differ from dominant expectations. This is due to the real and perceived lack of a solid opportunity structure that exists within poor urban communities. Students are more likely to display diligence, punctuality, and similar behaviors, if they see them as directly related to attainable educational and employment opportunities. Persisting through the requirements, stresses and struggles of school is deeply connected to the acquisition of material wealth and at the very least the ability to provide for one's family. In environments where that connection between effort and reward is weak or nonexistent, students are unlikely to demonstrate those behaviors, which is not to suggest that no students within these communities possess those qualities. Families living in such contexts do not equally experience the weight of oppression within their communities, and suggesting that they do denies their sense of agency (Vigil, 2010; Wilson, 1997).

Schools, though they potentially offer the development of a counter narrative for children who are poor and of color, are often where negative folk pedagogies or dominant culture views are reinforced and galvanized. In her work *Ghetto Schooling*, Jean Anyon describes the sentiments of Black and white teachers alike concerning the poor children they serve in a K-8 school in Newark, New Jersey. Words like stupid, ugly, and smelly

are used to insult students. How students are treated by their teachers can and often has an impact on how students perform academically. In a discussion of joblessness in urban settings particularly as it relates to Black males, Wilson (1997) describes how prospective employers view applicants: not on their own merits but by the characteristics that tend to be ascribed to the neighborhood in which they live.

The current state of many urban communities and the lives of the Black and Brown people who are overrepresented in such communities may be linked to the unjust impoverishment experienced at the hands of White folks. The unjust enrichment of many White people occurred through the “systemic socio-economic exploitation” of African slaves in America and various people of color globally. The same ideology that permitted the unjust impoverishment of subjugated groups permeates schools, which are ideology producing institutions in and of themselves (Feagin, 2004). In this way, education reflects the fundamental reality of systemic racism, which Feagin defines as “an institutionalized oppression that is rationalized in a racist ideology” (p. 205). Within the context of such an ideology, race and ethnicity are used to rank and classify individuals in order to justify their level of access to the rewards that society has to offer. In multiethnic societies such as ours, “ethnicity is an extremely critical determinant of who gets ‘what there is to get’ and in what amounts” (Marger, 2006, p. 18).

## **2.4 Contribution to the Field**

Few studies have undertaken the task of collectively considering the impact of the factors enumerated above. Most research focuses singularly on one of the domains – demographic, aspirational, school level, or socioeconomic – or specific factors within

each of the domains. Moreover, the focus on socioeconomic status and efforts to improve the educational outcomes for children of poverty have often led to a conversation that almost always comes back to a question of resources available to children and families in the schools they attend. Race to the Top, financial incentives to promote greater effort and increased test scores on the part of teachers and school leaders, and an investment of resources to support failing schools suggest that it really is all about money. Is it really, though?

The methods employed for this study (detailed in Chapter Three) allow for an analysis of the impact of each selected factor on the likelihood of dropping out among Black students. Findings from this current study may lead to a more thorough understanding of the factors that are useful in predicting dropout rates among Black students and as such will inform future interventions and initiatives designed to ensure academic achievement. Further, such insights may shape the work of serving additional vulnerable populations.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODS**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The preceding chapters discussed relevant literature and research on the academic achievement of Black students. Chapter One detailed recent educational outcomes for Black students relative to their peers. Chapter Two reviewed theoretical perspectives of the problem as well as current literature and proposed interventions. The current chapter explains the methodology for this dissertation.

This dissertation considers the predictive value of demographic, aspirational, and school culture variables on dropout rates among Black students. The data used in this study are taken from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). ELS is a nationally representative study that began with over 15,000 sophomores in 2002 and concludes with a third and final follow up in 2012, eight years after the participants would have completed high school. Multiple regression analyses will be utilized to determine which independent variables have the greatest impact on predicting dropout rates among Black students.

#### **3.2 Dataset**

The Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS) was conducted by the United States Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (Ingels, Pratt, Rogers, Siegel, & Stutts, 2004). ELS is a nationally representative panel study that followed the same cohort of American tenth-graders for 10 years as they progressed through high school and beyond. ELS consists of a base year study conducted in 2002,

and three follow-ups. In all, 750 schools were selected for participation in the ELS. Tenth grade students were selected randomly from each school. Non-public schools were sampled at a higher rate to ensure that the sample was large enough to support comparisons with public schools. Similarly, Asian students were sampled at a higher rate than White, Black, and Hispanic students to ensure that the sample was large enough to support comparison with other groups. The ELS includes questionnaires administered to school principals, parents, and math and English teachers for each student that participated in the survey.

The first follow-up was completed in 2004 when the students, if making typical progress would be in the twelfth grade. NCES “freshened” the ELS:2002 sample in 2004 by giving seniors who were not a part of the base year study of 2002 the opportunity to participate. Reasons for not participating in 2002 included being out of the country at the time or being in a different grade. Refreshing the sample in this way allowed the 2004 sample to be representative of seniors nationwide. The ELS:2004 included surveys administered to participants who were still attending their original school, students who had transferred from their original school, dropouts, and early completers.

The second follow-up came in 2006. Respondents included any members who had participated in ELS:2002 or ELS:2004. Data were collected to determine if respondents by that time had earned a diploma or GED, if they had ever enrolled in or were currently attending college, and if they were currently employed. The third follow-up, conducted in 2012, analyzed college enrollment and employment histories for study participants. Marital status and level of community involvement data were also collected. Data from ELS:2012 were not yet available at the time of this study.

### **3.3 Analytic Samples**

The original sampling design of ELS involved a clustered, stratified, national probability sample of just over 750 American high schools from which over 15,000 students in their sophomore year were randomly selected for participation. Students were interviewed in the base year 2002 and again in the follow up years 2004, 2006, and 2012. To study the specific research questions under investigation, variables belonging to ELS:2002 and ELS:2004 were selected for analysis. Since the focus of this current study is the dropout status of Black students, only Black respondents were included for this study. In total, 1,835 Black students participated in this study. Of that number, 48% or 907 were female and the remaining 52% or 928 were Black males.

### **3.4 Measures**

The goal of this dissertation is to study the effects that demographic, aspirational, and school level variables have on the drop out status for Black students. Studies have shown that demographic characteristics such as race and gender as well as school context variables such as public or private, and the region or urbanicity of a school may have an impact on the educational attainment of students (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Noguera, 2008; Ogbu et al., 1998; Ogbu, 2004; Rumberger, 1983; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). In addition, research suggests that aspirations, be they the aspirations that teachers and parents have for students or the aspirations that students have for themselves, may contribute to student choice to persist in school or transition out prior to completion (Anyon, 1997; Grossman, Kuhn-McKearin, and Strein, 2011; Spera et al., 2009). The literature also suggests that school climate and culture variables affect drop

out status (Bruner, 1996; Deal and Peterson, 1999; Fall and Roberts, 2012; Hopson and Lee, 2011; Renschler, 1992). For these reasons, the following dependent and independent variables were selected for inclusion in this study.

### 3.4.1 Dependent Variable

Dropout status was determined for ELS:2004 by reviewing high school transcripts as well as through the use of questions included on the first follow up survey. The dummy variable “dropout” was created from the composite variable F1DOSTAT, which stands for Follow up 1 drop out status. This variable identifies those 10<sup>th</sup> graders from the base year, ELS:2002, who had transitioned out of high school without obtaining a diploma, a certificate of graduation, or a GED by the first follow up, ELS:2004.

F1DOSTAT is a composite of the following two variables: F1D41 and F1D45.

F1DOSTAT originally places respondents into one of four possible response categories:

- 1) did not drop out or complete an alternative program of education
- 2) dropouts
- 3) 2002 10<sup>th</sup> graders who completed a GED or some alternative program equivalent to a high school diploma;
- 4) 2002 10<sup>th</sup> graders who were previously identified by themselves or the school as a dropout

In constructing the dummy variable “dropout,” those cases of the variable F1DOSTAT, students either graduated from high school or completed a GED, were recoded to 0 = “did not dropout.” Remaining cases were recoded to 1= “dropout.”

### 3.4.2 Independent Variables

Four sets of independent variables were selected for analysis in support of answering the research question, “Which factors have a greater predictive value in determining drop out among Black students?” These include demographic, aspiration, school culture, and socioeconomic status variables.

#### 3.4.2.1 Domain I-Demographic variables

Statistics show that the odds of dropping out before graduating are much higher for Black students than their white counterparts (Holzman, Jackson, & Beaudry, 2012). A review of the literature on the demographic factors associated with Black dropout rates influenced the selection of the variables that follow.

Studies suggest that gender-based differences influence Black academic achievement (Noguera 2008; Payne, 2008). As a result, “Female,” a dummy variable, indicating whether the sex of the respondent is female (coded 1) or male (coded 0) was included.

There has been much debate whether private school students truly perform better than public schools students or if the confluence of other associated factors such as socioeconomic status, neighborhood and family background are larger contributing factors (Peterson and Llaudet, 2006; Lubienski, 2006). For this reason, “Public” was included in the demographic variables. The dummy variable “Public” indicates whether the high school the respondent attended was a public school (coded 1) or a private school (coded 0).

Extensive research has been conducted and a great deal of the education reform efforts have centered around the nation's urban centers such as New York City, Chicago, Washington, DC, and Los Angeles (Hochschild, Scovronick, & Scovronick, 2004; Lippman, Burns, & McArthur; 1996). The cities listed above and others like them serve many of the nation's poorest communities of color. For this reason "urban" is isolated as a variable to determine what, if any, predictive value urbanicity has on the dropout status of Black students. "Urban" is a dummy variable indicating whether the high school the student attended was located in an urban locale (coded 1) or a non-urban locale (coded 0). South is a dummy variable, derived from the NELS 2002 variable BYRegion. It indicates whether the high school the respondent attended was located within the south (coded 1) or some other region of the nation (coded 0).

#### 3.4.2.2 Domain II-Aspiration Variables

The second set of independent variables includes factors that measure aspiration. Research suggests that peer relationships have an effect on a student's decision to persist or drop out of school (Berndt, Laychak, & Park, 1990; Ladd, 1990; Martin, Marsh, McInerney, & Green, 2009). As such, the first variable included in Domain II is "Meet friends" (BYS27E). The values of this variable are based on a Likert scale that ranges from 1 to 4, where 1= "strongly agree"; 2= "agree"; 3= "disagree"; and 4= "strongly disagree." For this study, scores of 1 and 2, reflecting strong agreement or agreement, were recoded as 1 while scores of 3 and 4 indicating disagreement or strong disagreement were recoded as 0.

The second variable selected for inclusion in Domain II is “job skills.” Designated as BY27G in ELS 2002, “job skills” is an ordinal variable that measures the degree to which students attend school because they believe it will equip them with the skills they need to obtain a job after completing school. Studies have shown that students are sometimes compelled to transition out of school prior to completing because they perceive that their school will not provide them with the tools to be successful when they complete school (Wilson, 1997). As with “meet friends,” the values of this variable are based on a Likert scale which ranges from 1 to 4, where 1= “strongly agree”; 2= “agree”; 3= “disagree”; and 4= “strongly disagree.” For this study, scores of 1 and 2, reflecting strong agreement or agreement were recoded as 1, while scores of 3 and 4 indicating disagreement or strong disagreement were recoded as 0.

Much education research analyzes and discusses the role of aspirations in academic achievement (Bandura et al., 1996; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Rumberger, 2000). BY27HI is a composite variable, which was constructed from two variables that asked students whether their parents and teachers expected them to be successful in school. The original variables, BY27H (Parents expect success in school), and BY27I (Teacher expects success in school), both use a Likert scale that ranges from 1 to 4, where 1= “strongly agree”; 2= “agree”; 3= “disagree”; and 4= “strongly disagree.” The average of BY27H and BY27I were calculated to determine the level of agreement associated with the composite variable BY27HI.

BY56. BY56 is an ordinal level variable that ranks the student responses to the statement, “How Far in School Student Thinks S/he Will Get.” It utilizes a Likert scale that includes a range from 1-7, where:

1= “Less than high school graduation”

2= “High school graduation or GED only”

3= “Attend or complete 2-year college/school”

4= “Attend college, 4-year degree incomplete”

5= “Graduate from college”

6= “Obtain Master's degree or equivalent”

7= “Obtain PhD, MD, or other advanced degree”

To determine whether the decision to drop out is influenced by a student’s perception of the aspirations and expectations that their parents have of them, the variable BYS65ab was included into our model. BYS65ab is a composite variable constructed from two variables that asked students about the long-term educational aspirations they believed their fathers and mothers held for them. The original variables, BYS65A (How far in school mother wants 10<sup>th</sup> grader to go), and BYS65B (How far in school father wants 10<sup>th</sup> grader to go), both use the same 7 point Likert scale as BYS56 above.

The average of parental aspirations of both the mother and father, BYS65A and BYS65b respectively, were calculated to determine how far students thought their parents wanted them to get in school- BYS65ab.

#### 3.4.2.3 Domain III- School Culture Variables

Literature shows that school culture variables can have a profound impact on student achievement. The degree to which students feel safe and whether or not they feel



their educators believe in their academic potential correlates with how students perform in school (Fall and Roberts, 2012; Hopson and Lee, 2011; Renchler, 1992). The following school culture variables belonging to the ELS base year student questionnaire were selected for these reasons.

The first of these variables, BYS20AEFG, is a composite variable constructed from four separate ordinal variables that measure slightly different aspects of the student's relationship to *and* assessment of their teachers. The first variable, BYS20A, asks the student to indicate how "well you get along with teachers." The second variable, BYS20E, asks the student to indicate if they think "the teaching is good." The third variable, BYS20F, asks the student to indicate whether the "teachers are interested in students." The fourth and last of these variables, BYS20G, asks the student to indicate if "teachers praise effort." Each of the aforementioned variables is based on a Likert scale which ranges from 1 to 4, where 1= "strongly agree"; 2= "agree"; 3= "disagree"; and 4= "strongly disagree." The average of BYS20A, BYS20E, BYS20F and BYS20G were calculated to determine the value of the composite variable BYS20AEFG.

The remaining school culture variables listed below and included in this study were originally based on a four-point Likert Scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) and have been rescaled. The new range runs from: 0 = "strongly disagree" or "disagree" to 1= "agree" or "strongly agree."

- Not Put Down (BYS20H)—"In class I often feel put down by my teachers"
- Safe (BYS20J)—"I don't feel safe at school"
- Control (BYS20L)—"misbehaving students often get away with it"

- No Disruptions (BYS20K)—“disruptions by other students get in the way of my learning”
- Knows Rules (BYS21A)—“everyone knows what the school rules are”
- Same Punishment (BYS21C)—“The punishment for breaking school rules is the same no matter who you are”

#### 3.4.2.4 Domain IV- Socioeconomic Status

Research suggests that academic achievement is correlated to socioeconomic status. Indeed, many reform efforts encourage intervention and prevention strategies to address the school based needs as well as the community based needs of children in underprivileged communities (Anyon, 1997; Fruchter, 2007; Kozol, 1995; Noguera, 2003; Payne, 2008). As such, it was important to include socioeconomic status as a variable for consideration in this current study. SES1 is a composite variable comprised of the occupation, wealth, education, place of residence, and income of the student’s parents.

### 3.5 Analytic Strategy

Logistic regression was used to determine which independent variables have the greatest impact on predicting dropout rates among Black students. Model 1 enters demographic variables into a regression equation to examine their impact on the dependent variable “dropout.” This includes the following variables: gender (female =1; male =0), school type (public =1; all other =0), school urbanicity (urban =1; all other or non-urban =0), and region (South =1; all other regions =0). In Model 2, variables that

measure aspiration and motivation are added to the regression model. For the variables ‘meet friends’ and ‘job skills’, strong agreement or agreement =1; disagreement or strong disagreement = 0.

For the composite variable “teacher and parent expect success in school,” 1= “strongly agree”; 2= “agree”; 3= “disagree”; and 4= “strongly disagree.” The composite variables “how far in school student thinks s/he will get” and “how far students think their parents want them to get in school” are both based on the 7 point scale described above.

Model 3 will examine the impact of school culture variables on the model. BYS20AEFG is a composite variable “teacher attitude and treatment of students.” The average of BYS20A, BYS20E, BYS20F and BYS20G were calculated to determine the value of the composite variable BYS20AEFG.

For the remaining school culture variables listed below 0 = “strongly disagree” or “disagree” to 1= “agree” or “strongly agree.”

- Not Put Down (BYS20H)—“In class I often feel put down by my teachers”
- Safe (BYS20J)—“I feel safe at school”
- Control (BYS20L)—“misbehaving students often get away with it”
- No Disruptions (BYS20K)—“disruptions by other students get in the way of my learning”
- Knows Rules (BYS21A)—“everyone knows what the school rules are”
- Same Punishment (BYS21C)—“The punishment for breaking school rules is the same no matter who you are”

Model 4 adds socioeconomic status to see what impact this variable has on the entire

model. Logistic regression was used to determine which variables were useful in predicting the occurrence of dropout for Black students.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### 4.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters discussed relevant literature and research on the academic achievement of Black students. Chapter One introduced the dissertation, the research question(s), theoretical framework, and a brief description of the dataset employed for this work. Chapter Two expanded the theoretical perspectives and considered the appropriate literature pertaining to Black student educational achievement, including proposed strategies to improve those outcomes. Chapter Three detailed the methodology for this dissertation. Chapter Four presents the results of this study based on the analysis of the analytic samples identified in Chapter Three.

This dissertation considers the predictive value of demographic, motivational/ aspiration, and school culture variables on Black dropout rates. The data used in this study are taken from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). ELS is a nationally representative study that began with over 15,000 sophomores in 2002 and concludes with a third and final follow up in 2012, which is eight years after the participants would have completed high school. Throughout this chapter, *Black students* refers to the 1,835 Black students who participated in the ELS survey and represent the sub-sample under analysis for this study.

An analysis was conducted in three distinct phases. First, descriptive statistics were gathered to determine general characteristics of the Black student sample. Second, correlation statistics were determined to test the relationship between the variables.

Finally, multiple regression analyses were utilized to determine which independent variables have the greatest impact on predicting the likelihood of dropping out among Black students.

## **4.2 Univariate Analysis (Table 4.1)**

Table 4.1 presents descriptive statistics of the means, standard deviations, ranges, and descriptions of the variables under consideration for the sample of Black students who took part in the ELS Survey of 2002 and constitute our analytic sample.

### ***4.2.1 Dependent Variable: Dropout***

“Dropout” is a dummy variable that is constructed from the ELS variable F1DOSTAT. F1DOSTAT identifies the 2002 10<sup>th</sup> graders who had dropped out of high school without obtaining a diploma, a certificate of graduation, or a GED by the first follow up year, 2004. Results from the univariate analysis reveal that 13% of the Black student sample had dropped out of school by the first follow up year, ELS:2004, which is also the year they would have been seniors in high school.

### ***4.2.2 Independent Variables***

#### ***4.2.2.1 Demographic variables***

As detailed in Chapter Three, four demographic variables were selected for analysis in this study. “Female” is a dummy variable indicating whether the sex of the respondent is female (coded 1) or male (coded 0).

“Public” is a dummy variable indicating whether the high school the respondent attended was a public school (coded 1) or a private school (coded 0). “Urban” is a dummy

variable indicating whether the high school the student attended was located in an urban locale (coded 1) or a non-urban locale (coded 0). “South” is a dummy variable, derived from the NELS 2002 variable BYRegion, which indicates whether the high school the respondent attended was located within the South (coded 1) or some other region of the nation (coded 0).

Of the Black students surveyed, 97% attended public school, 48% attended school in an urban setting and 60% of participants attended school in the South.

#### *4.2.2.2 Aspirations*

The five variables included in this domain are dummy variables. Prior research suggests that the selected variables play a role in the development of students’ aspirations and therefore are relevant to this current study. The values of the first variable, “Meet friends” (BYS27E) are based on a Likert scale which ranges from 1 to 4, where 1= “strongly agree”; 2= “agree”; 3= “disagree”; and 4= “strongly disagree.” For this study, scores of 1 and 2, “strong agreement” or “agreement,” were recoded as 1 while scores of 3 and 4 indicating “disagreement” or strong “disagreement” were recoded as 0. Of Black student respondents, 62% agreed or strongly agreed that school is a place to meet friends. The second variable selected, “job skills,” designated as BYS27G, is an ordinal variable, which measures the degree to which students attend school because they believe it will equip them with the skills they need for a job after completing school. As with “meet friends,” the values of this variable are based on a Likert scale which ranges from 1 to 4, where 1= “strongly agree”; 2= “agree”; 3= “disagree”; and 4= “strongly disagree.” For this study, scores of 1 and 2, “strong agreement” or “agreement,” were recoded as 1 while

scores of 3 and 4 indicating “disagreement” or strong “disagreement” were recoded as 0. Results indicate that 49% of Black students said that school is a place to learn skills for a job.

BYS27HI is a composite variable, which was constructed from two variables that asked students whether their parents and teachers expected them to be successful in school. The original variables, BY27H (Parents expect success in school), and BY27I (Teacher expects success in school), both use a Likert scale that ranges from 1 to 4, where 1= “strongly agree”; 2= “agree”; 3= “disagree”; and 4= “strongly disagree.” The average of BY27H and BY27I were calculated to determine the level of agreement associated with the composite variable BY27HI. The average score for “parents and their teacher expect success in school” was 1.76. This indicates that on average respondents fell between “strongly agree” and “agree,” leaning towards “agree.”

BYS56 is an ordinal level variable that ranks the student responses to the statement, “How Far in School Student Thinks S/he Will Get.” This variable uses a Likert scale that has a range from of 1-7, where:

1= “Less than high school graduation”

2= “High school graduation or GED only”

3= “Attend or complete 2-year college/school”

4= “Attend college, 4-year degree incomplete”

5= “Graduate from college”

6= “Obtain Master's degree or equivalent”



7= “Obtain PhD, MD, or other advanced degree”

The average score of 5.09 for “how far in school student thinks s/he will get” indicates that respondents believed that they would complete their studies somewhere between obtaining a college degree and obtaining a master’s degree or equivalent, leaning slightly closer to obtaining a college degree.

BYS65ab is a composite variable constructed from two variables that asked students about the long-term educational aspirations they believed their fathers and mothers held for them. The original variables, BY565A (How far in school mother wants 10<sup>th</sup> grader to go) and BY565B (How far in school father wants 10<sup>th</sup> grader to go) both use the same Likert scale as BY556. The average of parental aspirations of both the mother and father, BY565A and BY565b respectively, were calculated to determine how far students thought their parents wanted them to get in school—BYS65AB.

Respondents felt that their parents held similar aspirations as they held for themselves, as the average score for “how far in school parents want 10<sup>th</sup> grader to go” (BYS65AB) was 5.17.

#### *4.2.2.3 School Level Variables*

Seven school level variables were selected for inclusion in his current study based on their prevalence in prior research concerning educational achievement and outcomes. BY20AEFG is a composite for ‘teacher attitudes and treatment of students’ derived from the following four statements on the ELS survey:

- BYS20A: “students get along well with teachers”
- BYS20E: “the teaching is good”
- BYS20F: “teachers are interested in students”
- BYS20G: “when I work hard on school work, teachers praise my effort”

The range for the original variables as well as the composite is from one to four, with one being “strongly agree” and four being “strongly disagree.” The mean score of 2.26 indicates that most students were between “agree” and “disagree,” leaning slightly closer to “agree.”

The following school culture variables belonging to the ELS base year student questionnaire were originally based on a four-point Likert Scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) and have been rescaled. The new range runs from: 0 = “strongly disagree” or “disagree”; 1= “agree” or “strongly agree.”

- Not Put Down (BYS20H)—“In class I often feel put down by my teachers”
- Safe (BYS20J)—“I don’t feel safe at school”
- Control (BYS20L)—“misbehaving students often get away with it”
- No Disruptions (BYS20K)—“disruptions by other students get in the way of my learning”
- Knows Rules (BYS21A)—“everyone knows what the school rules are”
- Same Punishment (BYS21C)—“The punishment for breaking school rules is the same no matter who you are”

Of the respondents, 32% did not feel put down by their teachers (BYS20H). Regarding safety, 34% felt safe at school (BYS20J). Some 52% of respondents felt that

misbehaving students often got away with it (BYS20L). Forty-five percent of respondents, however, said that disruptions do not get in the way of their learning (BYS20K). Concerning school rules, 29% of respondents stated that everyone knows what school rules are (BYS21A) while 58% said that the punishment is the same no matter who you are (BYS21C).

#### *4.2.2.4 Socioeconomic Status*

Socioeconomic status is a standardized variable for the entire population. By definition, standardized variables have a mean of zero (0). For the Black population, the socioeconomic status score is -0.25. Therefore, the Black student SES score is lower than the overall population.

**Table 4.1. Means, Standard Deviants, Ranges and Description of Variables for ELS Black Sample (N=1835)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Description: ELS Variable Label</b>
<b><u>Dependent Variable</u></b>				
Dropout Status	0.13	0.33	0-1	Has student dropped out by first follow-up year (F1)?
<b><u>Demographics</u></b>				
Female	0.48	0.49	0-1	Gender dummy variable – R is female
Public	0.97	0.16	0-1	School type dummy variable
Urban	0.48	0.49	0-1	School urbanicity dummy variable
South	0.60	0.48	0-1	School region dummy variable
<b><u>Aspirations</u></b>				
Meet Friends	0.62	0.48	0-1	School is a place to meet friends
Job Skills	0.49	0.50	0-1	Learns skills for job in school
Teacher/Parent Expectations	1.76	0.61	1-4	Teachers and parents expect success in school (composite)
Student expectations	5.09	1.49	1-7	How far in school student thinks will get
Parent expectations	5.17	1.52	1-7	How far in school parents want 10th grader to go
<b><u>School-level Variables</u></b>				
Teacher Attitude	2.26	0.55	1-4	Composite of teacher attitudes and treatment of students
Not Put Down	0.32	0.47	0-1	In class does not feel put down by teachers
Safe	0.34	0.47	0-1	Does not feel safe at this school
Control	0.52	0.49	0-1	Misbehaving students often get away with it
No Disruptions	0.45	0.49	0-1	Disruptions do not get in way of learning
Know Rules	0.29	0.45	0-1	Everyone knows what school rules are
Same Punishment	0.58	0.49	0-1	Punishment same no matter who you are
<b><u>Socio-Economic Status</u></b>				

BYSES1	-0.25	0.65	-1.78-1.80	Socio-economic status composite
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### 4.3 Bivariate Analysis

Table 4.2 presents the results for Pearson’s Correlations that were performed to ascertain whether or not the independent variables have a statistically significant relationship with other variables being studied, including the dependent variable ‘dropout.’ Findings from the bivariate analysis are detailed below.

#### 4.3.1 Pearson’s Correlation (Table 4.2)

There is a weak negative correlation ( $-.140^{***}$ ) between “how far a student thinks s/he will get” (BYS56) and “teacher and parents expect success in school” (BYS27HI). This relationship is statistically significant to the .001 level. Similarly, there is a weak negative correlation between “how far in school parents want 10<sup>th</sup> graders to get” (BYS56AB) and “teacher and parents expect success in school” (BYS27HI). This relationship is not statistically significant. There is a moderately strong positive correlation between “how far in school parents want 10<sup>th</sup> grader to go” (BYS65AB) and “how far student thinks s/he will get” (BYS56). This relationship is statistically significant to the .001 level.

There is a moderately strong positive correlation ( $.318^{***}$ ) between the composite “teacher attitude and treatment of students” (BYS20AEFG) and “teacher and parents expect success in school” (BYS27HI). This relationship is significant to the .001 level. “Teacher attitude and treatment of students” has a weak negative correlation ( $-.110^{***}$ ) with how far student thinks s/he will get.” This relationship is also statistically significant. There is a weak negative correlation between ‘teacher attitude and treatment

of students' and 'how far in school parents want 10<sup>th</sup> grader to get' (BYS65AB).

There is a weak positive correlation between socioeconomic status (BYSES1) and "teacher and parents expect success in school" (BYS27HI), "how far student thinks s/he will get" (BYS56), and "how far parents want 10<sup>th</sup> grader to go" (BYS65AB). All of these relationships are statistically significant. Their scores are .080\*\*; .163\*\*\*; .205\*\*\*, respectively.

Of the variables under consideration for this dissertation, family expectations (BYS65AB) has the strongest correlation to student expectations (BYS56).

**Table 4.2. Pearson's Correlations**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>(1)</b>	<b>(2)</b>	<b>(3)</b>	<b>(4)</b>	<b>(5)</b>
(1) Teacher and parents expect success (BYS27HI)	1				
(2) How far student thinks he will get (BYS56)	-.140***	1			
(3) How far in school parents want 10 <sup>th</sup> grader to go (BYS65AB)	-.017	.384***	1		
(4) Teacher attitude and treatment of students (BYS20AEFG)	.318***	-.110***	-.023	1	
(5) Socioeconomic status (BYSES1)	.080**	.163***	.205***	.020	1

## 4.4 Multivariate Analysis

This dissertation uses logistic regression analysis to consider the predictive value of demographic, motivational/ aspiration, and school culture variables on the likelihood that Black students generally, and Black males and females separately, will drop out.

### 4.4.1 All Black Students (Table 4.3)

Table 4.3 presents logistic regression analysis of dropout status for Black students. The four Blocks—Block 1, Block 2, Block 3, and Block 4—show logistic regressions predicting the likelihood of Black students dropping out of high school. The data represented here are for all the respondents in our sample and shows analysis across the demographic, aspirational, school-level and socioeconomic status variables under consideration for this study.

#### 4.4.1.1 Demographic Variables

Block 1 focuses specifically on the impact that demographic variables have on the dependent variable “dropout.” Being a female decreased the odds of dropping out by 48.1% compared to the odds of dropping out for Black males. This is statistically significant to the .001 level.

#### 4.4.1.2 Aspiration Variables

Block 2 introduces aspiration variables into the equation. The variable “how far student thinks s/he will get” was robust, being statistically significant to the .001 level in Block two and maintaining that level of statistical significance throughout the additional



Blocks. For Black students, as self-expectation increases the odds of dropping out decreases by a factor of .389. This is statistically significant to the .001 level.

In Block 2, being a female decreased the odds of dropping out by 31.8% compared to the odds that a Black male would drop out. This is significant to the .05 level, which is less significant than in Block 1. Also, in Block 2, attending school in an urban setting increases the odds of dropping out by a factor 1.666 for Black students compared to the odds of dropping out from a non-urban school.

#### *4.4.1.3 School Level Variables*

Block 3 introduces school level variables into the equation. Being a female and attending an urban school continue to be significant in Block 3 as does how far in school a student thinks s/he will get. Being a female decreases the odds of dropping out by 36% and is significant to the .05 level. Attending an urban school increases the odds of dropping out by a factor of 1.694 and is also significant to the .05 level. As self-expectation increases, it decreases the odds of dropping out by 37.5% and is significant to the .001 level.

Of the school level variables under consideration for this dissertation, two were statistically significant for the Black student sample. BYS20AEFG, the composite for “teacher attitude and treatment of students,” increased the odds of dropping out by a factor of 1.605. In addition, “not put down” increased the odds of dropping out by a factor of 1.688. Both were significant to the .05 level.

#### *4.4.1.4 Socioeconomic Status*

Block 4 introduces socioeconomic status into our equation for dropouts.

Parent socioeconomic status is statistically significant to the .001 level. For every unit increase in SES the likelihood of dropping out for Black students decreases by 52.1% compared to Black students who do not have the unit increase.

In Block 4, being a female, attending an urban school and “how far in school student thinks s/he will get” (BYS56) continue to be significant, as do the school level variables that were introduced and proven to be significant in Block 3, teacher attitude and treatment of students (BYS20AEFG) and “not put down” (BYS20H).

Being a female decreases the odds of dropping out by 40.6%, while attending an urban school increases the odds of dropping out by a factor of 1.718. Both are significant to the .01 level, which is an increase in significance compared to Block 3. In Block 4, as self-expectation increases, it decreases the odds of dropping out by 35.6% and is significant to the .001 level.

Concerning school level variables, the composite “teacher attitude and treatment of students” increased the odds of dropping out by a factor of 1.652 and is significant to the .01 level. The variable “not put down” increased the odds of dropping out by a factor of 1.623 and is significant to the .05 level.

#### *4.4.2 All Black Male Students (Table 4.4)*

Table 4.4 below represents the results of logistic regression analysis of the dropout status for Black male students only.

#### *4.4.2.1 Demographic Variables*

For Black male students, attending an urban school increases the odds of dropping out by a factor of 1.801 and is significant to the .05 level. Urbanicity is robust throughout for Black male students as it increases in significance and impact across Blocks 2 through 4 as the remaining variables are introduced.

#### *4.4.2.2 Aspiration Variables*

Block 2 introduces aspiration variables. All of the aspiration variables under consideration for this dissertation decrease the odds of dropping out for Black male students. Only two, however, prove to be statistically significant. For Black male students, the belief that school is a place to acquire job skills (BYS27G) decreases the odds of dropping out by 50.1%. This is significant to the .05 level. As self-expectation (BYS56) increases for Black male students the odds of dropping out decreases by 35.6%.

As stated above, Urbanicity remains significant in Block 2, where attending an urban school increases the odds of dropping out by a factor of 1.973. This is statistically significant to the .01 level.

#### *4.4.2.3 School Level Variables*

Block 3 introduces school level variables into the model. Though three of the variables served to decrease the odds of dropping out for Black male students, they did not prove to be statistically significant. These were “safety” at 18.9%, “no disruptions” at 34.1% and “same punishment” at 19.9%.

The variable “not put down” increased the odds of dropping out by a factor of

2.003. Similarly, the variable “knows rules” increased the odds of dropping out by a factor of 2.036. Both were significant to the .05 level.

Urbanicity, job skills, and self-expectation maintain their significance in Block 3. Attending an urban school increases the odds of dropping out by a factor of 2.351 for Black male students. An increase in the variable “jobs skills” decreases the odds of dropping out by 50.1%. For Black male students, as self-expectation increases, the odds of dropping out decreases by 34.6%.

#### *4.4.2.4 Socioeconomic Status*

Block 4 introduces socioeconomic status into our equation for Black male students. Parent socioeconomic status is statistically significant to the .001 level. For every unit increase in SES the likelihood of dropping out for Black male student’s decreases by 58.2% compared to Black male students who do not have the unit increase.

In Block 4, the school level variable “not put down” increased the odds of dropping out by a factor of 1.992. Similarly, the variable “knows rules” increased the odds of dropping out by a factor of 2.145. Both remain significant to the .05 level.

As in Block 3 above, urbanicity and self-expectation maintain their significance in Block 4. Attending an urban school increases the odds of dropping out by a factor of 2.414 for Black male students. Further, as self-expectation increases, the odds of dropping out decreases by 33.2%. The variable “job skills” is no longer significant.

#### *4.4.3 All Black Female Students (Table 4.5)*

Table 4.5 below represents the results of logistic regression analysis of dropout status for Black female students only.

##### *4.4.3.1.1 Demographic variables*

None of this dissertation's demographic variables proved to be statistically significant for Black female students. Attending a public school, however, increased the odds of dropping out for Black females by a factor of 8.320.

##### *4.4.3.2 Aspiration Variables*

As self-expectation increases for Black female students, the likelihood of dropping out decreases by 45.8%. This is statistically significant to the .001 level. The variable BY56 is robust, maintaining its significance across Blocks 2 through 4. None of the other variables tested in Block 2 are significant.

##### *4.4.3.3 School Level Variables*

None of the school level variables under consideration for this dissertation proved to be statistically significant for Black female students. The aspiration variable "How far in school student thinks she will get" remains significant to the .001 level. The likelihood that a Black female student will drop out decreases by 41.8% as self-expectation increases.

#### *4.4.3.4 Socioeconomic Status*

Block 4 introduces socioeconomic status into our equation for Black female students. Parent socioeconomic status is statistically significant to the .01 level. For every unit increase in SES the likelihood of dropping out for Black female students decreases by 52.3%.

In Block 4, as self-expectation increases for Black female students, the likelihood of dropping out decreases by 38.2%. This remains statistically significant to the .001 level. None of the other variables tested in Block 4 are significant.

**Table 4.3.**  
**Hierarchical Logistic Regression Analysis of Dropout Status in the Black Student Sample**

<i>Dependent Variable</i>												
Dropout (N=1835)												
	Block 1			Block 2			Block 3			Block 4		
<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>
<b>Demographics</b>												
Female	-.656***	.184	.519	-.383*	.195	0.682	-.447*	.199	.640	-.521**	.202	.594
Public	1.501	.871	4.486	1.170	.882	3.222	.884	.888	2.421	.682	.896	1.977
Urban	.352	.184	1.421	.510**	.195	1.666	.527**	.202	1.694	.541**	.206	1.718
South	.024	.188	.898	.055	.196	1.057	.022	.201	1.022	-.068	.207	.934
<b>Aspirations</b>												
Meet Friends				-.247	.195	.781	-.208	.199	.812	-.122	.202	.885
Job Skills				-.345	.206	.708	-.314	.211	.730	-.325	.214	.723
Parents/Teachers Expectations				-.053	.160	.949	-.098	.170	.907	-.033	.174	.967
Students Aspirations				-.492***	.063	.611	-.469***	.066	.625	-.440***	.067	.644
Parents Aspirations				-.024	.062	.976	-.032	.063	.968	.009	.063	1.009
<b>School-Level</b>												
Teacher Attitude & Treatment of Students							.473*	.190	1.605	.502**	.192	1.652
Not Put Down							.523*	.228	1.688	.484*	.230	1.623
Not Safe							-.426	.242	.653	-.346	.245	.708
Control							-.122	.211	.886	-.138	.213	.871
Disruptions							-.198	.210	.820	-.115	.211	.892
Know Rules							.365	.219	1.440	.353	.221	1.423
Same Punishment							-.137	.202	.872	-.147	.205	.864
<b>Socio-Economic Status</b>												
BYSES1										-.735***	.163	.479
Constant		-3.457***				-.506			-1.243			-1.840
$\chi^2$		21.041***				99.667***			118.506***			139.921***
-2LL		868.722				790.095			771.257			749.842
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>		.032				.149			.176			.206

† p≤.10 \*p≤.05 \*\*p≤.01 \*\*\*p≤.001

**Table 4.4.**  
**Hierarchical Logistic Regression Analysis of Dropout Status in the Black Male Student Sample**

<i>Dependent Variable</i> Dropout (N=928)												
<i>Independent Variables</i>	Block 1			Block 2			Block 3			Block 4		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>
<b>Demographics</b>												
Public	1.300	.966	3.668	1.058	.990	2.882	.909	1.002	2.483	.648	1.022	1.911
Urban	.588*	.243	1.801	.679**	.258	1.973	.855**	.278	2.351	.881**	.284	2.414
South	-.202	.239	.817	-.259	.251	0.772	-.253	.261	0.776	-.348	.271	.706
<b>Aspirations</b>												
Meet Friends				-.253	.259	.777	-.141	.269	.868	-.058	.273	.944
Job Skills				-.696*	.285	.499	-.696*	.303	.499	-.795	.310	.451
Parents/Teachers Expectations				-.019	.204	.981	.006	.225	1.006	.108	.232	1.114
Students Aspirations				-.439***	.082	.644	-.424***	.086	.654	-.403***	.087	.668
Parents Aspirations				-.052	.080	.950	-.067	.082	.935	.003	.085	1.003
<b>School-Level</b>												
Teacher Attitude & Treatment of Students							.351	.242	1.420	.402	.245	1.495
Not Put Down							.695*	.307	2.003	.689*	.309	1.992
Not Safe							-.210	.314	.811	-.050	.322	.951
Control							.037	.276	1.038	-.013	.279	.987
Disruptions							-.417	.284	.659	-.286	.286	.752
Know Rules							.711*	.299	2.036	.763*	.305	2.145
Same Punishment							-.222	.268	.801	-.269	.275	.764
<b>Socio-Economic Status</b>												
BYSES1										-.872***	.222	.418
Constant		-3.267***							-1.281			-2.111
$\chi^2$		9.923*							71.515***			88.264***
-2LL		492.752							431.160			414.411
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>		0.29							.197			.134

† p≤.10 \*p≤.05 \*\*p≤.01 \*\*\*p≤.001



**Table 4.5.**  
**Hierarchical Logistic Regression Analysis of Dropout Status in the Black Female Student Sample**

<i>Dependent Variable</i> Dropout (N=907)												
<i>Independent Variables</i>	Block 1			Block 2			Block 3			Block 4		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>
<b>Demographics</b>												
Public	2.119	2.102	8.320	1.516	2.113	4.553	1.289	2.122	3.630	1.087	2.125	2.965
Urban	-.024	.289	0.977	.198	.314	1.218	.104	.328	1.110	.085	.335	1.089
South	.444	.322	1.559	.650	.345	1.916	.634	.355	1.885	.536	.361	1.708
<b>Aspirations</b>												
Meet Friends				-.284	.302	.753	-.317	.311	.728	-.238	.316	.788
Job Skills				.151	.317	1.163	.223	.325	1.250	.276	.332	1.317
Parents/Teachers Expectations				-.250	.268	.778	-.396	.285	.673	-.397	.294	.672
Students Aspirations				-.612***	.106	.542	-.542***	.111	.582	-.481***	.112	.618
Parents Aspirations				.050	.100	1.052	.031	.101	1.032	.045	.100	1.046
<b>School-Level</b>												
Teacher Attitude & Treatment of Students							.530	.327	1.699	.555	.332	1.741
Not Put Down							.397	.376	1.488	.330	.378	1.391
Not Safe							-.844	.441	.430	-.857	.447	.424
Control							-.500	.352	.607	-.510	.357	.601
Disruptions							.064	.332	1.066	.142	.335	1.152
Know Rules							-.183	.348	.833	-.257	.351	.773
Same Punishment							-.077	.328	.925	-.044	.334	.957
<b>Socio-Economic Status</b>												
BYSES1										-.741**	.271	.476
Constant		-4.822*			-1.174			-1.749			-2.280	
$\chi^2$		4.750			45.554***			58.257***			66.140***	
-2LL		369.259			328.455			315.751			307.868	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>		0.16			.154			.194			.220	

\*p≤.05 \*\*p≤.01 \*\*\*p≤.001

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter analyzes how the existing research concerning the demographic, aspirational, school level, and socioeconomic variables under consideration are supported or challenged by the findings presented in Chapter Four. A plausible explanation is offered where previous research and present findings differ. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings as they relate to the various theoretical perspectives presented in Chapter Two. Aspects of each finding that best explain the dropout rates among Black students are highlighted.

#### **5.2 Demographic Variables**

Four demographic variables were selected for analysis for this study—gender, public, urbanicity, and region. Existing research has posited that each of the selected variables may play a role in dropping out among Black students. What remains less clear is the relative significance of each variable. The section below addresses this idea for each selected variable in light of the findings presented in the preceding chapter.

##### *5.2.1 Gender*

The results from this study confirm that Black male students are more likely to drop out of high school than their Black female counterparts. As shared in the literature review, there are myriad reasons why this may be the case. One of the overarching explanations presented is the idea that Black students, particularly Black males, are made

to feel that school is not a place for them. They are overrepresented in every category that reflects negative interactions with the school setting: suspensions, expulsions, lowest performance on standardized assessments, and placement in special education settings (Carter & Wilson, 1992; Garibaldi, 1992; Noguera, 2008; Saunders, et al., 2004; Jackson, 2008). Further, they are aware of the stereotypes that exist concerning the intersection of their race and their gender, and this negatively affects their school experiences (Bruner, 1996; Howard, 2008; Noguera, 2008; Saunders, et al, 2004). Moreover, with the percentage of incarcerated Black males between the ages of 16 and 24 steadily increasing, much research has also highlighted the profoundly detrimental impact that the school to prison pipeline has had on the academic outcomes of Black males (Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2007; New York State Department of Criminal Justice, 2003; Smith 2009; Wald and Losen, 2003). Given these well-documented concerns and struggles, it is not surprising that Black males continue to perform less well than their Black female counterparts.

### *5.2.2 Public*

As with most other student groups, Blacks, both male and female, were more likely to drop out of public school than private school (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Chubb & Moe, 1988; Evans and Schwab, 1995). Many of the studies referenced above were based on data gathered as a part of the High School and Beyond Longitudinal study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education in 1980. Research suggests that other contributing factors may play a role in the academic achievement of Black students—and students in general—in private school as compared to those attending public schools. To begin with, those students who are enrolled in private schools have

made a deliberate decision to enroll in those settings. Attendance at a private school is also indicative of a belief and investment in schooling. Families that send their children to private school have the financial wherewithal to do so, or they have the knowledge to navigate the financial assistance terrain to help offset the costs. Whether paying for private school tuition out of pocket or securing aid, these families and most often their children are committed to attaining a quality education. Finally, private schools enjoy greater autonomy than their public school counterparts. They are able to make organizational, curricular, and staffing decisions with greater ease and alignment to their personal philosophies (Berliner and Biddle, 1995; Chubb and Moe, 1988; Hofman, Hofman, Guldemon, & Dijkstra, 1996).

A second contributing factor to the academic success that Black students experience in private school is that many private schools have strict requirements for enrollment and maintaining attendance in good standing. Many private schools require students and families to pass rigorous screening requirements that may include entrance exams, several rounds of interviews, and the presentation of portfolios. To be sure, Black students and other students who are graduating at high levels from private schools do so not simply because they are attending the private school. Indeed, they were already academically on track for graduation well before entering the private high school setting. Finally, private schools often pride themselves on being able to implement a school vision that promotes discipline, safety, and quality instruction. Some of the more elite institutions boast low student-teacher ratios and offer targeted or individualized learning opportunities.

The contributing factors enumerated above help to explain why Black students attending private schools tend to have higher graduation rates. That said, it is important to note that nationally speaking, only a small fraction of students are enrolled in private schools compared to public schools (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Chubb & Moe, 1988). That percentage is even smaller for Black students. Any comparisons made between the subgroups must take this into account.

If private schools experience success as a result of family investment in education, the ability to offer access based on set requirements, and access to resources that allow them to offer tailored instruction, then one might argue that many public schools fail to realize such outcomes due to the lack of those same factors. Research suggests that the failure rate for Black students in public schools is especially true for public schools in urban centers (Fruchter, 2007; Kozol, 1995; Noguera, 2003).

In their text, *The Manufactured Crisis* (1995), David Berliner and Bruce Biddle respond to the media and government's handling of President Reagan's 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*. The report detailed how school systems across the nation were grossly underperforming and called for strategic large-scale reform efforts to ameliorate the problems. They suggest that the failure detailed in the report is not necessarily the result of poor practices within the schools themselves. Rather, they suggest that the nation's schools are situated within the nation's communities. Any attempts to discuss school failure or reform must be sure to take this into account (Berliner and Biddle, 1995).

While there are distinctions to be made between private and public schools, it is important to note that public schools are also far from homogenous. The following

section discusses why many public schools may perform less well than private schools while highlighting that not all public schools operate in the same manner.

Attendance in public schools is often determined geographically. Students are assigned to specific schools based on where they live. Public schools located in more affluent areas tend to have higher academic outcomes than those in more economically diverse or depressed regions because public schools rely on the tax base of the communities in which they are situated. The property taxes that some families are willing to pay to fund high performing school districts can be compared to the tuition that others are able and willing to pay to send their children to private schools. Those who cannot afford to live in such areas are relegated to living in neighborhoods of lower means, a difference that is almost always clearly reflected in the schools their children are assigned to attend. This difference in school quality is due in large part to the resource base that the school has to draw upon (Anyon, 1997; Fruchter, 2007; Payne, 2008).

The majority of public schools are unscreened with students attending schools within the areas in which they live. There are no exams, interviews, or portfolios used to determine which students are permitted to enroll. Such entrance requirements are often only in place for elite public institutions with limited seats. Families and children alike vie for the opportunity to gain access to such schools.

### *5.2.3 Urban*

The current study found that Blacks attending schools in an urban setting are more likely to drop out than their peers in nonurban settings. While these findings are aligned with the current literature (Baldwin, 2001; Green, 2001; Noguera, 1997), it is important to note a key distinction in the way the variable was conceptualized and

employed for this current study. For this study, suburban and rural are not considered as distinct regional or geographic categories but are combined into one category, nonurban. Most other studies, such as the ones referenced above, consider each region distinctly. That said, it is still important to discuss the role that urbanicity plays in dropping out among Black students. It is especially important for Black males, given that urbanicity has a significant effect for Black males on dropping out.

There are several key characteristics of urban centers that may contribute to dropping out among Black students, particularly Black males. First, studies show that students in urban areas are more likely to experience limited access to health care, less stable living environments, and are more likely to have limited English proficiency (Kozol, 1995; Kena et al., 2014; Noguera, 2003).

Further, urban schools have higher concentrations of students from low-income households, and a large percentage of students in urban centers attend high poverty schools. Payne (2008) asserts that the “inadequacy of the resource base” that urban schools have to contend with is no small matter (p. 24). Such shortages make it difficult to establish and maintain effective schools. Over time, these difficulties can challenge the beliefs and commitments of even the most sincere educators, particularly if they are held up as the primary cause of the failure they work diligently to address. As discussed in the literature, the work of JD Comer and later education reformers stress that resources are needed to support urban schools *as well as* the poor communities in which they are situated (Fruchter 2007; Kozol, 1995; Noguera, 2003, Payne, 2008). The academic gains made by African American and Latino youth during the 1960s were in large part due to the investment made to the communities serving these students as part of the national war

on poverty (Howard, 2010). Conversations concerning urban school reform must take community needs into consideration. Given this clear need to support communities, it is important to emphasize the point that many of the failings attributed to location (i.e. urbanicity) are actually manifestations of the challenges raised when contending with poverty. As discussed in the literature, Lippman, Burns and McArthur (1996) find that student absenteeism, classroom discipline, difficulty hiring teachers, and lower rates of high school completion are a few of the challenges that urban high poverty schools contend with at a higher level than their nonurban, high poverty counterparts.

Considering Black male students specifically, the findings support the idea that the active nature of the “streets” in urban centers serves as an alternative site for affirmation and socialization therefore contributing to the dropout rates of Black males in urban areas (Oliver, 2006).

#### *5.2.4 South*

Before beginning a discussion of the findings for the variable “South,” it is worth noting that adjustments were made to the regional categories for the purposes of this dissertation. Rather than utilize the four categories typically used by the U.S. Census Bureau, the regions were reconceptualized and only South and non-South were employed. Such a reconceptualization has several implications. First, South is compared to the rest of the country, including the Midwest, which tends to have higher rates of high school completion for all of their students and as such may serve to skew the comparison. Second, no distinction is made between urban and non-urban centers in the South and non-south. As detailed above, the impact of living and learning in an urban center is significant. The data and findings were not analyzed from this perspective.



Five of the ten states with the lowest graduation rates – Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina – are located in the southeastern part of the United States (Holzman, 2010). Data from this current study indicates that Black females are more likely to drop out of school if they attend high school in the South while Black males are less likely to drop out if they attend high school in the South. This finding partially confirms Rumberger's (1983) findings that Black students, both male and female were less likely to drop out of school if they lived in the South. Black males may be less inclined to drop out in the South than in other regions due to the omnipresence of extracurricular sports activities often available in Southern districts. Sports programs are often the life blood of Southern schools and communities and the presence of such opportunities may help compel young Black men to persist in school. Similar resources are often cut or eliminated altogether in urban centers.

Black females are more likely to drop out in the South, which is contrary to Rumberger's findings. One explanation for the difference in findings is that Rumberger's study is just over three decades old. Much has changed over the past thirty years, particularly how society views and defines morality among young women. It was previously deemed unacceptable for women to bear children without being married. This was particularly true in the South. Such societal pressures may have served to support high school completion among Black females. The increased likelihood of Black females dropping out in the South may be the result of the slackening of such expectations.

### **5.3 Aspirational Variables**

Summarily speaking, this study found aspirations to have the most significant impact on the decision to drop out, especially among Black female students. The

subsequent sections discuss the current findings in light of relevant research and literature (Bandura et al., 1996; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Rumberger 1983).

Five aspirational variables were included in this study. The first variable measures to what degree the decision to drop out is affected by self-aspirations. The second and third variables measure the effect of familial aspirations and teacher aspirations, respectively, on the decision to drop out. The final two aspirational variables consider what role friendships and viewing school as a place to acquire skills needed for future employment have on the decision to drop out. Each variable is discussed below in that order.

### *5.3.1 Self, Familial, and Teacher Aspirations*

Existing research and literature suggests that students' academic outcomes are correlated to the aspirations that they hold for themselves as well as the aspirations of their family members and educators (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Davis-Kean, 2005; Kao & Tienda 1998; Rumberger, 1983; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010).

The current study found that Black students who had high self-aspirations were far less likely to drop out. This was especially true for Black female students. While higher aspirations of parents and teachers also improved academic outcomes for males and females, the impact paled in significance when compared to the impact that self-aspirations had on success rates. Such findings suggest that the most powerful measure of student success is their academic self-concept – how far they believe they can and will get in school – so much so that the relationship has been found to be causal and not just correlational (Craven & Marsh, 2008).

According to self-efficacy theory (Bandura et al., 1996), ultimately what matters more than anything is one's belief that he or she is capable of accomplishing whatever he or she desires to accomplish. Yes, parent aspirations have been proven to influence academic achievement but only in so much as the child comes to hold those views for him or herself (Spera et al., 2009). Given the overarching significance of self-aspirations, future study is warranted to determine how aspirations are developed and ultimately enacted in service of academic achievement.

Family aspirations may be less significant for Black students because of what Grace Kao and Marta Tienda (2005) term the *aspiration-achievement paradox*. They suggest that well-meaning families with high aspirations for their children may not fully understand all that is required to turn their aspirations into achievement. This lack of understanding is often connected to lower levels of educational attainment, diminished involvement in social networks, and limited access to various forms of capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Wanting your child to go to a good college, to which nearly all families aspire, is not the same as understanding what needs to be done to get there; taking honors and AP classes, doing well on the SAT exams, and participating in extra-curricular activities. Being able to fund prep courses and tutors is another aspect altogether. It may be that students, who are in the school context, develop a clearer sense of what is necessary to turn aspiration into achievement. Then, relying on their self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura et al., 1996), they figure out exactly what they must do to achieve.

### 5.3.2 *Meet Friends*

The degree to which a student feels like school is a place to meet friends speaks to the sense of school belonging, the extent to which students feel like school is a place for them and they belong. It is connected to several aspirational measures—overall motivation to do well in school, how far a student thinks he or she will go, effort, and the value placed on schoolwork. Black students who viewed school as a place to meet friends were less likely to drop out of high school. This finding is in keeping with the existing research that suggests the peer networks play a significant role in shaping school dispositions and academic behaviors (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Finn & Rock, 1997; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Oliver, 2006). Positively or negatively, students' friends have the potential to influence their academic motivation. It is not surprising that Black students who believe that school is a place to meet friends would graduate at higher levels than their peers who do not believe this. This may be especially true for Black males, who drop out often because of the camaraderie and acceptance that they find on the streets; it is an acceptance that schools often fail to afford them (Noguera, 2008; Oliver 2006).

It is important to note that not all peer networks are qualitatively the same. Positive peer networks promote high academic aspirations and achievement and collectively pursue – or at minimum value – school completion. Organizations committed to improving the academic outcomes for Black students often work to create a “we feeling” among their student body to foster this collective sense of possibility and effort.

### 5.3.3 Job skills

Research has long considered the impact that faith in the opportunity structure—or lack thereof—may have on one’s commitment to school completion (Raffe & Willms, 1989; Wilson, 1997). Across fields, disciplines, and methodologies, nearly all studies conclude that students who believe that school is a place to acquire the job skills needed to secure future employment are less likely to drop out. Findings from this study support the previous findings referenced above, particularly for Black male students.

In *When Work Disappears* (1996), William Julius Wilson writes at length about how the opportunity structure motivates students, particular poor students living in America’s ghettos, to graduate. He suggests that it is one thing to be poor but another thing entirely to be poor and unemployed. Living and learning in areas where unemployment may be at record highs engenders a sense of futility among students. Conversely, one’s belief that school may equip him with tools to succeed can be motivating.

Job skills may be such a strong factor for Black males because a significant number of Black males continue to desire to be athletes or entertainers (Noguera, 2008). Schools committed to improving the graduation rate among their Black male students should make the connection between school learning and career requirements abundantly clear.

## 5.4 School Culture Level Variables

Of the school level variables under consideration, two were influential in predicting the likelihood of dropping out among Black students. Relationships and interactions with their teachers as measured by the variables “not put down” and “teacher

attitude and treatment of students” affect dropout rates. None of the school culture variables proved to be significant for Black females, indicating that the school level significance was largely due to Black males.

While the variable “job skills” is significant in earlier analyses for Black males, it loses its significance once school culture is considered. This suggests that while Black males may initially perceive school as a place to acquire skills for later work, the challenges of contending with school culture where they feel alienated, not challenged or unjustly treated because of unclear or unfair rules cancels out the initial job concern. Bruner (1996) suggests school culture can be alienating, leading Black males in particular to transition out of school.

For Black males, school culture, particularly knowing the rules and not feeling put down, was significant. It is not surprising that one of the main interventions as indicated in the Black and Latino Male School Intervention Study (BLMSIS) has been the creation of single sex schools with an intensive focus on school culture specifically aspects of norms and rituals that serve to build and affirm students’ academic identities and strengthen their abilities.

The Black and Latino Male School Intervention Study (BLMSIS) was a five-year study conducted by the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University. The study, which involved in-depth conversations with leaders, teachers, and counselors at five all-male schools, identified two overarching theories that served as the unspoken underpinnings of the work occurring in the participating schools.

To be successful in improving the academic life trajectory of the students, the schools had to purposefully engage in helping their Black and Latino male students reconstruct what they believed to be an often misconstrued sense of who they were and who they could be. In this view, it remains necessary for educators to build strong rapport with their students to strengthen their sense of belonging and identification with school.

The second underlying theory BLMSIS identified was the school's need to understand how the academic needs of Black and Latino boys have surfaced and what strategies should be targeted to address those needs. The study found students attending these schools had gaps in their academic skills due to limited opportunities. The schools worked to teach the basics while simultaneously introducing them to increasingly challenging content. They also found their students were not college minded nor were they college ready. All schools sought to implement a rigorous and relevant curriculum reflective of the high academic expectations they held for their students and their commitment to valuing and building on their students' knowledge and background. Implementing a rigorous curriculum and working to fill in the ability gaps requires educators to be brutally honest with their students about their needs while simultaneously working doggedly to support them. The findings showed that the students who were "not put down" were more likely to graduate. This finding seems counterintuitive. It suggests that students actually dropped out because their teachers did not bother to offer them critical feedback or challenge them to achieve at a higher level, which some *might* interpret as being put down.

## 5.5 Socioeconomic Status

Black students with higher levels of socio economic status were less likely to drop out, though SES proved to be slightly more significant for Black males than Black females.

There are several reasons why increased SES lowers the odds of dropping out of school. First, families of greater means are likely to have higher levels of educational attainment. As such, they serve as direct role models for their children and expect higher levels of school completion. Second, greater access to financial resources allows families to spend more time with their children or pay for tutors or extra-curricular activities, all of which strengthen the child's academic capacities. Finally, families of greater means often reside in more affluent communities with well-funded schools. This guarantees their children access to school experiences that usually result in academic success (Bourdieu, 1990; Noguera, 2003; Rumberger, 1983). Given the significance of SES on the dropout rates, is it possible to improve the academic trajectory of students of lower SES?

The purpose, power, and place of education as agents of amelioration are often debated. On one side of the argument, there are individuals and collectivities that feel it unrealistic and unacceptable to expect that schools, already charged with the task of educating some of the nation's poorest children, have to address issues of mental health, health care needs, and joblessness within the context of the school. On the other, there are those who claim that schools serving poor children cannot do their jobs effectively, that is getting students to succeed at high levels, without simultaneously addressing the real needs that walk into the school each day. Schools can either strategically support or grossly impede the academic progress and performance of children of poverty (Anyon,



1997; Fruchter, 2008; Kozol, 1995; Kena et al., 2014; Noguera, 2003). This awareness has caused several large urban districts to include community improvement efforts as a part of their school reform initiatives. New York City alone will open ninety-four community schools in the 2015-2016 school year, hoping to improve the learning outcomes of their students by addressing the larger needs of the communities in which they are situated.

## **5.6 Theoretical Connections**

The findings of this study will be discussed in light of the theories presented in Chapter Two: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Ogbu's cultural ecological theory, Bourdieu's capital theory, and Bandura's self-efficacy theory. What follows is a brief discussion of the relevance of the findings to these theories.

### *5.6.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory*

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) posits that a child's development will be due in large part to the nature of the interactions that the child has with his or her parents and siblings, neighbors and peers in the microsystem. In addition, development depends on the interplay of one or more microsystems, which constitute the mesosystem. The macrosystem refers to the cultural context in which people live. Issues of race, class, and other categorical ascriptions and perspectives are all a part of the macrosystem.

The findings from my research show that context and environment have a significant impact on Black dropout rates. Indeed, urbanicity was one of the larger determining factors among Black males. As discussed above, there are certain characteristics of urban environments—higher rates of poverty, limited access to quality

community resources, increased rates of unemployment, etc.—that influence social and academic development (Fruchter, 2007; Noguera, 2003; Wilson, 1997). That said, individuals are agentic and will not necessarily respond to environmental and contextual influences in a predictable way. Studies are now beginning to focus on resiliency among individuals who persist and succeed in spite of growing up in challenging environments and circumstances (Harper & Williams, 2014).

### *5.6.2 Ogbu's Cultural Ecological Theory*

Ogbu (2004) posited that one cannot understand the academic attitudes and performance of Black students without considering them within their social and historical context. He pointed out that Black people, like all minority groups, share a collective identity, which “refers to people’s sense of who they are, their ‘we-feeling’ or ‘belonging’ ... Collective identity usually develops because of people’s collective experience or series of experiences” (p. 3).

Viewing school as a place to meet friends was significant for Black males and speaks to their sense of a collective identity. Whether their intimate friends value school or not, many Black males have come to internalize that Black males lack an academic identity. As discussed in the literature, their peers are grossly over represented in special education classes, discipline referral data, and expulsion numbers. They are least likely to participate in advanced courses and consistently graduate at lower rates than their White male counterparts (Noguera, 2008). These statistics alongside a cursory review of present day incidents involving law enforcement authorities and Black males strongly speaks to the ongoing status problems that Ogbu suggests can reinforce a subjugated group’s collective identity. It may be that those who view school as a place to meet like-

minded friends are able to persist and graduate. Those who do not, retreat to the streets as their alternative socializing institution, a place where their humanity can be validated and their self-worth acknowledged and reaffirmed (Oliver, 2006).

### *5.6.3 Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory*

Black students' aspirations for themselves are often comparable to or higher than that of their peers. Their families' aspirations tend to be equally high if not higher. Nevertheless, they consistently perform less well academically and have lower rates of school completion. Kao and Tienda (1998) refer to this phenomenon as the aspiration-achievement paradox. They attribute this disparity to limited access to resources, a view that is closely aligned to the capital theory advanced by Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) found that families of privilege equip their children with social and cultural capital necessary to be successful in school when they teach their children the knowledge, habits of mind, dispositions, as well as patterns of speaking that are school friendly. Oftentimes, children of lesser-privileged backgrounds are unequally equipped, even when they possess similar aspirations. Further, they lack the additional resources to support participation in activities and behaviors that are often necessary to ensure the realization of their aspirations. Since SES affects dropout rates among Black students and family aspirations did not, it is fair to suggest that many students who drop out may lack resources—social, economic, cultural—rather than aspirations they need to achieve. Further study is warranted to better understand how those of lesser means are able to succeed in spite of their limited resources.

#### *5.6.4 Bandura's Self Efficacy Theory*

Bandura (2010) suggests that academic motivation is intimately connected to a belief in personal efficacy. Put differently, individuals are often motivated to do that which they believe they can do. The findings from this study confirm that Black students are more likely to persevere if they believe that they have the capacity to succeed and that their efforts will result in success. In fact, Black students' aspirations were the most significant predictors of dropping out or school success. For Black females, it was the only factor of any significance outside of SES. Families of greater financial means may be in a position to support their children with additional resources and experiences, helping to ensure increased alignment between aspirations and achievements.

Since sense of self-efficacy and subsequent aspirations are influenced by the actions of other actors (Bandura et al., 1996; Kao & Tienda, 1998), further study is warranted to determine exactly how aspirations and, more important, self-efficacy beliefs are formed and sustained.

#### **5.7 Summary**

All things considered, this current study highlights that among Black students aspirations serve as a powerful predictor of dropping out. Outside of socioeconomic status, self-aspiration was the sole variable that proved to be significant for all Black students. This has weighty implications across family, school, and community contexts. All spaces and systems must serve to foster a positive academic self-concept so that Black students will expect their own success and aspire to achieve that success. More important, these settings, the home and school especially, must work to imbue solid self-efficacy beliefs in their learners such that they not only have high hopes but a firm belief

that with effort and persistence they have the capacity to realize those ambitions.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this dissertation was to study dropping out among Black students, a plight that has been of national concern for some time. Specifically, I have sought to ascertain the predictive value of select demographic, aspirational, school level and socioeconomic variables on dropout rates among Black students.

The data used in this study were taken from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). ELS is a nationally representative study that began with over 15,000 sophomores in 2002 and concluded with a third and final follow up in 2012, which would be 8 years after the participants would have completed high school. The sub-sample analyzed in this research is comprised of the 1,835 Black students who participated in the ELS survey. The analysis was conducted in three distinct phases. First, descriptive statistics were described to determine general characteristics of the Black student sample. Second, a correlational analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between variables. Finally, multiple regression analyses was utilized to determine which independent variables have the greatest impact on predicting Black student dropout rates.

Concerning demographic variables, this study found that attending a school in an urban setting played a role in the likelihood that Black students would drop out. When data for female and male students were analyzed separately, urbanicity was no longer

significant for Black females but maintained its significance for Black male students. Overall, Black females were less likely to drop out than Black males.

Concerning the aspirational variables in question, the major findings of this study indicate that self-expectation was the strongest indicator of a Black student's, especially a Black female, decision to drop out. To be sure, this seemed to be the only indicator, apart from socioeconomic status that had any statistical significance in predicting drop out for Black females. For Black males, the aspirational variable that measured the degree to which students believed school was a place to acquire job skills was also significant.

Of the school level variables under consideration, the two variables measuring the interpersonal dimensions of the student teacher relationship (“teacher attitude and treatment of students” and “not put down”) proved to be significant for Black students. None of the school level variables under consideration for his dissertation proved to be significant in predicting dropping out for Black females, when analyzed as a distinct group. For Black males, however, the variable “not put down” mentioned above remained statistically significant. Further, the degree to which Black male students felt that everyone knew the behavioral expectations and consequences (variable “knows rules”) was also significant.

For Black males specifically, the findings above were discussed in relation to Bourdieu (1984), Bronfenbrenner (1979), and Ogbu's (1992) various ecological/social reproduction theories as well as Oliver's work (2006) discussing the streets as a socializing institution. Specifically, this dissertation postulates that schools are a site

where dominant ideology and culturally reified ways of being are normalized and reproduced. Black males are often made to feel denigrated because school is a place that is not for them. This results in a search—often outside of the school walls—for acceptance and affirmation. For Black females, the findings from this study affirm the insights of Bandura’s (2010) self-efficacy theory. Namely, Black females, once they believe that they are capable, are that much more likely to persist and succeed. Little else matters once a firm expectation of self has been established.

## **6.2 Limitations**

The findings from this study add value to the discussion of dropping out among Black students. Nevertheless, there are a number of limitations of this present work that are worth enumerating as they may inform future research.

### *Limitations of the Sample*

There is a real caution that one must consider when researching any category or construct as charged and controversial as race. One of the major limitations of this study is that it treats Black students as a monolithic group by failing to make the distinction between Blacks from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds. All Black students will not experience school and schooling in the same way.

Studies have shown that there are often differences in academic performance between African American students and Black students from the Caribbean, Latin America, or African countries. The work of John Ogbu (Ogbu, 2004; Ogbu et al., 1998) and Victor Villanueva (1993) expounds on the distinction to be made between voluntary minorities (those who willingly immigrate in hopes of better educational and economic



opportunity or for safety from lands in turmoil) and involuntary minorities (formerly colonized individuals who did not necessarily choose to immigrate but nevertheless now make their home here, i.e., descendants of slaves). Effort optimism research suggests that there may be differences in aspirations as well as attainment between Black Americans and Black immigrant students from parts of Africa, Latin America, or the Caribbean (Ogbu 1992; Suarez-Orozco 2001). These differences may be connected to how these students perceive themselves, America, and how they are perceived as well.

Researchers attribute the variation in academic achievement among subgroups of Black students to effort optimism on the part of immigrant families. Effort optimism is the belief that hard work will translate to success in America. This sense of optimism has its greatest impact on those who are new to the country or in the first generation after immigration. Studies show that the impact of effort optimism diminishes over time as immigrant families and their offspring assimilate and either assume or are made to assume the frame of reference of African American Blacks (Suarez Orozco, 2001). Because this study does not separate the sample into represented ethnic groups, it is impossible to assert that the findings hold true for all Black students equally. It is possible that the findings are more indicative for African American Black students than their peers who are immigrants or vice versa.

A second limitation of the sample is that it focuses on race and gender simultaneously. While research suggests that it is often times necessary to study how the intersection of various discourses affects individuals (Crenshaw, 1991; Gee, 2000) it is difficult to ascertain if the findings are as a result of race, gender, or the overlap of the two constructs. For example, it may be that aspirations are most significant for all

females independent of racial or ethnic background, not just Black females. Similarly, it may be that all males, with society's view that men should be breadwinners and providers, look to school to equip them with job skills, not just Black males.

A further limitation of the sample is that it focuses on all Black students as opposed to narrowing the lens and considering the research question for Black males or Black females, exclusively. Studies suggest that there may be gender differences in how students approach and experience school. The outcomes of Black males and females continue to differ to degrees that warrant further examination along gender lines.

A final limitation of the sample is that the study is based on survey data that were collected when participants were already sophomores in high school. School and life experiences that shape academic attitudes and aptitudes are at play well before students arrive at the high school door. Research suggests that those who leave school before obtaining their diploma are already transitioning by middle school, and many make that decision before ever beginning their 10<sup>th</sup> grade year (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1999; Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). Future research should consider this limitation and perhaps begin gathering data as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade year.

#### *Methodological Limitations*

There are several methodological limitations of this study as well. First, the data used is ten years old. Much has changed in the education world since then. Race to the Top, the federally funded education reform initiative, which includes the acceptance and implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards, has fueled rapid changes across school districts and systems, particularly those in urban centers. As such, the graduation completion rates for Black students, though still lagging, have seen

improvement, especially for Black males. The Schott Foundations *Yes We Can!* Report of 2010 (Holzman) highlighted several successes in this area. Urban Prep, an all-male school in Chicago with several sites, now boasts a 100% four year-college acceptance rate for all of their senior students-and has accomplished this four years in a row. Eagle Academy in New York City and several schools in the Uncommon Charter network in Newark, consistently record graduation rates that far exceed those of their peer schools in their respective cities.

This study did not consider the impact that state and federal educational policies such as NCLB and the current Race to the Top Initiative mentioned above have had on Black student dropout rates. Further, prior to the common core era, the requirements for graduation varied widely from state to state and oftentimes between districts within the same state. Dropping out is likely influenced by the policies and practices of the schools that the Black students attended as well as the districts and states in which they are situated.

A second methodological limitation of this study is that it is purely quantitative in nature. There are no observations or focus group interviews to provide additional data points for triangulation. This is especially concerning given that self-aspirations proved to be the most significant variable under analysis for males and females. This study and subsequent findings presented are limited in scope and depth because they lack the added dimension of participant voice to bring greater understanding to how and why aspirations proved to be so significant. More important, such conversations would have potentially shed light into how aspirations are cultivated in the first place and sustained over time.

A third methodological limitation is that the current study focuses on too many variables. The literature on dropping out has shown that many variables affect overall dropout rates, but no particular variable will necessarily show statistical significance for Black students specifically. A more thorough analysis is warranted to better understand aspirations, expectations, and how that domain in particular influences students to drop out or persist through school.

While this study considers family aspirations as they relate to dropping out, it does not include variables that measure family involvement, which has also been shown to be an important indicator of school success (Lareau, 1987; Simon, 2001). Given that family aspirations did not prove to be significant for Black students, it would be interesting to see if the same holds true for family involvement variables. Indeed one might argue that family involvement is in fact necessary because actions are indicative of what one believes. If the aspirations are high but the necessary actions to realize those aspirations are absent then that suggests various implications.

#### *Theoretical Limitation*

There is a great degree of overlap between the theories presented in Chapter Two. Each theory suggests that children are shaped by experiences in their homes and schools. Those experiences are influenced by the beliefs, values, expectations, and practices of their families, communities, and society as a whole. While all of the theories help explain why Black students drop out, only Ogbu's cultural ecological theory specifically speaks of race. Even so, Ogbu's work is focused more closely on the distinction in America between voluntary and involuntary immigrants. Another limitation of this study is its relative inattention to critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012;

Ladson-Billings, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). CRT structures research in a manner that acknowledges how racial oppression has shaped the experiences of research participants. Specific to CRT is a methodological approach, counter-storytelling, that calls for participants to make sense of and share their narratives as they understand them, not how they are depicted.

### *Limitations of Assumptions*

My research focuses on and therefore unintentionally reifies the deficit narrative. I concentrate on what factors best predict the likelihood that Black students will drop out as opposed to an analysis of the factors that aid Black students to persist through school and graduate. Shaun Harper and Collin Williams (2014), professors of education at the University of Pennsylvania, have recently concentrated on persistence. Commissioned by then-New York City Mayor Bloomberg, Chancellor Walcott, and other partners, the study focused on resiliency and what motivates students to persist and complete school, rather than adding to the narrative on dropouts.

Notwithstanding the various limitations enumerated above, my findings have merit. What follows is a summary of the implications for next that can be undertaken at various levels by stakeholders to ensure Black students thrive academically.

### **6.3 Implications**

Findings from this dissertation suggest that self-aspirations are a statistically significant factor in predicting dropout rates for Black students, especially Black females. In addition, Black male students need to see school as a place that can equip them with viable job skills in order to persist (Wilson, 1997). Given these findings, it is imperative that families, school leaders, teachers, community based organizations and professional

institutions collaborate to ensure that students have consistent exposure to role models and teachers who look like them. Students may identify with these individuals and strive to emulate their academic success.

Mentorship opportunities may also be instrumental in cultivating high academic aspirations. Effective mentors will engage students in dialogue that allows them to better understand the role that their actions play in establishing solid self-efficacy beliefs and realizing their aspirations. Finally, internship opportunities that allow Black students, especially Black males, to develop skills and habits for professional success are a necessary component of any improvement initiative.

Additional findings highlight that the school context, specifically the teacher-student relationship, is critical for Black males and academic achievement. As suggested by Bruner (1996) and Oliver (1996), schools need to become spaces that acknowledge and accept Black male students for who they are and what they bring to the school. Their vision counters the image of schools as alienating institutions that compel Black males to turn to the streets for affirmation and acceptance.

If Black males are “failing” and leaving school as an act of resistance to the reified knowledge they are expected to acquire and accept and the dominant norms they are expected to enact, then schools must become negotiated spaces that allow, better yet, welcome, young men to bring their total selves to the classroom. At the minimum, schools committed to improving the achievement of Black males must work *with* their students to question, deconstruct, and reconstruct the societal norms and values they feel bound to uphold.

Paulo Freire, an activist and academic from Brazil, believed that the true purpose of education was liberation: for individuals to come closer to being able to exercise their “[O]ntological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” ( Freire, 1993, p. 84). Such education encourages students to critically consider their social location and develop an awareness of the connections between their individual problems and the social contexts in which they are situated. Reaching awareness, also known as *conscientization*, is a necessary first step if one is to develop the resolve to act and change life circumstances. Schools are sites where liberating education can occur.

Raising the critical consciousness of the oppressed requires deliberate action from educators. Conscientization, rooted in problem posing, seeks to increase discussion and heighten awareness of how one’s way of being in the world is connected to and defined by existing power structures. Freire writes, “Problem posing education is this effort to present significant dimensions of an individual’s contextualized reality, the analysis of which will make it possible for him to recognize the interaction of the various components” (1993, p. 104). The first goal of problem posing education is to provide the space for students to question their existence and their place in the world, for them to reach a critical consciousness about the role of oppression in their lives. This deep thinking about the world is to serve as the catalyst for *praxis*, Freire’s term for informed action or activism. Students engaged in pedagogy of the oppressed, if the instructional style is successful, emerge, not as individuals weakened by the realization of their victimhood. Instead, Freire writes, they have “A deepened consciousness of their situation [that] leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible

to transformation (p. 85). Black males may need to reach conscientization to improve their educational attainment.

Education reformers and those committed to improving the academic achievement of Black males should codify and replicate what has been learned from the Black and Latino Male School Intervention Study (BLMSIS). The organization Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color (COSEBOC) is an organization engaged in that work. It holds a yearly gathering that engages a national group of school leaders, teachers, political representatives and the like in a series of sessions geared at sharing practices that have been instrumental in supporting Black male student achievement. Principals serving in urban communities with large percentages of Black male (and female) students should be required to attend COSEBOC's yearly conferences to learn from colleagues working in similar contexts. This type of professional learning would need to be endorsed by school superintendents and city or state school leadership, such as the New York City's chancellor of education. The practices encouraged by BLMSIS and COSEBOC, while based in efforts to support Black and Latino males, specifically, are often transferable and beneficial to improving the academic outcomes for other vulnerable populations. Specifically, COSEBOC calls for the implementation of high quality remediation programs as well as rigorous courses of study (honors, AP track courses), extensive identity work to foster a positive academic self-concept in students, and mentorship as a core practice. These practices, when implemented consistently, have proven to have dramatic and lasting impact for Black students. Indeed they are at the core of the work at Urban Prep, Eagle Academy, and Uncommon's North Star schools, all of which have realized significant gains for their Black student population.



Regarding teachers, it is imperative that preparation programs teach educators how to connect and engage with their students. Teachers, regardless of race and background, should be required to participate in courses that explicitly teach them how to structure classroom learning environments that let kids *get* smart. Students, especially those belonging to vulnerable populations, should not have to question whether their teachers believe in their abilities. Teachers should not shy away from correcting or challenging their students for fear of having their actions misinterpreted. Rather, teachers must encourage their students to persist to realize their academic potential. Praising or accepting mediocrity will not cause students to achieve the dramatic improvements they are capable of and so desperately need. Finally, teachers should be trained on culturally responsive teaching practices so that they can incorporate these pedagogical techniques to better meet the needs of diverse populations.

One would be hard pressed to find an educator or education reformer that disagrees with the current push to hold teachers accountable for student performance by focusing on instructional practices in schools. Nevertheless, improving teacher and school practice is but one prong of what must be a multipronged approach if schools and society are to realize dramatic gains and experience lasting improvements for Black students and other vulnerable populations that have become the rhetoric of school reform efforts. As detailed in the findings and discussion chapter, there are contextual factors that have a significant impact on dropping out.

Living in an urban center had a significant impact on the likelihood that Black, especially male, students will drop out. Education policy should focus on the creation of more schools that address the needs of their students *and* their communities. This requires

funding as well as protocols to ensure that funding is allocated to support communities in a strategic manner. The educational policy forum, A Broader Bolder Approach, strongly encourages this type of strategic action (Gregory et al., 2010).

#### **6.4 Future Research**

The findings presented in this current study can be deepened and extended to further inform initiatives aimed at improving academic achievement among Black students. Future research that addresses the limitations highlighted above will add much needed data to the conversation, thereby strengthening reform efforts. What follows below are specific examples of future research.

##### *Consider Black Students as a Heterogeneous Group*

As mentioned above, it is important to appropriately divide the Black student sample into its constituent subgroups such as African American students and Black immigrant students. Those who are classified as immigrants can be more specifically identified based on the country or region they immigrated from (i.e., Africa, Caribbean, Latin America, etc.) or further still as foreign-born or first generation. Categorizing Black students into various subgroups will allow for researchers to determine better what cultural influences or native/non-native factors may also be significant in predicting dropout rates. Further, such research may be able to determine if there are specific factors that are significant for all Black students or if significance varies between ethnic groups.

### *Conduct Research Along Racial or Gender Lines*

As stated above, several of the findings may be specific to race or gender and not necessarily at the intersection of the two domains. Future research should consider the same research question for females, independent of race and seek to determine if any of the variables under consideration prove to be statistically significant for females in general. The same task could be undertaken for males specifically. Conducting the study in this way would help in elucidating whether findings from this study are race or gender based.

Further, future study should focus on Black females or Black males specifically as opposed to both demographic groups simultaneously. Given that there were meaningful differences in which variables proved to be significant for males and females, further study might take a closer look at how the variables “job skills” or “not put down” translate into lower academic achievement and ultimately the decision to drop out among Black males. Similarly, research focused on Black females might ascertain exactly how and why aspirations play the role that they do in the lives of Black female students. Focusing the study along gender lines in this way would allow for deeper analysis and theorizing of select variables, which may ultimately lead to better understanding and more impactful reform.

### *Newer, Younger Data Set*

As discussed above, the data used in this current study is more than ten years old and is based on high school students. Given all of the local and national changes in education since the adoption of the Common Core state standards in 2009, future research should be based on a more recent dataset and be sure to include the survey results for

students as low as 6<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This would help to ensure that the findings and discussion are relevant for students who are in school now, not those who were completing school nearly a decade ago. Further, the findings would reflect the academic aptitude and disposition of students during their middle school years, a time period that some researchers suggest is most instrumental in determining who is likely to persist and succeed and who is likely to drop out (Alexander et al., 1999; Balfanz et al., 2007).

#### *Include Qualitative Data*

The findings presented in this study are based solely on quantitative analysis and yield only interpretive information. Adding qualitative data such as focus group and individual interviews or observations of students within the school setting would provide information for a more complete understanding of why Black students drop out.

Interviews would allow researchers to ascertain whether study participants perceive their aspirations as having a significant impact transitioning out of or persisting through school. Further, the right questions would shed light on how aspirations are cultivated and how they manage to play the significant role that the current findings suggest they do.

#### *Focus Specifically on Aspirations*

Given that aspirations (specifically self-aspirations) proved to be one of the most significant factors in predicting dropping out among Black students, they warrant more detailed analysis and discussion. Future research should include qualitative methods and seek to ascertain how aspirations are cultivated and maintained in the face of challenge or difficulty. If research in this area is to serve students, educators, and families, studies must seek to learn how to avoid the aspiration-achievement paradox of which Kao and

Tienda (2007) speak. What role do self-efficacy beliefs play in shaping one's aspirations? Does self-efficacy precede aspiration development? Or is positive or negative self-efficacy what determines if one achieves their aspirations? What about tenacity or what is now commonly referred to as grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007)? What role does this character strength play in realizing aspirations? In what way is grit related to aspirations or self-efficacy beliefs? Schools are taking steps to message and support the development of a positive academic self-concept and high aspirations among poor and minority students. There is little to no data, however, that confirms in a quantifiable way that school aspiration and grit-building practices are directly contributing to improved outcomes. Future research should seek to specify *which* school practices are most influential in cultivating high aspirations and resilience in students. Angela Duckworth and her colleagues in the field of positive psychology are now partnering with schools to undertake this important work.

#### *Focus on Family Involvement*

Future research should focus on family involvement as well as family aspirations. Studies show that family involvement, even more so than family aspirations, has a significant impact on school success. This may be because anyone can profess to believe anything. The truth lies in what one does. Analyzing the alignment or disconnect between family aspirations and family involvement may help to explain further why family aspirations did not prove to be significant for Black students. Further, if in fact students with a greater alignment between family aspirations and family involvement have higher academic achievement, then the implications for family engagement reform initiatives would have research based backing.

### *Include Critical Race Theory as a Core Theory*

Future research that seeks to make sense of the school experience of Black students and their decision to drop out should include critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical lens. This would allow for the purposeful analysis of how race shapes life and school experiences. Further, CRT calls for the use of counter storytelling, a research methodology whereby participants share their stories and experiences. Interviews and focus group conversations allow participants to provide much needed perspective, which in turn will allow future researchers to come to more complete and accurate conclusions.

### *Resiliency Angle*

This dissertation unintentionally reifies the deficit narrative. Future research should consider the question from the strengths or resiliency angle. There is a significant and growing body of research that details the factors that lead students to fail. As such, there needs to be just as much, if not more, research and discussion on the factors that promote academic success among Black students, especially Black males, who are seldom portrayed or discussed in a positive light. Shaun Harper's (2013) study, mentioned above, is an example of one such study. Conducting and sharing research that comes from the resiliency angle will add a much needed chapter to the positive narrative for Black males, highlighting key factors that can promote their success as opposed to adding another sentence to the long and overheard conversation of their failure.

While this current study highlights several findings and proposes strategies for improving the academic outcomes of Black students, there is still much to be learned. The insight gained from undertaking any or all of the proposed research activities

described above would undoubtedly inform efforts to improve the academic life course trajectory of Black students, the chief aim of this dissertation.

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