This mixed method study investigates the achievement motivation levels of 20 African American females between the ages of 15 and 18 from a suburban high school in southwestern Ohio. When investigating their achievement motivation levels, quantitative data from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scale – PALS and qualitative data from the focus group members were collected to explain parents’ education level, academic self-efficacy, expectancy-value and social/cultural factors that impact achievement motivation levels. Study results revealed that a parent’s education level influences the girls’ achievement motivation levels, but social/cultural factors also influenced the achievement motivation levels. Implications from this study could provide schools with suggestions on strategies to promote and maintain levels of achievement motivation in African American girls.
EXPLORING ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS IN HIGH SCHOOL

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Introduction

The diverse array of students attending schools in the United States today has grown as increasing numbers of Latinos, African Americans, Asians and a number of other ethnic and cultural groups enroll (U. S. Department of Education-NCES, YR.; US Census 2010). Assessing the achievement and educational attitudes of these diverse groups is just as important as assessing those same attributes for White students. Given the historical inequalities that existed for these students within our educational system, it is particularly important to determine what attitudes these students hold toward education in general and achieving in particular. Furthermore, given the projection that students of color will soon be the majority in most school districts, it benefits our society to not only understand the academic capacity and achievement of multicultural students but to address their needs.

Several studies in education have focused on African American males and their perception of the purpose of education (Noguero, 2003; Rascoe & Atwater, 2005; Graham & Anderson, 2008; Henfield 2011; Palmer & Maramba, 2011).1 Graham and Anderson (2008) conducted a study on gifted African American males and how their ethnic identity and academic identity influenced each other. Findings confirmed that this group of gifted male students valued education highly even when they were in the presence of people who did not value education as highly. These gifted African American males experienced the aversive effects of “acting White,” – termed by Fordham and Obgu (1986) as learning school curriculum and learning to follow the standard academic practices of a school, while giving up acting like a member of their minority identity group – as defined by their peers. The authors further stated that because of the experiences and perseverance of African Americans through adversity, the students saw their ethnic identity as a strength that could be connected to their academic identity.

Graham and Anderson’s study of gifted African American males focused on the positive academic experience African American males may be exposed to, but there were other studies that focused on some of the challenges African American males experience in their educational career. Palmer and Maramba (2011) conducted a study to provide insight into the disengagement of African American males in education through the lens of critical theory. Critical theory was used to identify the inequalities that African American males experienced in

1 These are various studies that explore perceptions of African American males in education in the areas of cultural factors, giftedness and achievement disparity.
education as a result of inhibitory social structures and processes. Findings suggest that much of the aversive experiences that occurred inside the school were a reflection of what occurred outside of the school culture. Palmer and Maramba (2011) also credited the academic disengagement of African American males to the negative images they were exposed to by the media and television news and other forms of advertising. In another recent study, Harper (2012) focused on the counter perspective of African American men and their views on post-secondary education. His study found that young African American men were aware of the racial and social challenges they faced in schools, but overall, they viewed post-secondary education as a beneficial and liberating means to an end.

Although there has been an abundance of research on African American males’ achievement at a secondary level, there has been little research on African American females’ achievement at a secondary level (Evans-Winter, 2007). As a result, very little is known about African American females’ perception of the purpose and value of education and how it affects their motivation to achieve. According to Evans-Winters & Esposito (2010), there is a need to examine the educational experiences and processes of African American girls. In order to address this current limitation in the field, this study will examine the social and cultural factors that influence African American females’ motivation, the educational trends of minority students, and the impact academic self-efficacy theory and expectancy-value theory have on African American females attending high school.

The results of this research will attempt to answer questions related to: achievement motivation levels of African American girls in high school; and how social/cultural factors and perceptions of those factors affect achievement motivation levels. Given disparities that exist in educational achievement among various groups of young African Americans today, this study attempts to inform schools about possible ways to support and monitor such achievement with African American girls. To adequately understand the achievement motivation levels of African American females, theories related to expectancy value and academic self-efficacy will be examined. Social and cultural factors surrounding parent and peer interaction and education status will also be examined to provide a richer understanding of factors that may influence the academic achievement levels of African American girls. Given the social-cultural context for African Americans, the overarching question is: what determines or impacts achievement motivation for African American girls? I first outline the educational status of African American
girls in the United States, then expectancy value and academic self-efficacy, followed by the social-cultural factors in which all of this operates, and finally the study methods and results are presented.

**Literature**

**Education Status**

Despite the fact that there are millions of African American K-12 girls within our education system, there is a limited amount of research on the educational status of African American girls in the United States (Muhammad & Dixson, 2008)\(^2\). Much of the research on educational status focuses on the adolescent African American population as a whole. Although the research is limited, there are a few statistics that provide information about the educational status of African American high school females.

When looking into the dropout rates of females in high school, there were gaps between white, African American and Hispanic females between 16 and 24 years of age. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2003), African American females were dropping out of school at rates that were approximately double that of White females, but Hispanic females were dropping out of high school at rates that were almost double that of African American females. The most recent data on high school drop out rates (2009) for African American girls, confirmed that African American female dropout rate was at 8.1%, White females’ dropout rate was at 4.1% and Hispanic females dropout rate was 16.1%. There may be a variety of factors that contribute to these dropout rates and continue to contribute to the dropout rate; with the most common factor being pregnancy. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2003), teenage girls were less likely to graduate from high school if they became pregnant sometime during their high school career. Statistics confirmed that among African American births, there were 82 live births for 1,000 African American girls (NCES, 2003).

In some general cases, some African American girls were less likely to be enrolled in college prep classes and disproportionally enrolled in vocational courses. Although, according to the statistics, there was a larger number of African American females being enrolled in

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\(^2\) Muhammad and Dixson used information from the Educational Longitudinal Survey of 2002 and explored the resilience that is developed in Black girls and women.
vocational courses, females were almost two thirds more likely to attend a college or university than African American males. In the year 2000, 63% of African American females were enrolling in college or university, whereas 37% of African American males were enrolling in a college or university. The percentage enrollment of African American females was also higher than any other female enrollment in the year 2000 (NCES, 2003).

When compared to African American males, African American females continue to perform at higher levels than African American males (Corra, Carter & Carter, 2011). The Corra et al. study found that African American females were more likely to enroll in higher level or AP courses in high school, were viewed positively by teachers. The study looked at five different courses: Math, Physical Science, English, Social Sciences and Foreign Language. In each of those subject areas, a higher number of African American females were enrolled in the AP courses. African American males were found to be more likely to fail classes, drop out of school, get into trouble, or be expelled from school.

Adelabu (2007) also found that African American males did not perform as well academically as African American females and African American males were less likely to graduate from high school or report academic aspirations when compared to African American females. African American females set more academic and career goals and tend to make future plans for themselves because they were more optimistic about their future.

Nevertheless, African American girls continue to make strides in their education in hopes of pursuing their desired status in life. In pursuing their aspirations, there has to be expectations and a value in those expectations that influences how diligently they work toward that goal.

**Expectancy-Value Theory**


The Theory of Achievement Motivation is very complex and is comprised of a combination of many different theories from various theorists. John Atkinson is recognized as one of the first to provide a mathematical perspective of achievement motivation, a focus on the
individual differences, and personality structures associated with achievement motivation. Atkinson’s theory is also inspired by Miller’s conflict model, which focused on the conflict between approach and avoidance in individuals. The level of intensity, affect and balance of the oppositional (approach avoidance) forces surrounding a situation determines how a person approaches that situation, or avoids the situation. In sum, the individual will most likely have a conflict between hopes for success and fears of failure.

One’s hope for success is viewed as the tendency to approach an achievement-related goal ($T_s$). $T_s$ is the result of motive for success ($M_s$), the probability that one will be successful ($P_s$) and the incentive value of success ($I_s$). Motive for success is one’s desire to work toward success. The probability that one will be successful is the expectancy that the task will ultimately lead to the desired goal. Incentive value of success is conversely connected to the probability that one will be successful, therefore, when the probability of success decreases, the incentive value of success increases. For example, if an individual is aware that their chances of attaining a goal are minimal because of certain obstacles, the value of that goal may increase if they already have a high level of motivation.

Fear of failure is an avoidance quality that drives motivation. Tendency to avoid failure ($T_{AF}$) is a multiplicative function of motive to avoid failure ($M_{AF}$), the probability of failure ($P_{AF}$) and the incentive of failure ($-I_{AF}$) (Weiner, 1992). Motive to avoid failure is the ability to experience shame once an individual has not accomplished a goal and wishing to avoid feeling that shame and embarrassment. Probability and incentive to avoid failure are environmental factors which suggest that the incentive value of failure is a negative effect, otherwise known as “shame” (Weiner, 1992). In sum, persons are motivated to attain a goal by avoiding failure and shame.

Lewin contributed to expectancy-value theory through the development of resultant valence theory (a component of aspiration) which is defined as “the level of future performance in a familiar task which an individual, knowing his or her level of past performance in that task, purposefully attempts to reach”. When an individual is faced with a task, the level of difficulty is already being measured by that individual. If the individual anticipates success in a task, the

\[3 M_s + P_s + I_v \rightarrow T_s \text{ (minus the levels of avoidance noted by Weiner)}\]

[motivation of success + probability of success + incentive value of success = Achievement related task of goal]
valence is positive and if the individual anticipates failure in a task, the valence is negative. Therefore, that individual has to make a choice as to which task to fulfill. In most cases, that individual will choose a task that is challenging but will also give them the opportunity to be well-rewarded.

Julian Rotter is considered to be a social learning theorist. In Rotter’s social learning theory, he discussed the choices that persons make when they are faced with multiple ways of behaving in certain situations. In Rotter’s theory, there are four concepts: behavior potential, expectancy, reinforcement value, and psychological situation. Behavioral potential is the probability that a behavior will occur depending on the reinforcement or series of reinforcements. For example, in class a student may want a particular toy, or classroom item; the student may think of ways of obtaining the toy. The student could wait his or her turn, take the item without permission, or politely ask to play or use the item (Weiner, 1992). In sum, the individual has to make a choice on how to behave in a situation that is most appropriate for that setting. Expectancy is defined as “the probability held by the individual that a particular reinforcement will occur as a function of a specific behavior on his or her part in a certain situation.” The expectation the person has for the behavior is subjective because his or her behavior is dependent on what he or she expects from the behavior. Reinforcement value is “the degree of preference for any reinforcement if the possibility of their occurring were all equal.” Essentially, reinforcement could earn more value because it has been associated with another reinforcement. Usually, when a secondary reinforcement (i.e. money, grades, etc.) is linked to a primary reinforcement (i.e. food, clothing, etc.) the individual will find the secondary reinforcement to equally reinforcing as the primary reinforcement. The psychological situation pertains to learning and understanding the framework of behavior in order to choose the best behavior to display in different settings. How individuals interact in different settings is based off of social behavior that has been learned from previous experiences. A person's behavior is influenced by the expectancy that the behavior will be reinforced with something that may be of value to that person.

Motivated behavior results from the combination of the individual needs and the value of goals available in the environment. In this particular theory, the individual has to have the expectation that specific behaviors will lead to specific goals. The value of that goal also needs to be taken into account (Petri, 1981). In most cases, an individual’s expectation of attaining a goal is influenced by their past experiences. The expectancy could be considered a determining
factor because, despite how much value a goal has, the person has to expect success in reaching that goal.

**Academic Self-Efficacy**

Every individual has certain skills needed to fulfill a goal or to complete a task. One component that is needed to fulfill a goal or complete a task is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy can explain and predict the thoughts, emotions, and actions of an individual. There is also emphasis on how that individual feels they can perform with the skills they exhibit. In other words, self-efficacy is a belief in what someone can do (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Academic self-efficacy is very similar to the characteristics of general self-efficacy, but there is a deeper focus on the academic aspect of the individual. Academic self-efficacy makes reference to an individual's beliefs that they can execute any given academic task, at any level, successfully. The level of a student's academic self-efficacy can have an influence on their academic engagement, goal setting, task choice, intrinsic motivation, career choice, performance and achievement.

Academic self-efficacy, as well as general self-efficacy, is formed and maintained from past experiences, vicarious experiences, persuasive communication and physiological reactions (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Past experiences are very important in building and maintaining academic self-efficacy. Students need successful experiences in an academic task in order for them to feel they can complete the same task or a similar task at the same level, or at a more challenging level. It is effective for a student to observe another individual, of similar background and interests performing a task that is similar to what they expect to perform. In other words, students should have the opportunity to observe a model. Once the student observes the successes that the model has experienced, they may feel more confident in performing the task themselves, thus making their academic self-efficacy stronger. Persuasive communication from persons with integrity and good standing that provide positive and constructive feedback that the student needs helps in fostering academic self-efficacy. A student needs to know that they are performing well or the steps they need to do to perform better to encourage their academic self-efficacy. In some cases, persuasive communication is needed throughout the entire task because success in a task may take some time to experience. Receiving continuous feedback, positive and constructive, could motivate the student and make it evident to them that they are making progress in that task. Physiological reactions (sweating,
fatigue, aches and pain and mood changes) can lead to academic self-efficacy adjustments. Depending on how one’s body reacts to certain given tasks, could influence how the person feels about their ability to complete that task successfully. Students may be more reluctant to participate in that particular task if they have experiences of anxiety which could possibly lead to sweating and mood changes. If their physiological reactions are more comforting and pleasing to them, they are more likely to accept the task and feel they can complete the task successfully.

Academic Self-Efficacy is considered to be one of the strongest predictors of academic achievement (Schweinle & Mims, 2009); as academic self-efficacy increases, academic achievement increases as well (Fife, 2011). Fife (2011) continued his research by looking into the relationship between academic self-efficacy, ethnic identity and spirituality in African American undergraduate students who are majoring in STEM programs (e.g. science, engineering). Ethnic identity was defined as how a person perceives the knowledge, traditions, and history of their particular group. Results from the study support the connection that ethnic identity and academic self-efficacy have with each other. The study suggests that when an individual has a strong connection to their culture or a particular group they can identify with, they tend to have high expectations of achievement. Along with high expectations of achievement, it is implied that students had a higher self-esteem about themselves. From a spirituality perspective, the study found that African American students who participated in the study, students’ religious views were connected to their academic expectations. The participants believed that adding religious beliefs to their life would make them more successful in their STEM program, increase their economic status and their social relationships.

Edman & Brazil (2007) conducted a study on the ethnic differences in perceptions of campus life on a community college campus. The study looked into how African American, White, Asian, and Hispanic students’ perceptions of campus climate and social support affected their academic self-efficacy. Researchers hypothesized that the African American participants would have negative views about the climate of the campus and their social support system. Surprisingly, the African American participants reported the campus climate and their support system positively. The study also looked into correlations between GPA and academic self-efficacy. The average GPA between White and African American students differed from one

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4 Fife (2011) defined academic self-efficacy as the belief that one can and will meet the demands of one’s academic environment.
another. The average GPA for a White student was 2.53 and the average GPA for African American students was 1.85, but their academic self-efficacy levels were similar. Although their GPAs differed, their academic achievement levels were similar, which could have indicated that GPA did not have a significant correlation with academic self-efficacy for that study.

All of these issues, the sense of achievement, drive to succeed, and perception of self as being achievement oriented, existed within a socially constructed environment, a social context. Understanding that context was key to not only determining achievement status but understanding how environment contributes to that status and how (if needed or desired) these constructs can be impacted.

**Social and Cultural Factors**

Social and cultural factors such as, negative stereotypes (Carter, 2008; Fischer, 2010), parental involvement (Somers, Owens & Piliawsky, 2008) and community involvement (Evans-Winters, 2007) play a major role in how young African American girls view the importance of education and their level of achievement motivation.

In many instances, the negative stereotypes of academic inferiority is attributed to minority populations (i.e. African American, Hispanic and Native Americans) when compared to Asians, Asian Americans or White Americans (Howard & Anderson, 2010). Awareness of these stereotypes can produce forms of anxiety in individuals who are members of these minority groups thus leading to strategies of attempting to escape the pressure of confirming or disconfirming these stereotypes (Osborne & Walker, 2006). Two ways that individuals may attempt to escape these pressures is through disidentification and withdrawal. In order for a stereotype to be threatening, that stereotype must be relevant and the person must be invested in the accompanying task in order for them to truly experience stereotype threat. If a person no longer identifies with that task and limits the connection they have to the task, then they no longer experience the threat of that stereotype. Withdrawal at necessary moments also permits the student from engaging in the task and reduces the anxiety they would experience if they would have engaged in that task. The purpose of Osborne & Walker’s (2006) study was to examine ninth and tenth grade minority students who had high identification with academics, and

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5 Carter investigated the achievement of African Americans and how critical race achievement ideology is developed among them.

6 The threat that others’ judgments of their own actions will negatively stereotype them in the domain
experience a higher level of stereotype threat. Students who had a high identification with academics were students who valued academics and viewed their academic performance as an important aspect of self. A binary logistic regression analysis was conducted and supported the hypothesis that the higher the academic identification was for minority students, the more vulnerable they were to withdraw from school. The results from the binary logistic regression analysis also supported the hypothesis that the higher the identification was with White students, the less vulnerable they were to withdraw. Because a stigma is placed on minority students and their academic abilities, this leaves them to be more vulnerable to dropping out of school.

Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson (1997) introduced the stereotype threat model (Croizet, Desert, Dutrevis & Leyens, 2001) to explain the limited performance of African Americans in academic areas. Stereotype threat is defined as the event of a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs becoming self-relevant, and potentially adversely impacting the level of confidence and performance in a task that is not thought to be a strength of that population. More simply, stereotype threat is one’s fear of confirming a negative stereotype concerning one’s own group. Stereotype threat may have originally focused on threats and pressures that minority populations experience, but all people experience stereotype at some time (Jordan & Lovett, 2007). African American students experience stereotype threat when they are thought to be inferior to their white counterparts in the areas of science, math, reading, SAT scores and on their report cards (Corra, Carter & Carter, 2011). Females are also stereotyped to be inferior to males in their mathematical abilities (Jordan & Lovett, 2007). White males also experience stereotype threat if they are viewed as having limited rhythm or being clumsy on the dance floor if this behavior is relevant (Smith & Hung, 2008). When any member of a group experiences stereotype threat, their thoughts can be distracted and a certain amount of pressure is placed on them to confirm the stereotype or disconfirm the stereotype. When individuals experience stereotype threat, there are different ways that people can cope with these experiences. Jordan & Lovett (2007) expressed a common way to cope with the negative stereotype was to avoid any situation that is associated with that negative stereotype.

Taylor & Walton (2011) further confirmed the stereotype threat by suggesting that African American students experienced “double jeopardy”. In their study, they conducted two experiments. In the first experiment, White and African American students were given words to
study in either a threatening or nonthreatening environment. After a one to two week time span, students returned to recall the words and the definitions. Half of the participants were assigned to a non-threatening “warm-up” environment and the other half were assigned to a threatening “test” environment. The second experiment incorporated a value affirmation component to reduce the stereotype threat that the African American students may experience during these tasks. To participate in the value affirmation intervention, students were given a 10 minute writing assignment where they had to choose personal values about themselves and provide a description about why that was an important value to them. Results from Experiment 1 found that African American students were able to recall and define roughly half of the previously learned words when they were placed in a nonthreatening environment. Students from the threatening environment showed more challenges when they were asked to recall and define the previously learned words. Findings from this study promoted nonthreatening environments to improve the academic performance of minority students. Experiment 2, where value affirmation was incorporated, findings confirmed that value affirmation reduced the influence stereotype threat has on minority students. African American students who completed a value affirmation prior to studying in a threatening learning environment were able to recall and define the words correctly in a nonthreatening environment. Value affirmation also has been proven to increase the focus of the students from the study.

In addition to the value affirmation component, other implications were shared for minority students who experience stereotype threat. Jordan & Lovett (2007) suggested emphasizing hard work and effort over innate intelligence. Encouraging hard work and effort suggests that intelligence is malleable instead of a quality that never changes. Explaining the grading process explicitly to ensure that minority students do not negatively associate their minority status to their grades is also a suggested practice to reduce the effects of stereotypes. Other suggestions included having open discussions about effects of stereotype threat with the inclusion of persons from a variety of minority groups who have succeeded in their endeavors despite adversities and have chosen their personal success for the acceptance of their peers.

Negative stereotypes have an influential impact on the levels of achievement in African American girls and also their view of the importance of education (Carter, 2008). It is possible that between the ages of 15 and 18, they may not fully understand how racist, sexist and classist patterns affect their personal perceptions and the stereotypical images that have been established
in their lives. Although some African American girls may not fully understand how these patterns affect them, they are aware that their experiences are somewhat different and require the development of a certain personal characteristic known as resilience. Resilience has also been defined as a positive pole of individual differences in people’s response to stress and adversity (Reis & Diaz, 1999). Typically, resiliency is developed through personal experiences and being a witness to the experiences of others. Resiliency is a characteristic in many young girls. Not only do African American girls have to overcome the sexist and classist patterns that affect their lives, they also have to overcome the racial patterns (Evans-Winters, 2007).

Many young African American girls are aware of the negative stereotypes such as teenage pregnancy, promiscuity, drop-out rates, welfare dependency, drug and alcohol abuse, the image of being “loud and ghetto,” and the stereotypes associated with their intellectual abilities linked to their culture (Evans-Winters, 2007). When made aware of these negative stereotypes, some African American girls may feel a sense of responsibility to not validate these stereotypes by behaving differently (Carter, 2003). Some of these behaviors may include, speaking Standard English, earning high grades in school, and looking a certain way (Barnett, Stadulis & Singer, 2010). These behaviors lead to the assumption that any individual from a different cultural background, especially an African American background, has taken on a White persona because they have a high value for education and pursue a higher education. According to Evans-Winters (2007), this assumption is not one that is held by resilient African American girls; they tend to believe that education is a means to an end, and has a high probability of benefiting their life. In any culture, in order to thrive or succeed academically, an individual has to see themselves as a member of a racial group, be aware of the racism and stereotypes and develop a perspective of self as succeeding as a racial group member (Oyserman, Grant, Ager 1995). In these particular cases, African American girls are believed to have a high sense of racial pride, but also make it their individual responsibility to prove to their counterparts that these stereotypes do not hold true to their entire culture (Carter, 2003). Grant (1999) conducted a study on 18 and 19 year old African American girls in a rural school district. The girls in the study shared the belief that doing well in school brought them self-satisfaction, family pride and the feeling of being role models in other African American students. This disposition would suggest that these students saw how valuable education can be for their future and the futures of others who were close to them. If it is within their control, they did not affiliate themselves with activities that "taint"
their personal image (Evans-Winters, 2007). For example, resilient African American girls were more reluctant to participate in sexual activities, not only because of the image they could portray, but also because they preferred to not have to endure the negative consequences that are connected to those activities. Avoiding such activities typically started with parents regulating what activities their children participated in and did not participate in (Evans-Winters, 2007).

Parents’ involvement also played a significant part in the view of education and the levels of motivation to achieve in academic settings. There were also other cases where parents have not been exposed to a post-secondary education, and because they had not had this exposure, they encouraged their children to pursue opportunities in higher education (Smith, 2009). In Grant’s (1999) study of African American girls in a rural school district, their value of education and their support structures were examined. For these participants, they credited much of their academic achievement to their parents because of their encouragement. These students also identified their parents or other family members as being the most important role models in their lives. However, Smith (2009) expressed concern about the research that has been done with parental involvement with African American families. From much of his research, he discovered that many studies focused on the parental involvement of low-SES single mothers and much of the research has been based on Eurocentric values – the thought of taking ownership of one’s successes and failures, but fails to account for structural conditions in society that may restrict some people from achieving to their full potential in schooling or in life (O’Connor, 1997) – without taking into account the racial and social oppressions that this group experiences. In an attempt to provide a more objective view of parental involvement, Michael Smith (2009) conducted a study of the parental involvement of African American parents who were identified as having a low socioeconomic status. The results of the study suggested that many African American families that came from a low socioeconomic background lack the necessary knowledge that is required to prepare their children for academic success. Because there may be a lack of knowledge, there is a possibility that the connections between the financial and lifelong values that are associated with a formal education are limited. Of course, when an African American community, as well as any other racial or ethnic, had confidence that financial benefits will follow a college education, they were more likely to hold a higher value for a formal education.
One common strategy that African American parents use to encourage their children to perform their best in high school is a narrative of struggle (Smith, 2009). In a parent’s narrative of struggle, parents expressed how their financial and career limitations were due to their lack of completing their education or pursuing higher education. Because parents have experienced certain struggles possibly due to their lack of education or life experiences, their idea of education may have shifted. In this situation they viewed education as a means to an end.

Because education may be viewed as a means to an end, there may also be specific messages that promote these ideas. Collins (1997) went into great depth about the messages that African American females receive and the historical roots of these messages. In Collins’ (1997) African American college course, she asked her female students – who come from different geographical, economic and social backgrounds – what messages they received from their mothers in relation to education. Many of the responses were very similar, despite their different backgrounds. Messages from mothers included being educated before marrying and settling down, being able to support themselves financially and taking their time before getting into a serious relationship. These messages encouraged these African American females to be self-reliant and to be prepared for adverse situations. These types of messages and characteristics are rooted in the matriarchal roles women had during slavery. During slavery, African American mothers were not allotted the full luxury of solely caring for their children. Instead, mothers had to care for their children, the children of others and stay consistent with their work. Because African American women had different experiences as mothers historically, much of their perception of motherhood is different and even with political and economic changes, many of these historical practices hold true for African American mothers today (Collins, 1997). In many African American families mothers have the dual responsibility of caring for their children and possibly other children and also contributing to the household income. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) identified 64.2% of African American mothers of all marital statuses who have children 18 years of age and younger are employed. Through their experiences, mothers strived to prepare their daughters for the experiences they will have as a young African American woman. Mothers sent the message of living with and understanding the systems of the world in which they live, but not limiting themselves to certain stereotypical roles and surpassing the stereotypical images that could be placed on their group. Given the stereotypes they potentially face outside of their families, there are gender stereotypes they face within their family that could
affect their self-beliefs about their academic abilities. Wood, Costes, Rowley and Adeyanju (2010) conducted a study on the gender stereotypes that parents hold for their children. The study found that African American parents indirectly held lower expectations for their sons when compared to their daughters. These expectations are influenced by the societal expectations placed on African American males and females.

Although education may be held in high regard, there still may be some institutional factors that African American families experience at a high school level that make their access to formal education more challenging. When families look into enrolling their child in college, there is a need to network and establish relationships with institutional agents, individuals that help with locating opportunities to advance in higher institutions (Smith, 2009). Not only is it important to have institutional agents, it is also helpful to have institutional agents from similar cultural backgrounds that can help with the advancements in college opportunities. In some instances, without institutional agents to support African American families, exclusion occurs and could lead to parents having feelings of discouragement toward being involved in college opportunities and activities that are introduced in high school (Smith, 2009).

Community involvement also plays a significant role in the participation of African American girls in high school. There are positive and negative aspects within a community that influences student participation. From a positive outlook, there are after school programs that students will participate in, internship opportunities and church involvement because it is the “right thing to do” which is connected to worship purposes (Evans-Winters, 2007). From a negative outlook, parents may have kept their children away from their immediate environment because it led to trouble. In such cases, parents may have prevented their child from participating in activities that had no connection to education, or involved individuals from their community that they have considered to be negative influences. These habits could be used to limit the amount of stereotypes that are associated with the African American population, but it did not exclude them from the stereotype threats they would experience just being in the African American population.

Given this social-cultural context for African American girls, what is the status of their achievement motivation within a high school setting? The questions guiding this project examine the potential differences in the achievement motivation levels of African American girls in high school. The three research questions are: What are the achievement motivation levels for
these African American females; does their parents’ education level impact the achievement motivation levels of these females; and what social/cultural factors play a role in the achievement motivation levels of these African American females? To answer questions about the influence of social/cultural factors on achievement motivation levels, qualitative data from the focus group will be examined and included in the analysis.

**Methods**

**Setting**

A high school located in the Southwestern area of Ohio with a population of about 1036 served as the study location. This particular township area is occupied by 58,499 residents with a median household income of approximately $53,000. Thirty-two percent of this population holds occupations in the management, business, science and arts field. The school is located in a suburban area just outside of the city limits. This school is comprised of 33.2% African American, 1.9% Hispanic, 1.6% Asian and 56.7% White, non-Hispanic students. The participating school's economic status is categorized as a medium-low poverty level. Approximately 43% of the student body is identified as being economically disadvantaged and 48.3% of the student population qualifies for free/reduced lunch. The school has a 1:17.5 teacher student ratio. In the year 2010, graduation rates for the school were relatively high. Approximately 90% of the student body graduated. African American students had a graduation rate of approximately 88%, 92% for White students and 94% for economically disadvantaged students.

**Participants**

Participants were African American girls between the ages of 15-18 in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades. Many of the participants were also highly involved in school activities (i.e. track, student council, concert choir) and in their communities (i.e. church). The participants viewed their involvement in their school and community as another outlet and connection to their culture, family and support system in their achievement. Forty-five girls, who had study hall as a class in their school schedule, were identified and selected by the school counselor. All 45 potential participants were asked to participate in the study. Out of those forty-five girls, twenty girls completed the survey measuring achievement motivation (PALS – Patterns of Adaptive
Learning Scale) and five of those twenty girls participated in the focus group. The average age of the 20 girls completing the PALS was 16.75. Six levels of education were listed and later divided into two parent education level categories. The two categories included High School Graduate Category parents who were identified as not completing high school (rating of 1), completing high school (rating of 2) or having some college education (rating of 3). College Graduate Category included parents who were identified as earning an Associate’s degree (rating of 4), earning a Bachelor’s degree (rating of 5) or earning a graduate level degree (rating of 6). Their average parental education was 4.6 for mothers and 4.3 for fathers, meaning that on average, with the exception of the ones who did not know, both parents were earning at least an Associate’s degree. Six girls were in the 10th grade, five girls were in the 11th grade and nine girls were in the 12th grade with the average grade level at 11.15. Out of the 20 participants, 5 girls identified their mother as being in the High School Graduate Category and 13 girls identified their mother as being in the College Education Category. Two of the participants did not know their mother’s education level and marked “Not Sure” on their survey. Seven girls identified their father as being in High School Graduate Category and 9 girls identified their father being in the College Graduate Category. Four of the participants did not know their father’s education level and marked “Not Sure” on their survey.

**Procedure and Instrumentation**

Permission was obtained from the district, building and parents to participate in the study. To measure the achievement motivation level consistent with Atkinson's, Lewin's and Rotter's Expectancy-Value Theory and Bong’s Academic Self-Efficacy Theory, Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scale (PALS) was utilized (Midgley, 2000). PALS has been used with diverse populations. This scale has been used with school age children from elementary to high school in districts that were identified as low to middle income. Male and females were equally included in instrument standardization. Ethnically diverse populations were well represented in the sample sizes; approximately 55% of the standardization was from minority backgrounds and 30% of whom were African Americans. Reliability for the subscales is relatively high with an Alpha (α) of .71 and above. The validity of the subscales include: Personal Achievement Goal Orientation α = .74-.89, Academic-Related Perceptions, Beliefs and Strategies α = 78-.89,
Perceptions of Parents, Home life and Neighborhood $\alpha = .71-.83^8$. The PALS contains questions divided into eleven achievement motivation categories, and in each of those subscale categories, a mean was calculated. The eleven categories included: Mastery Goal Orientation (MGO), Performance-Approach Goal and Performance-Avoid Goal Orientation (P-approach-Avoid), Academic Efficacy (AE), Academic Self-Handicapping Strategies (ASHS), Avoiding Novelty (AN), Self-Presentation of Low Achievement (LOWACHI), Skepticism about the Relevance of School for Future Success (Skeptic), Parent Mastery Goal (PM), Parent Performance Goal (PPG), Dissonance Between Home and School (DISSON) and Neighborhood Space (NEIGHB).

A qualitative component was used to this research project in order to enrich the study. A focus group was held for all girls who wished to participate after school. Although PALS did not have formulated questions for an interview portion, questions were constructed based on the quantitative questions from the scale to ensure reliability. The group participated in a semi-structured interview, which was held after school for approximately one hour. The questions for the semi-structured interview were developed based on the responses from the PALS subscales that had consistent results. The Self-Presentation of Low Achievement had consistently low scores indicating that the participants did not have qualms about reinforcing the “Acting White” stereotype and had confidence in their academic abilities. Steady high scores under the Parent Performance Goal scale helped develop the focus group question of where their achievement motivation levels developed. Higher scores on a certain question under the dissonance between home and school led to the focus group question of the difference between their home life and school life. The purpose of the semi-structured interview was to give the participants an opportunity to elaborate and provide explanations for their responses to the PALS scale.

Throughout the month of data collection, the researcher checked with the potential participants during their elective classes (i.e. art, music or study hall) to collect their consent forms or remind them to return the consent forms. When the participants returned the consent forms, they were immediately given the PALS survey to complete. Participants were able to complete the form in 10-15 minutes and return to class. Once a date was confirmed for the focus group, the researcher called down the students who completed the survey and noted their interest in participating in the focus group to notify them of focus group date and confirm their

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8 PALS is a flexible scale that can be tailored to the preferences of the researcher without interrupting the reliability and validity of the individual scales
attendance. The day prior to the focus group, a reminder was sent to the classes of the participants to remind them of the time, date and location of the focus group. On the day of the focus group, the researcher provided drinks, sandwich assortment, chips, and cookies for the participants in an effort to show appreciation. The research advisor was also present. Her purpose in the focus group was to record comments made from the participants and pose questions when needed.

Inferential statistics were used to examine differences between the parents in the College Graduate groups and the parents in the High School Graduate groups on achievement motivation. A t-test was used to analyze the achievement motivation levels of the African American girls in high school whose parents possessed some college education or no college education.

**Research Design and Analysis**

This study used a mixed method approach. Mixed methods research is the class of research where the researcher combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods and approaches to a study. Mixed method is a fairly novel approach to research method. Although it is new, it has been found to be very useful in research studies where researchers are looking to explore and understand quantitative data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Independently, quantitative and qualitative research methods have strengths and weaknesses. Quantitative research strengths include less subjectivity allowing it to be relatively free of bias, swift in its data collection timeframe and are able to be generalized when the study has been replicated and has disclosed similar results. Some weaknesses of quantitative research include, overlooking phenomena that could better describe the results of the data and may be too technical for the average reader. Strengths of qualitative research comprise of natural settings for data collection, interpretations of the participants and descriptions of budding phenomena. Similar to any research method, there are limitations such as, difficulty in accurately testing hypotheses and theories, time consuming data collection and lower credibility with certain programs. Although there are limitations in each research method, combining them together could produce a superior form of research. Because there were quantitative portions and qualitative portions that needed to be investigated, it was appropriate to use this approach to the research.
Prior to beginning the research, a few hypotheses were created after the development of each research question on achievement motivation levels. For question 1, I hypothesized that the achievement motivation levels of the African American girls in the study would be high; could be attributed to either of their parent’s high education level; further, there is a positive relationship between social/cultural factors and achievement motivation levels of this population.

In every administered survey, each participant was asked to identify their parents’ level of education. Six levels of education were listed and later divided into two parent education level categories. The two categories included High School Graduate Category parents who were identified as not completing high school (rating of 1), completing high school (rating of 2) or having some college education (rating of 3). College Graduate Category included parents who were identified as earning an Associate's degree (rating of 4), earning a Bachelor's degree (rating of 5) or earning a graduate level degree (rating of 6).

The mean of each of the achievement motivation categories was examined and each achievement level category mean was examined under each parent education category. Because of the questions in each category, there were categories that were expected to have a high average score and categories that were expected to have a low average score. The subscale categories that were hypothesized to have high scores based on theory and did have a high average score included MGO, PapproachAvoid, AE, PM and PPG. The categories that were expected to have a low average score included Pavoid, ASHS, AN, LOWACHI, Skeptic, DISSON and NEIGHB.

Means were calculated for each of the categories. The total group means of each category are depicted in the Table 1. The achievement motivation levels of this sample of girls was in the high range, which indicated a high desire to master educational goals, high academic self-efficacy and they believed their parents had high expectations for their academics. After exploring the sample mean score in each of the achievement motivation categories, the girls’ achievement motivation scales were examined taking into account parent’s education level. The researcher focused intentionally on mean scores for MGO (Master Goal Orientation) and PM (Parent Mastery). It was hypothesized that the parents’ education level would be related to the achievement motivation levels.
Results

To address the answer to question 1 'What are the achievement motivation levels for these African American females?’ Table 1 results can be examined. The mean score for this sample was higher than the mid-point of the scale. To answer the second question we compared parents’ education to motivation scales. This comparison suggests that parent education is connected. When looking at the relationship that the mother’s education level has with the participants’ Mastery Goal Orientation, the results showed that the participants who reported having mothers with a College Graduate Category education level had a higher mean MGO score of 4.69 as opposed to participants who documented their mothers as having a High School Graduate education level with a mean MGO of 4.06 (Table 2). Father’s level of education and the girls’ motivation mean scores showed similar results. Participants who recorded having fathers with a College Graduate Education Level had a mean MGO of 4.85. Participants who reported their father as only completing High School had a mean MGO of 4.23 (Table 3).

The Parent Mastery (PM) goal mean score was also examined across the varying levels of parents’ education. The participants recorded what they believed to be their parents’ academic performance goals for them. In this group of questions, it was expected for both parents who were recorded as having achieved a higher education level to have higher performance goals for their daughter than those parents with lower level of educational attainment. The participants who recorded their father as being a College Graduate had PM of 4.55. Participants who recorded their father as having a High School Graduate had a PM mean of 3.81 (Table 3). Girls with mothers who were identified as being a College Graduate had a PM mean of 4.48 and girls with mothers who were identified as having High School education had a PM mean of 3.6 (Table 2).
Table 2
Mothers’ Education and mean MGO and PM scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Mastery Goal Orientation (MGO) mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Parent Mastery Goal (PM) mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Graduate Category Education Level</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate Category Education Level</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
Fathers’ Education and mean MGO and PM scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Mastery Goal Orientation (MGO) mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Parent Mastery Goal (PM) mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Graduate Category Education Level</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate Category Education Level</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A t-test analysis was also used to look for any significant differences in achievement motivation categories and the categories between the educational level groups. Table 4 and Table 5 show the significant differences that were found between parents’ education groups on the MGO and PM measures. For mothers, the results revealed a significant difference (<.05 level) for MGO and for PM between mothers who were College Graduates versus mothers who were High School Graduate educated only; MGO and PM scores were higher for daughters who had mothers who were recorded as having a College Graduate Category level of education. Under fathers’ education, there was also a significant difference (<.05) for MGO and for PM scores. For girls whose fathers were College Graduates the MGO and PM scores were higher.
Table 4
*t-test of Mothers’ education level*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Std. Error Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MGO</td>
<td>-2.209*</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>-.62564</td>
<td>.28326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>-3.198*</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.88718</td>
<td>.27746</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
*t-test of Fathers’ education level*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Std. Error Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MGO</td>
<td>-2.6*</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>-.61376</td>
<td>.23608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>-2.458</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>-.74603</td>
<td>.30355</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These comparisons address the second research question: Does the parents’ education level relate to the achievement motivation levels of these females? The results showed that the higher the parents’ education level – either mother or father, the higher the MGO is for that student compared to a student who documented either parent as having a High School Graduate Category education level. The results also showed that girls perceived parents, who were reported as having a College Graduate Category education level, to expect their daughters to have a higher performance in school than parents who were reported as having a High School Graduate Category education level.

Because MGO and PM had a high mean, a correlation was conducted to look for any potential relationships between the two variables. The correlation between the MGO and PM mean was .08 which is a weak correlation. This weak correlation indicated that the participant’s Mastery Goal Orientation and Parent Mastery are independent of each other. In other words, the parents’ academic expectations did not have a strong relation to the mastery goals that these sample of students hold for themselves. It was expected that the participants would have high mastery goals for themselves if their parents had high academic expectations for them, but these results suggested that regardless of their parents’ expectations, they have an independent characteristic that gives way to building their own mastery goals that reflect their levels of academic self-efficacy. This leaves the door open to entertain other factors that may also impact
these girls setting their own goals. The semi-structured focus group, a type of interview approach where guidelines and a framework of questions are put into place and follow up questions allow flexibility in the direction in which the group determines, addressed the third research question: what social/cultural factors play a role in the achievement motivation levels in these African American females? The content of the focus group was created around the questions that were answered in the PALS questionnaire and the patterns found in their responses. Based upon the responses, the topics for the focus group were 'feelings about the term "acting White" and their level of confidence, 'the difference between home life and school life,’ and 'the source of their motivation and how they interpret those interactions and messages.' Participation in the focus group was completely voluntary and a total of five girls participated.

To start, the focus group members discussed their level of confidence in their abilities and their influences. One of the participants mentioned her confidence coming from her parents. Her parents would tell her, “Don't base what you’re doing on what others are doing.” Some of the other participants became more specific, differentiating between their mother and father. Two participants mentioned their father being the main person who encouraged their motivation in school. From their description, each of their fathers encouraged them to embrace their academic abilities and not hesitate to show others what they know. One participant shared how she believed people view African Americans. From her experiences, people viewed African Americans as not being as smart as other racial groups. She feels, because this is the perception of African Americans, it was even more important to her that she shows that she was smart and performed well in her academics.

After sharing what their parents instilled in them, the researcher asked them what their perspectives were on the term “acting White.” Not surprisingly, the term was still used to describe the behaviors of minority students who did not behave according to stereotypes that described the population with which they identify. Many of the girls in the focus group had been accused of “acting White” from their peers. At times, it was an offensive comment from others, but for them, it took reassurance from others who are close to them to help them look past those comments. One participant shared how it frustrated her at times, but her former teachers and mother assured her that her peers only said that because they were jealous and wanted “to get on your nerves.” One student expressed her issue with associating certain behaviors with a
particular race and acting a “certain color.” She felt that she did not “act” a certain color; her behavior was a reflection of who she was as an individual.

Because many of the girls confirmed that they were comfortable with the behaviors they displayed and who they were as individuals, the researcher thought it would be interesting to see if there was a difference between their school life and their home life. The purpose of this discussion was to gain their genuine experiences in different settings and how they behave in those settings. One of the focus group members shared her experiences from when she was enrolled in a private school and had a different group of friends at school and in her neighborhood. At this student’s former private school, the majority of her friends were White. On many occasions, she spent time with them outside of school. While spending time with her peers from her private school, she gained an interest in country music and other activities. When she listened to country music around her friends at home, her friends would be surprised to see her taking an interest in country music. In many similar situations, she believed that she did have some characteristics that some people would recognize as being White, but she continued to accept those characteristics and be comfortable in her own skin. Another participant added her experiences in different settings. She said, “I don’t change depending on who I go around, but I have learned from early on that I have to be open to new ideas. My mom told me that’s a good trait; you have to become very personable.” She does not see herself as changing when she is in the presence of people from different backgrounds. Instead, she views it as her adapting and becoming comfortable in new environments. Because she can also see the value in being open to new ideas, she views these experiences as a catalyst to becoming a better-rounded individual.

In closing the focus group, the researcher asked them, “Are any topics they wanted to discuss?” The girls wanted to discuss questions from the survey about their neighborhood. The results from the survey showed that many of the participants held favorable views of their neighborhood. They recognized their neighborhood as being safe and positive. They also found themselves being involved in their church, sports and student government at school. Although they enjoyed these activities, sometimes they found themselves being the only African American present in these activities. One girl in the focus group described her feelings about being the only African American student in her position in student government. She stated, “It makes me feel nice because I was selected into office, but my parents always told me to be around another African American because if something goes down, I have someone to back me up. That’s why I
feel uncomfortable.” Although she had these feelings toward her position, she emphasized that her father continued to encourage gaining as much experience as possible. For all of the girls, their parents encouraged them to gain as many experiences possible, socially and academically.

Based on the focus group discussion, many of their experiences were similar and the messages they received were similar. The messages they received included: maintaining independence, having confidence in self, being well-rounded and continuing their education. The focus group highlighted how influential culture can be in the life of an African American female. The participants of the focus group had parents who were reported as having different levels of education. The majority of the focus group participants recorded their parents as being a College Graduate and one girl recorded her parents as a High School Graduate.

Although the girls’ parents’ level of education differed from each other, the parental messages were very similar. Parents’ level of education appears to be related to the achievement motivation levels for this group of African American girls, but the cultural messages were similar across all levels of education and promote positive and fulfilling experiences for these African American females.

Discussion
The qualitative and quantitative data suggested that the academic achievement of this sample of African American high school girls was related to their parents’ education level and the parents’ goals for their children. Not only parents’ education alone, but the social/cultural content, appeared to also play a major role in the achievement motivation levels and goals of these African American girls. Throughout the focus group dialogue, the girls shared examples that were set by their parents and relayed messages that impacted their access of achievement and motivation. For some, their parents completed college and strongly encouraged them to attend college and provided them with resources to prepare them for college. For others, their parents did not attend college, but they continued to uphold high goals for their daughters.

According to the literature, a narrative of struggle is another framework that parents use to motivate their children to do well in their endeavors (Smith, 2009). This literature focused on the parents who did not continue their education and may have endured financial limitations. From the participants’ comments, both mother and father used their own experience of struggle (the technique found in the literature) to motivate their daughter. However, their mothers
emphasized this struggle more to highlight the dual struggle that women of color have. The mothers and daughters appeared to bond and relate around this experience. However, comments from the focus group alluded to parents of all educational levels using this technique to motivate their daughters and help them learn from their mistakes.

In addition to parents providing direct messages, this sample of girls received messages from others indirectly. One participant shared her observations of her sister’s method of making decisions and the consequences that followed. From her perspective, if a situation ended with a negative consequence, she assumed that the consequence would be the same for her if she engaged in the same behavior. Even interactions with their peers influenced their behaviors, thoughts about themselves and goals for themselves. Instead of the “acting White” comments having a negative influence on them, they chose to use that as a vehicle to understand who they are as an individual and a trigger to break the stereotype between African Americans and education. Stereotype threat was also a social/cultural factor that was investigated in this study. These participants described instances when they were faced with stereotype threat and how they conducted themselves when faced with those situations. On many occasions, they heard comments from teachers in their school and peers about their expected performance or behavior.

Those comments included African Americans not performing well on standardized assessments and behaving in a manner that was more associated with individuals who are identified as White. As mentioned previously, a common method to coping with these challenges is avoiding the accompanying stereotyped-related tasks. For these African American girls, they used those challenges as a catalyst for their motivation. Rather than avoiding a task, they accepted the task and avoided failing that task. It is possible that for these girls, failing at a given task could translate into them believing that they may have played a part in confirming a negative stereotype. By avoiding the failure of a task, they are avoiding a form of shame in confirming a negative stereotype for themselves and their population. This all suggests that these girls had a sense of racial pride which pushes them to do well and prove that these negative stereotypes do not hold true for all members of their subgroup.

As previously discussed, there were many theories that contributed to the achievement motivation theory. Based on the results from this study, John Atkinson’s mathematical perspective of achievement motivation is a perspective that accurately described the goals and behaviors of the girls who participated in this study. The participants in this study expressed
their high value for education in the survey and during the focus group. The participants conveyed their desire to work toward their desired success (motive for success). The girls believed that their successful performance in school would lead to their ultimate goal in life (i.e. college, successful career, etc.), which represented the probability of success. In addition, the girls have been exposed, directly and indirectly to obstacles (i.e. comments, personal experiences, etc.) that boost the value of their educational goals. In sum, all of these factors, motive for success, probability of success and incentive value of success, contribute to their approach of achievement-related goals. Throughout the study, Weiner’s fear of failure model was not thoroughly discussed, but it should not be overlooked as a factor that influenced their motivation. Academic self-efficacy was also considered during this study. Academic self-efficacy was influenced by successful past experiences on academic tasks; it was nurtured through modeling, open conversations with prominent individuals and feedback. Academic self-efficacy was included in the survey and discussed during the focus group. The results from the survey revealed that the participants had a high academic self-efficacy. Some of the focus group members have consistently performed at the top of their class or have been in more structured academic environments where they did well on their academic tasks. In addition, they received supportive feedback from teachers and their parents; all of which lead to them having increased confidence in themselves and similar tasks that are more challenging. Overall, this sample of African American girls could be viewed as possessing high aspirations, high sense of academic self-efficacy, and have been recipients of clear messages from their parents and cultural context to achieve in the face of challenges.

**Implications and Study Limitations**

The achievement motivation levels of African American females, as well as all students, are important to nurture. School administrators and staff should always make an effort to understand the social/cultural factors that impact how students achieve, and of course, these factors may be different for all cultural subgroups. In an attempt to be proactive, educators should also seek out strategies to promote and maintain achievement motivation and academic self-efficacy levels. Given that parents are reported to carry much weight in setting the standard for achievement it may be useful for the school to include and intentionally connect with parents to clarify expectations. In addition, keep the parents highly involved.
1. Since parents with higher education seem to emphasize higher levels of achievement, it may be beneficial to find ways to closely connect with those less educated parents in an attempt to increase levels of motivation in their children.

2. If feasible, in an organized group, continue to give African American girls an opportunity to communicate and network with African American women who have experience in different professions. Providing these opportunities will give the girls insight into skills to nurture.

3. In the classroom, encourage teachers to incorporate current women from different ethnicities in classroom lessons and discussions to promote women from diverse backgrounds. Discussing current women from ethnically varied backgrounds displays acknowledgement of their accomplishments and empowers African American females (as well as all high school girls).

4. Provide opportunities, if feasible, with African American female students in local colleges and universities to mentor African American females in the school. Encouraging these casual relationships gives the girls an opportunity to receive feedback on expected college experiences.

5. For administrators, school psychologists and other educators who are interested in promoting the academic development of African American females, it would be ideal to foster a connection between institutional agents and families who are interested in sending their children to a post-secondary institution and could benefit from such relationships.

6. For teachers, it could be beneficial to appropriately address stereotype threat when needed. In addition to addressing stereotype threat, also allow for open discussion of positive characteristics that students possess that contribute to their academic success and provide encouraging feedback.

7. For school psychologists, it is recommended to have a cultural self-awareness and how beliefs and values differ from one culture to another. It may also be beneficial to consult with teachers and other staff members to assist them in understanding that messages from the community and home are multi-dimensional and have an influence on how they view education and how they pursue educational tasks.

As with any study, limitations are always present. First, because the researcher only wanted participants who had study hall in their schedule so not to interrupt class time, the selection of African American girls was slightly limited. Out of the forty-five girls who were invited to participate in the study, only 20 girls completed the survey causing the study to have a small sample size. Out of the 20 girls who completed the survey, only five girls were present for the focus group reducing the amount of qualitative data that could have been collected.
A second limitation was the timeframe in which the data was collected. The data for this study were collected toward the end of the school year. At the end of the school year, students are preparing for final exams, graduation and college enrollment. This limited timeframe could have impacted the amount of girls who were willing to participate in the study. In the future, it would be more ideal to collect data during the middle of the school year.

Another limitation is not all participants were aware of their parents’ education level and the reports of their parents’ education level were based on their perception. It could be possible that they may have limited to no interaction with their parents or a conversation about their parents’ academic career was never discussed. Also, the students completed the survey at the time it was given to them. At no point in time did they have an opportunity to discuss the parent education questions or the PALS questionnaire with their parents. Moreover, programs in which an Associate’s degree is awarded were not specified and “some college education” did not specify a number of classes or years of experience needed to be considered as having “some college education”. It may be possible that parents received vocational training rather than attending a formal community college and these factors were not differentiated. Although it may not skew the analysis completely, it would have been ideal to have all 20 participants, rather than 16 to 18 participants, record their parents’ education level. The grades and GPAs of the participants were not explored as part of this study. Having a certain GPA could have expanded exploration the quantitative and qualitative results that were collected for this study. Although the data has been consistent with the existing literature, the results from this study should not be generalized for all African American females.

Lastly, contact with one of the authors has been made on multiple occasions, but a normative sample size, pre-test and post-test reliability and internal item reliability of the original PALS survey has not been located. This lack of information could leave one to question to the validity of this tool of measurement for this study. In future research, another tool of measurement that includes the statistical numbers is recommended.

The limitations listed above give way for more opportunities in further research. In the future, it may be valuable to explore potential differences in African American girls who have high GPAs and African American girls who have low GPAs. It may also be of interest to interview the parents of the girls first-hand and compare the parental view with the girls views. Additional research could be useful for African American girls who live in different regional
areas (e.g. urban, suburban and rural) to obtain a more accurate picture of their experiences and perspectives.
References


Osborne, J. & Walker, C. (2006). Stereotype threat, identification with academics, and withdrawal from school: Why the most successful students of colour might be most likely to withdraw. *Educational Psychology, 26,* 563-577


Appendices

Appendix A

Dear parent/guardian,

My name is Lindsay Whittle and I am currently a second year graduate student in the School Psychology Program. I am also currently a school psychology-counseling practicum student at Northwest High School and am implementing a research project at Northwest on the achievement motivation of African American girls in high school settings. The data collected are intended to provide insight into how to enrich the educational experience of African American high school girls.

Your daughter has been invited to participate in this project. With the assistance of the Northwest School Psychologist and School Counselor, African American female students in grades 10, 11, and 12 were invited to participate. Your daughter will be asked to complete a short questionnaire about her goals, the value of school, and views of parental involvement. The questionnaire may take anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes to complete. The questionnaire may be sent electronically, printed, completed at home and returned in paper copy or students will have the opportunity to have the questionnaire given to them and completed at school during homeroom/advisory period. The students will not be asked to include their names on the questionnaire once it has been submitted. The questionnaires will be confidential and locked in a file cabinet for security purposes. The questionnaire will only be accessible to the research advisor and the researcher. The student’s participation is completely voluntary and they may withdraw at any time without consequences. Once the questionnaire has been completed, a small focus group open to volunteer participants of the survey will be conducted for one day after school for one hour. Members of the focus group will not be identified in the study. The purpose of the focus group is to provide a more in depth explanation of how African American girls in high school interpret the social and cultural factors they are exposed to and how it influences their motivation. Discussion in the focus group will be audio-recorded, and remain confidential. Once data collection and analysis have been completed, the recordings will be disposed of properly. The results from the research will be used as a graduate education specialist thesis.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher, Lindsay Whittle at (513-253-4127) or whittln@muohio.edu. You may also contact the researcher advisor, Dr. Susan Mosley-Howard at (513-529-1877) or mosleygs@muohio.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please call the Office of Advancement of Research and Scholarship at (513-529-3600) or humansubjects@muohio.edu.

Thank you for consideration of your daughter’s participation. Below is the consent form that needs to be returned to the researcher; you may keep the above portion. Your daughter will be asked to sign an assent form, to confirm her participation in the research project. We look forward to working with each student.
I, ________________________________ understand the purpose, procedures and my parental rights in regard to the questionnaire and the focus group. I have contacted or will contact the Primary Investigator or Research Advisor if I have any questions or concerns in regard to my daughter’s participation in the questionnaire and focus group.

___ I agree to allow my daughter, _________________________ to participate in this research project. I understand that her participation in this project is completely voluntary and she may withdraw at any time without consequence. I also understand that her name will not be associated with her response or participation in the focus group. By signing below, I acknowledge that I am the student’s parent or legal guardian.

___ I agree to allow my daughter, __________________________ to participate in the focus group. I understand that the focus group will take place shortly after school is dismissed for with one hour duration.

Parent/Guardian signature: ___________________________ Date: _____________________

By signing above, I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older and the students parent/guardian.
Dear Student,

You are being asked to participate in a project that will potentially help school staff understand and promote opportunities to enrich educational experiences of African American girls in high schools. Your part in the project will be to answer a questionnaire and there may be a possibility of participating in a focus group to discuss your interpretations of the social and cultural messages that might influence your motivation. All students who choose to participate in the survey have an opportunity to volunteer to be a member of the focus group. Your answers to the questionnaire and potential participation in the focus group will be confidential, which means that your answers and/or comments will only be shared with in charge of the project. The purpose of this project is to help school staff improve schools.

Your parent(s)/guardian(s), teachers, and principal have approved your completion of the questionnaire and potential participation in the focus group. The questionnaire should take no longer than 20 minutes to complete. The focus group will be held after school for approximately an hour where the students, researcher and research advisor will discuss the questionnaire and your interpretations.

These questions are not a test and there is no right or wrong answer. You will not receive a punishment or reward for answering the questions. Your participation is greatly appreciated and may provide insight into things that influence your achievement motivation. Results may provide important implications for high school teachers and counselors. By signing below, you are agreeing to participate in the project. You also affirm that you understand the focus of the project and know that it is totally voluntary whether you participate or not, and even if you choose to participate you can discontinue at any time.

_________________________________
Student’s Name (Print)

____________________________________  __________
Signature                      Date
Appendix B

Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS)

Check the education level completed by each parent:

Mother:

___ Has not completed high school
___ Has completed high school or high school equivalent
___ Has attended some college
___ Has earned an Associate’s Degree
___ Has earned a Bachelor’s Degree
___ Has earned a graduate level degree
___ Not sure

Father:

___ Has not completed high school
___ Has completed high school or high school equivalent
___ Has attended some college
___ Has earned an Associate’s Degree
___ Has earned a Bachelor’s Degree
___ Has earned a graduate level degree
___ Not sure
**Personal Achievement Goal Orientations**

**Mastery Goal Orientation**

1. It is important to me that I learn a lot of new concepts this year.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

2. One of my goals in class is to learn as much as I can.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

3. It is important to me that I improve my skills this year.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

**Performance-Approach Goal Orientation**

4. It is important to me that other students in my class think I am good at my classwork.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

5. One of my goals is to show others that class work is easy for me.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

6. One of my goals is to look smart in comparison to other students in my class.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true
Performance-Avoid Goal Orientation

7. It is important to me that my teacher does not think that I know less than others in class.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

8. One of my goals in class is to avoid looking like I have trouble doing the work.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

Academic-Related Perceptions, Beliefs, and Strategies

Academic Efficacy

9. I am certain I can master the skills taught in class this year.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

10. I am certain I can figure out how to do the most difficult classwork.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

11. I can do almost all the work in class if I do not give up.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

Academic Self-Handicapping Strategies

12. Some students fool around the night before a test. Then if they do not do well, they can say that is the reason. How true is this for you?

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true
13. Some students look for reasons to keep them from studying (not feeling well, having to help their parents, taking care of sibling, etc.). Then if they do not do well on their classwork, they can say this is the reason. How true is this for you?

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

14. Some students let their friend keep them from paying attention in class or from doing their homework. Then if they do not do well, they can say their friends kept them from working. How true is this for you?

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

15. Some students put off doing their class work until the last minute. Then if they do not do well on their work, that is the reason. How true is this for you?

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

Avoiding Novelty

16. I would prefer to do class work that is familiar to me, rather than work I would have to learn how to do.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

17. I do not like to learn a lot of new concepts in class.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true

18. I prefer to do work as I have always done it, rather than trying something new.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true
Self-Presentation of Low Achievement

19. I would avoid participation in class if it meant that other students would think I know a lot.

1 Not at all true  2 Somewhat true  3 Very true

20. If other students found out I did well on a test or an assignment, I would tell them it was just luck even if that was not the case.

1 Not at all true  2 Somewhat true  3 Very true

21. I would volunteer to answer a question in class if I thought other students would think I was smart.

1 Not at all true  2 Somewhat true  3 Very true

22. It is very important to me that I do not look smarter than others in class.

1 Not at all true  2 Somewhat true  3 Very true

Skepticism about the Relevance of School for Future Success

23. Even if I do well in school, it will not help me have the kind of life I want when I grow up.

1 Not at all true  2 Somewhat true  3 Very true

24. Doing well in school does not improve my chances of having a good life when I grow up.

1 Not at all true  2 Somewhat true  3 Very true
25. Doing well in school will not help me have a satisfying career when I grow up.

   1  2  3  4  5  
Not at all true  Somewhat true  Very true

Perceptions of Parents, Home Life, and Neighborhood

Parent Mastery Goal

26. My parents want my work to be challenging for me, even if I make mistakes.

   1  2  3  4  5  
Not at all true  Somewhat true  Very true

27. My parents want me to understand my class work, not just memorize how to do it.

   1  2  3  4  5  
Not at all true  Somewhat true  Very true

28. My parents want me to see how my class work relates to things outside of school.

   1  2  3  4  5  
Not at all true  Somewhat true  Very true

Parent Performance Goal

29. My parents would like me to show others that I am good at class work.

   1  2  3  4  5  
Not at all true  Somewhat true  Very true

30. My parents would be pleased if I could show that class work is easy for me.

   1  2  3  4  5  
Not at all true  Somewhat true  Very true
Dissonance Between Home and School

31. I do not like to have parents come to school because their ideas are very different from the teachers' ideas.
   1  2  3  4  5
   Not at all true  Somewhat true  Very true

32. I feel uncomfortable when my parents come to school, because they are different from the parents of many of my classmates.
   1  2  3  4  5
   Not at all true  Somewhat true  Very true

33. I feel troubled because my home life and school life are like two different worlds.
   1  2  3  4  5
   Not at all true  Somewhat true  Very true

Neighborhood Space

34. In my neighborhood, I have trouble finding places to hang out with my friends.
   1  2  3  4  5
   Not at all true  Somewhat true  Very true

35. After school, I find it difficult to find anything worthwhile to do in my neighborhood.
   1  2  3  4  5
   Not at all true  Somewhat true  Very true

36. On the weekends, I can find good and useful things to do in my neighborhood.
   1  2  3  4  5
   Not at all true  Somewhat true  Very true
I would like the opportunity to participate in a focus group that will ask me about the messages I receive as a young African American girl and my perceptions of those messages. My signature below confirms my agreement to participate in the focus group; I understand that the focus group will take place after school for an hour. I also understand that my agreement to participate does not guarantee my participation in the focus group. Moreover, I understand that my participation in the focus group is not a requirement, and my refusal of participation or withdrawal from participation will not result in any consequences.

____________________________________
Student’s Name (Print)

____________________________________
Signature

________________________
Date