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Academic Achievement Gap and After-School Programs: Implications for School Social Workers

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Academic Achievement Gap and After-School Programs: Implications for
School Social Workers

By

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the
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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

Currently in the United States there is a gap in academic achievement within the school system. For the purpose of this study, academic achievement is defined as grade point average, school attendance, test scores, and graduation rate. White (non-Latino) students are outperforming students of color, and many students of color are not meeting the necessary criteria to graduate from high school. While it is currently not possible for any one group of people to change the education system in the United States, it is important to look at ways we can serve the students that are currently being ignored. While the current education system focuses on teaching students what they need to know to pass a test, also termed “teaching to the test,” many students, particularly students of color, are being failed by the system. The purpose of this research is to assess if supports found in after-school programs increase academic achievement. While not much research has been conducted in this area, the research that has been conducted found students who participate in after-school programs have higher levels of academic achievement than those who do not. The factors in after-school programs that have been found to increase academic achievement are: a supportive adult in the student’s life; when students are encouraged to understand concepts, rather than how to take a test; when students were taught to manage their negative behaviors, and learn how to work cohesively as a team with peers. Given the results of the research that currently exists, it is imperative that school systems begin to incorporate these supports into their systems. Additionally, results from this study may imply that incorporating similar supports into the public school system will help to increase the academic achievement of students of color, thus decreasing the achievement gap between students of color and White (non-Hispanic) Students.

Keywords: Students of color, achievement gap, academic achievement, after-school programs

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Introduction

Currently in the United States' educational system, an academic achievement gap exists between students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and different racial backgrounds. Specifically, students who are White (non-Latino) or from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have a higher rate of graduation while students of color (African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian) who come from lower socioeconomic status often do not perform as well academically (National Assessment for Educational Progress). Often, this gap is attributed to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Erskine, 2014).

Test scores are one way of demonstrating the degree to which there is an academic achievement gap between students of color and White students in the US. The average math score, across the nation, for White students in 2007 was 290, while African American students were 31 points behind with an average score of 259; the scale measurement scale ranges from 1 to 500 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). This gap also existed across the board educationally with White students performing a minimum of 27 points better than students of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

While the current school system has failed to offer successful interventions for students of color, many after-school programs offer an alternative model that addresses the academic disparity between students of color and White students due to their focus on the holistic needs of the student, rather than solely focusing on teaching to the test as many schools currently do. After-school programs address the needs of at-risk youth in a variety of ways. Many of which are based on research that shows what support systems

are needed. Many programs incorporate support from a caring adult, educational tutoring, prosocial skill building, and art integration (Hurd, Sanchez, Zimmerman & Caldwell, 2012). Often, after- school programs incorporate creativity into their method of teaching academics. Students are encouraged to learn, but the focus is not on passing standardized tests, but rather is placed on making learning a positive experience that builds students' confidence in their ability to achieve academically, thus improving their academic achievement (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). Clearly, there is system that works for improving academic achievement for at-risk youth.

Because it is clear that there is a gap in the current education system in the US, it is important that a change is made in the way schools address the needs of their students of color. There are programs that have reported success in raising academic achievement by taking a different approach to education. For this reason, it is important to advocate for change within the school system. In the Social Work Code of Ethics (1999), the value Ethical Principle calls social workers to

...pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

Given that social workers, are in agreement with this Social Work Value, it is important that social workers advocate for the rights of students of color. It is also important that focus is placed on the needed educational policies that will improve academic achievement, as well as address academic risk factors that lower socioeconomic and minority students face (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). It also falls within a social

worker's role to educate staff on the needs of their students, so that they, as a team, can build an environment where students in the "at risk" category can be successful (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009).

To date, few studies address how the structures found within after-school programs impact academic achievement for students of color. However, there is research on the general impact that an after-school program has on the academic improvement of students of color. The purpose of this qualitative study is to assess how after-school programs impact their participants, and whether integrating successful aspects of these programs into the current public school system could help to close the achievement gap.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to assess what aspects of art education and after-school programs lead to higher levels of academic achievement for at-risk youth. The findings of this research are intended to help further the integration of successful interventions into the current school system. The included literature will address the current state of academic achievement within the population of at-risk youth, the success art education, after-school programs, and what the literature states about each aspect of the after-school programs included in this study.

For the purpose of this literature review, the following terms are used: at-risk youth; and, achievement gap. In effort to provide a clear understanding of what is being discussed, the terms will be defined. For the purposes of this study, at-risk youth will refer to youth that have had at least three of the following experiences: economic hardship (poverty); unemployed parents; residential mobility; single parent; parents without a high school education; living in a home where English is the second language; or, being raised by a teenage parent. These factors put a child at-risk for educational hardships (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2012).

The term “Achievement gap” refers to the statistically significant gap that exists academically between groups of students, where one group of students is outperforming another, specifically the gap between students of color and White (non-Latino) students, as well as students from different socioeconomic statuses (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2009).

Achievement Gap/ Scope

The achievement gap between students of color and white students has a long history in the United States. Expectations that all students would have equal access to resources were raised when the desegregation of schools occurred. The desegregation of schools was a result of the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* desegregation decision. When equal access still did not occur, the passage in 1964 of *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, an act that was put into place in effort to address the inequality of resources in schools, yet again gave people of color reason to hope that the achievement gap would begin to close. Again that Act failed, but hope that the gap would close was raised once more with the help of the civil rights movement during the 1960's. However, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a national program that has released annual data showing the trend of the achievement gap since the 1970's, has not reported a consistent narrowing, despite the acts that many thought would lead to its closure. Since The National Assessment of Educational Progress began tracking data, there was a decade where the gap was narrowing in both reading and math, but this narrowing ended in the 1990's, and in many cases widened once again.

While researchers have looked into the causality of the narrowing gap, it has been difficult to attribute it to any one change in the US at the time. Researchers looked into what the cause of this narrowing could be, and found that, in part, the narrowing was attributed to family structure, and how it was changing during that time. More than two decades later, the educational system is still failing its students, and a breakthrough in research, regarding what changes are needed has yet to occur. Minority and lower socioeconomic students are still behind their White and middle to upper-class peers

(Barton & Coley, 2010). The following statistics show the state of the achievement gap over the past 10 years.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2009), on a national level, African American and Hispanic students do not score as well as their White peers on reading and math assessments. Students in the United States were tested in 4th and 8th grade to compare average scores math and reading scores. At the 4th and 8th grade level, White students had scores that, at minimum, were 26 points better than Black students; the scale measures from 1 to 500. Hispanic and Latino students tested at a 25- 26 point deficit in comparison to White students (NAEP, 2009).

In addition to having a high dropout rate, O'Donnell and Kirkner (2014) state that 42% of Latino, 43% Black, and 46% of Native students will not graduate on time, with a regular diploma. While 22% of Caucasian students and 17% of Asian American students will not graduate on time. According to data pulled from both the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, our current system of education is not working for everyone. They provide data displaying that by the eighth grade only 53% of Black and 37% of Hispanic students meet the national math standards (NAEP, 2009).

According to Minnesota Public Radio News (MPR), the graduation rate for Minnesota students of color is among the worst in the country. The graduating rate of Natives in Minnesota is second from the bottom, at 49%. While less than 60% of Black and Hispanic students graduate, 85% of White students graduate on time. These rates are the lowest in the country (MPR News, 2015). Similarly, Klein (2014) reported that while Minnesota does well as a state academically, the achievement gap between White and

students of color, as well as between students of low and high socioeconomic status is one of the highest in the country (Klein, 2014).

In comparison to the national average, the Minnesota Department of Education reports that 67.5% of White students meet math proficiency standards, compared to 32.6% of Black, 35.7% of Native, and 36.5% of Hispanic students that meet standards. A significant gap is also present in reading proficiency scores, with 65.1% of White students, 32.9% of Black students, 34.5% of Hispanic, and 35.1% of Native students meeting proficiency standards (MDE, 2013).

Lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In the United States, youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have a lower rate of academic success than those from families with higher income (Serbin, Stack, & Kingdon, 2013). In a study of 4,109 students ages 6 to 13, conducted by Serbin et al. (2013), it was found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds had lower grades than their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The study reports that this was caused by the families' inability to provide the resources needed to help their children succeed educationally. The results of this study reiterate that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are not having their needs met by the educational system.

In contrast to the study conducted by Serbin et al. (2013), the results of a qualitative study conducted by Herbert and Reis (1999), involving 18 high achieving high school students, stated that among the students of color in urban schools, the high achieving students came from the same lower class status as those who were underachieving. The participants were determined as high achieving based on their grades, academic awards, and teacher nominations. Reasons for why their research had

different results from the majority of research conducted on this subject were discussed, and, in part, determined to be related to the students' support system within and outside of school, specifically the importance of a supportive adult and educationally motivated peers (Herbert & Reis, 1999). This finding is important, as it relates to incorporating a supportive adult into after-school programs and is influential in academic achievement.

Students of color. It is important to look at what the research has to say about academic achievement of youth of color. While the research clearly shows that there is a gap between academic achievement of students of color and White students, there has been research that highlights interventions that are effective.

Based on a longitudinal study conducted over the course of 16 years, Rojas-Labeouf and Slate (2009) found that White students consistently had statistically significant higher test scores than their Hispanic peers in both reading and math, with percentages ranging from 1.50% to 13.61% higher math score for White students, and an average of 10.5% better in reading. Currently, an average of 42% Latinos, 43% African Americans, and 46% of native students will not graduate from high school on time (O'Donnel & Kirkner, 2014). In situations where at-risk youth have been successful academically, it is because they have created strategies to best manage the adversity they are facing in order to be able to focus in school (O'Donnel & Kirkner, 2014).

According to a longitudinal study of 282 elementary students from urban communities, African American students were found to have lower levels of social emotional competence, which greatly impacts a student's ability to be successful educationally (Elias & Haynes, 2008). Social emotional competence is defined as skills that aid in one's adaption to new and diverse settings (Elias and Haynes, 2008). In

comparison to what was found in the study conducted by Elias and Haynes (2008), O'Donnell and Kirkner (2014) discuss the importance of incorporating supportive adult and peer relationships into their after-school program, and suggest that it fosters educational involvement among the youth (Strobel, Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008). They also state that this theory supports the outcome of their study, where they found that students had a higher academic achievement after joining their program, compared to the students in a control group.

Current School System

In 2001 The *No Child Left Behind Act* was put into place in effort to help 100% of students reach achievement standards, specifically students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds that do not perform as well as those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Erskine, 2014). Rather than incorporating what research has shown to be effective intervention, *No Child Left Behind* uses testing to assess potential educational improvements (Erskine, 2014). According to Lagana-Riordan and Aguilar (2009), each state has to set standards, based on what they believe is necessary for students to learn, issue tests that determine if the students are meeting these standards, then set goals to ensure that students meet proficiency standards. While data assessing state-by-state progress shows minor improvements in closing the achievement gap, students that fall within the at-risk category have yet to experience improvement in their academic achievement (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009).

The issue of teaching to the test is one that has been caused by *No Child Left Behind*. Additionally, *No Child Left Behind* is credited with diminishing arts education in the country's school system. Educators are focused on teaching students what they need

to pass math and English literature tests, but this focus has caused schools to remove or reduce art education from their curriculum. When schools fail to meet testing standards, they are faced with budget cuts, and, most often, art education programs are cut (NEAToday, 2014).

Art Education

A method of intervention that research has shown to be impactful on education is incorporating the arts into teaching. While many school districts incorporate art education into their curriculum, it is often done minimally. Given the positive impact that art education has on academic achievement, it is important that it is used as a method of intervention for low achieving students.

Data shows that arts education is not currently a focus in the public school system. It is stated that nationally, 90% of high schools and 67% of elementary schools offer art education. But while the percentages of schools that offer art education is high, the extent to which classes are offered differs across school districts. As the city with the third largest educational system in the country, Chicago's method of including art education into educational system was discussed as an example. In Chicago, a half-time art teacher is employed per 750 students at the elementary school level (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011).

According to a qualitative study conducted by Rabkin and Hedberg (2011) there has been a 23% percent decline in arts education over the span of 42 years. The study analyzed information beginning in 1962 and ending in 2008 (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). There has been discussion surrounding the possibility that the No Child Left Behind act has attributed to the decline in arts education, but there are also reports that say the law

has helped to increase art education in public schools. While research has proven to be inconclusive, it is important to note that many strongly believe that NCLB is to blame. These reports are troubling given the positive impact arts education has on academic achievement (NEAToday, 2014).

Learning. For the purpose of this study, fine arts and its impact on learning were assessed. Fine arts were described as music, visual arts, dance, drama and literature/creative writing. Students involved in the Fine arts program showed a .5 increase in their GPA, a half grade increase in math, and a full grade increase in English (Respress & Lufti, 2005).

In a study conducted by Butzlaff (2015), it was found that students who took at least one music course prior to college enrollment had higher reading test scores than those who did not participate in high school music classes. This was found after collecting data from 24 colleges that kept track of this information. Due to the timing of collection, pretests were not conducted, and limited the ability for the researcher to determine causality. Therefore, it is difficult to state that involvement in music classes increased reading scores, but there is a correlation that exists. While causality cannot be determined, the results of this study demonstrates the need for further research surrounding this issue. And, given the correlation that was shown to exist between musical involvement and high reading scores, implementation of more music and art into school systems may be beneficial to student learning (Butzlaff, 2015).

In another study by DeMoss and Morris (2004), differences in academic performance and attitudes of students in schools that integrate arts into learning, and those that do not were measured. The study was conducted using 37 schools and pairing

them with 80 professional arts organizations. While the results of the study did not yield statistically significant academic improvements between the two groups, students that were involved in arts integrated programs had a knowledge that was more analytical and showed higher understanding of concepts, rather than simple factual recall. Additionally, DeMoss, and Morris (2004) found that students in arts integrated schools had a higher rate of independent study outside of school, they were motivated to work on their own, and felt as if they had mastered the materials enough to do so. Students also had improved analytical thinking skills, and a more positive approach to academic challenges

After-School Programs and Academics

According to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), after-school programs are influential in providing students with the opportunity to be successful educationally. Specifically targeting students of color. They report that after-school programs do a better job at addressing the needs of the whole child, rather than just the educational aspect. Minnesota Department of Education attributes involvement in after-school programs with the improved academic achievement of their participants. It is also noted that academic enrichment, cultural, and recreational activities are key to the program's success, and that many programs take a different approach to teaching that aids students in understanding academic material (MDE, 2011). Given the report from the MDE, and the following research findings, it is troubling to note that currently the school system does not incorporate what has been found to be successful into their curriculum.

Because after-school programs are believed to incorporate methods that positively impact academic achievement, it is important to look at what supports are incorporated

into the programs. Additionally, it is important to note what research findings show to be effective methods of intervention, and what is not effective.

Each of the after-school programs included measurements of school performance in their assessment of how well students were doing academically. Measurements of academic performance included assessment of grade point average (GPA), school attendance, test scores, number of days of in-school and out of school suspension, reported incidents, and both excused and unexcused absences (Rapp-Paglicci, Stewart, & Rowe, 2011). The Prodigy Program was developed for youth in the Juvenile Justice System in Florida, and other at-risk youth in the area. The programming offered incorporated arts of multiple forms including performing, visual, media, and musical arts classes. After involvement in the 8 week program, students' levels of academic achievement were measured to compare to initial levels of academic achievement. While there was a decrease in the number of reportable instances, the decrease was not statistically significant. Additionally, there was an increase in the students' English, math, reading, and attendance, but this increase was not statistically significant (Rapp-Paglicci et al., 2011).

In another study, O'Donnell and Kirkner (2014) looked at out-of-school programs and academic performance of 118 students in grades 10 through 12. All of the participants were in an after-school program that used technology, outdoor activities, and art as a creative way to foster academic achievement in youth. They measured academic achievement with the students' GPA, school attendance, and standardized test scores. Participants were involved in the program for a minimum of 30 days. At the end of the youths' participation of the program, their academic achievement was compared to

previous reports. Results showed statistically significant improvements in the area of academic achievement (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014).

In a study focusing on high achieving at-risk students in an urban school, each student attributed their academic success and drive to their involvement in a variety of after-school programs and summer programming. These students were considered high achieving due to their high GPA, standardized test scores, involvement in advanced placement and gifted and talented courses (Herbert & Reis, 1999).

Also related to academic achievement is the removal of negative mental health symptoms and decrease in externalized behaviors that some programs provide. Although an increase in academic performance related to test scores and GPA was not statistically reported, withdrawal symptoms, depressive symptoms, externalized and internalized behaviors were decreased (Rapp-Paglicci, Stewart, & Rowe, 2012).

Structure of After-School Programs

Supportive adults. Because many after-school programs incorporate at least one supportive adult into their programs, it is important to look at what research has to say about the impact that adults have on at-risk youth. In many cases youth reported that having an adult that provided them with academic support, and who challenged them had positively impacted their academic achievement.

Based on the current research findings, parental contribution in academics is central to academic success (Brown, 2004). It is with this idea that Sutherland, Waldman, and Collins (2010) discussed using art therapy to keep youth in school, stating that the relationship between a child and their therapist is the most important aspect of therapy. In many of the programs discussed, regardless of the curriculum, this was an important

aspect highlighted in the literature. Across the research, it has been stated that the involvement of at least one supportive adult is helpful to the academic success of students.

Based on the results on their study involving 126 students in grades five and six, Serbin, Stack, and Kingdon (2013) state that parental support directly impacts their child's academic performance and classroom behaviors. These results were pulled from parent responses to the Parenting Dimensions Inventory, which measures parental support, control, and context. The results of this survey were then compared to academic achievement levels of their children. It was reported that students with parents that were attuned to their child's state and needs, as well as parents that were responsive was a statistically significant predictor of higher academic achievement (Serbin et al., 2013).

In another study, Sutherland, Waldman, and Collins (2010) also agreed with the importance of supportive adults, stating that the relationship building aspect was most important part of their art therapy program. In a study assessing the academic success of students of color in an urban high school, each student self-reported that part of their success could be attributed to the influence and support of a caring and encouraging adult (Herbert & Ries, 1999). This influence made an impact on the student's success, regardless of the position the adult held in the student's life.

Similarly, Hurd et al., (2012) studied 541 African American youth during their freshman year of high school and found the support of an adult mentor was key to helping African American students believe in their academic abilities. Also, youth who had the support of a natural mentor (a non-parental adult) had a higher GPA and a greater

belief in the importance of an education. The findings show that having a supportive adult was related to higher academic achievement (Hurd et al., 2012).

In another study, where high achieving inner city African American students were interviewed about their success ($n = 4$), six themes were pulled. One theme that was pulled from the interviews was that these students attributed genuine connections with adult staff to their success, specifically their school counselors, noting that their involvement was one of the most important (Williams & Portman, 2013).

Additionally, Elias and Hayes (2008) found a modest relationship between student perceptions of teacher support at the beginning of the year and academic performance at the end of the year. Good perceptions were related to a lower rate of absenteeism during the course of the school year. In addition to lowering rates of absenteeism, perceived teacher support, at the beginning of the school year, was associated with higher social-emotional competence, which is important in academic performance (Elias & Hayes, 2008).

Incarcerated youth involved in an arts program reported that the relationship with their teacher was important to keeping them involved and invested in the program. They reported that his positive attitude, support, and belief in their skills and abilities was motivating and helped them to achieve while in class (Lazzari, Amundson, & Jackson, 2005).

Teaching prosocial skills. In addition to addressing the students' needs for a positive adult influence, much focus was placed on increasing the prosocial skills of the students. Many after-school programs focus on diminishing the negative behaviors of their students, it is important to look at ways of doing this. Teaching at-risk youth how to

manage their negative behaviors is important so that they can spend more time in the classroom, and less time being redirected and disciplined in school. One program in particular focused on anger management and coping skills with the notion that it would assist students with real-life functioning outside of the program (Waldman & Collins, 2010).

In one study, Wright, John, Alaggia, and Sheel (2006) studied after-school art programs among at-risk youth ($n = 5$). The programs served youth ages 9 to 15 from low-income urban and rural areas. It was found that students who regularly participated in a community-based arts program saw a significant decrease in conduct problems, and a significant decrease in emotional problems. This increased the participants' ability to work with their fellow classmates as a part of a cohesive team (Wright et al., 2006).

Project Succeed Academy, a school that was developed to help manage students' behavioral issues incorporated a form of martial arts into their program as a way to help the students successfully manage their violent tendencies (Brown, 2004). One program that was designed with the purpose of teaching self-regulation skills found that while participation of their art program decreased these behaviors, the results were not statistically significant. However, students reported feelings of better control, and increased self-efficacy (Rapp-Paglicci et al., 2011).

While another program that modeled and taught anger management, problem-solving, and social skills to 120 children in 4th and 5th grade classrooms at different elementary schools ($n = 4$) saw a reduction in negative behavior symptoms (Lemberger & Clemens, 2011). It was reported by both the students and their families that there was a

significant reduction in behaviors such as: anxiety, withdrawal, aggressive, and externalized behaviors (Rapp-Paglicci., et al., 2012).

The relation of social-emotional competence, defined by Elias and Haynes (2008) as cooperation, assertion, and self-control, to academic achievement was statistically significant. Students that had higher levels of social-emotional competence at the beginning of the school year had higher recorded grades on their report card at the end of the year (Elias & Haynes, 2008).

Research has explored the impact that after-school programs and art education has on academic achievement. While there are significant gaps in the research, the research that exists suggests that both afterschool programs and arts education positively influence academic achievement in youth. Given the current state of the achievement gap, it is important that researcher continue to assess the full impact that art education and after-school programs have on learning.

Conceptual Framework

Ecological Theory

The theoretical framework that has influenced my interest in this area of study is the *Ecological Theory*. The *Ecological Theory* was developed as a way to understand the manner in which people interact with the systems around them, and the impact this interaction has on an individual. According to the theory, the systems are separated into four different levels of interaction: Micro, Meso, Exo, and Macro. The interaction between a person and these four systems is one that is constant. It is due to this constant interaction that a person develops behavior patterns that are consistent with their experiences (Ashford & Lecroy, 2013), (DePoy & Gilson, 2012).

Microsystem. According to this theory, a microsystem consists of a person's immediate surroundings. Some examples would be family, school, home, work, and daycare. A person has direct contact with this system and can be greatly impacted by their interaction with it. If a person is having difficulties with one specific area within the microsystem, it will likely interfere with their ability to function well within another area of their microsystem. This interaction between microsystems is called the mesosystem (Ashford & Lecroy, 2013; DePoy & Gilson, 2012).

Currently, much of the blame for the achievement gap for students of color is placed on their microsystems. Many state that factors such as absentee parents, neighborhood crime, and negative student behaviors are to blame for the academic achievement gap. However, a student's microsystem cannot be the sole blame for the issues that exist in the current school system. There are many other factors outside of the

immediate surroundings of students of color that have led to a system that fails them (Jackson & Howard, 2014).

Mesosystem. As previously mentioned, the mesosystem consists of the interactions between individual microsystems. For example, the interaction between home life and school life is a part of the mesosystem. If the interaction is positive, that is the impact it will have on the microsystem. However, if the interaction is negative, it will have a negative impact on the individual's microsystem (Ashford & Lecroy, 2013; DePoy & Gilson, 2012).

In the case of students of color, there is much interaction between cultural and structural systems that lead to the experiences that youth of color have in the school system. These factors include policies that support racial inequalities, underfunded schools, low teacher quality, chronic poverty, and cultural factors (Jackson & Howard, 2014).

Exosystem. The exosystem consists of an outside societal system that indirectly impacts an individual's systems. Although an individual is not able to actively participate within this level of the system, it has an impact on their quality of life. For example, if a parent is fired from their job, it is not within the control or decision-making of their child, yet it greatly impacts their life (Ashford & Lecroy, 2013; DePoy & Gilson, 2012).

Macrosystem. The macrosystem is the system that influences the society in which a person lives. The system includes cultural values, economy, and politics (Ashford & Lecroy, 2013; DePoy & Gilson, 2012).

This macrosystem greatly impacts students of color and their ability to receive a quality education. As mentioned when discussing the mesosystem, there are many factors

that impact the academic achievement of students of color. It is important to look at the impact of greater society. Currently the pedagogy used in most schools does not match the experiences of many students of color, and this impacts their level of academic achievement (Jackson & Howard, 2014). Many school systems lack culturally responsive educators and literature, even though research findings show that a culturally responsive school system improves academic achievement for students of color (Jackson & Howard, 2014).

When looking at the disproportionate academic outcomes for students of color, some come to the conclusion that students of color do not have the potential of White students, and this impacts the direction that educators take when addressing the problem. This manner of thinking only leads to further disparities in education. The focus should be on inequalities that have been built into the system of education. Examples of these inequalities being Jim Crow laws, historical arrangements, unequal funding, and unequal structural conditions (Jackson & Howard, 2014).

The impact of the macrosystem of youth of color is great. It is disturbing to see the current system of education is denying students of color an equal opportunity to obtain an education.

Currently, the *Ecological Framework* is not being used as a method of intervention for closing the achievement gap. However, given that each student has multiple systems impacting their ability to achieve academically, it is important to begin doing so.

The current school system within the US focuses on a student's ability to pass a test, and achieve average grades. This is currently done by teaching students what they

need to pass a test. Rather than creating an environment that is conducive to learning, schools are forced to focus on testing. Because many students are coming from microsystems that create high levels of stress, it is difficult for them to reach academic expectations. Because this framework is not used in schools, many administrators and teacher are ignorant to why students are unable to achieve academically.

In comparison, many after-school art programs work to incorporate supports that will meet the needs of students who have consistent negative interplay between their systems. Students are not solely taught to meet academic expectations, but are also allowed creative freedom, are supported by positive adults in the program, and given tools to help manage negative behaviors. Of these supports, the most important is the incorporation of a caring adult. In contrast to students that do not enroll in after-school programs, those that do have higher academic scores than those that do not enroll. I believe this gap is due to the school system's focus on one system, rather than four.

Professional Motivation

My professional motivation for using this framework relates to my experiences as a school social worker. I have seen the impact that the current educational structure has on students identified as being "at-risk." While educators and administrators are aware that a problem exists, a successful method of intervention has yet to be set in place. It is a social worker's professional duty to ensure that this vulnerable population is no longer left behind educationally. Within the social work profession, the *Ecological Theory* has been a successful tool for understanding, and working with individuals. I believe that it can also be helpful in changing the current school system, and minimizing the achievement gap.

Personal Motivation

As a person of color, I was motivated to look at possible ways to improve the education system in the US. I am saddened to see the way this country has continually failed to properly educate people of color. I experience immense frustration because I know that people of color are no less capable of obtaining a quality education than any other students, yet there continues to be a problem. It is with this conviction that I wanted to look into possible systemic changes.

The manner in which this research is being collected has been influenced by this framework. The interview questions incorporate the idea that there are multiple systems interacting within each student's environment, impacting their ability to achieve academically. It is also important to understand how school social workers view the current system. Additionally, the researcher will incorporate questions that seek to understand if it would benefit students to begin incorporating this framework into the school environment.

Methods

How Do After School Programs Address Academic Achievement for At-Risk Youth?

Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how after school programs influence academic achievement for students of color. As little research has been conducted in this specific area, this study is exploratory in nature. This methods section addresses: sample used; demographics; protection of human subjects; process of recruitment; data collection; data analysis; discussion of the findings; and, strengths and limitations.

Sample

I contacted school social workers and after-school program staff within the state of Minnesota. For this qualitative study, 4 after-school program educators were interviewed ($n = 4$). Participants were recruited using a convenience and snowball sampling method. Participants were recruited in one of two ways: 1) through schools that offer after school programs; or through 2) after school programs that run after school programs who are not run by the schools (e.g., community centers; and non-profit organizations). These programs were located through publically available information, including the Department of Education (to locate schools) and two local non-profits that highlight more than 50 agencies that offer after school programs. The information found on these websites include those that offer after-school programs and schools that are working to increase academic achievement in Minnesota public schools.

In order to be eligible for this study, the four participants met the following criteria: minimum of one year of experience working as an educator (k-12) in an after-school program, or as a licensed a school social worker who has worked with students involved in after school programs. The after school program educators had experience working in the state of Minnesota. Those that were excluded from this study were educators, and school social workers that did not have experience working with students involved in after school programs, and those who were not currently practicing or teaching in the state of Minnesota.

Demographic Information

For the purpose of this study, the demographic information collected asked licensed school social workers and after school program educators if they had at least one year of experience working with students that are involved in after school programs. Additionally, licensed social workers and after-school program educators were asked if they work in the state of Minnesota.

Recruitment

Prior to recruiting for this study, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was submitted and approved by the IRB board at the University of St. Thomas. The level of IRB process that I completed was expedited.

As previously stated, school social workers and educators were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. *Convenience sampling* is a method that requires the researcher recruit participants through means that are readily available to the researcher (Monette, Sullivan, Dejong, & Hilton, 2011). *Snowball sampling* is when researchers contact a participant that fits the inclusion criteria, then asked if they could direct the

researcher to anyone they thought may have insight into the area of study (Monette et al., 2011).

In this case, interviewees were be contacted via email, and asked if they were willing to participate in the study. Additionally, included with the research questions, found in Appendix C, was a question asking participants if there was anyone else they thought the researcher should speak with. The educators included in this study were found using two websites that provide information of schools and after-school programs that are partnering to increase academic achievement for students involved in after school programs in the state of Minnesota. Participants were given a letter of introduction, stating the purpose of the study, and had the option of accepting or declining participation to mitigate risk and coercion. The letter of introduction can be found in Appendix A.

Protection of Human Subjects

As the safety of participants was of utmost importance, the confidentiality of participants has been protected. Prior to participating in the study, participants signed a consent form which can be viewed in Appendix B. In addition to signing a consent form, I verbally informed participants of the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and voluntary nature of the study.

To ensure the safety of interviewees, prior to the start of the interview process, I verbally informed participants that they may choose to end the interview at any point. Interviewees were also told that they could withdraw from participating in the research at any point. Additionally to help mitigate risk, a resource list, found in Appendix D, was given to participants. The list included information regarding supports for students that

are struggling academically, as well as supports for educators and school social workers working with this population.

Additionally, to minimize any potential risk to the participant, I asked open-ended, semi-structured questions. The questions pertained to the educator and social worker's professional experiences. The list of questions can be found in Appendix C. Educators and school social workers, rather than students, were eligible for inclusion in this study in effort to refrain from causing risk to any vulnerable populations.

Because participants are not vulnerable persons, and are able to answer non-invasive, open-ended and semi-structured questions in the manner they chose, the risk for this study was minimal. The questions were reviewed by my research committee and chair, as well as by the University of St. Thomas IRB prior to conducting any interviews.

The contents of this study were kept confidential, the information has been secured in my locked office, and locked computer files. The information will be destroyed on May 15th, 2019; three years following the completion of this research project. The questions and consent form were reviewed by my research committee, chair, and approved by the Institutional Review Board prior to beginning recruitment for this study.

Data Collection

The data was collected using ten semi-structured interview questions. The questions are located in Appendix C. Open-ended, semi-structured interview questions were used so the researcher could obtain participants' perspectives based on their experiences. Interview questions were created by me, the researcher.

The interviews were taped, transcribed, and analyzed. The interviews ranged from approximately 30- 45 minutes long, and took place in the location of the participant's choosing to ensure they felt safe and comfortable. The audio recordings were protected and saved to my password protected computer. Prior to recording the interview, the participant was informed of the audio-recording process both verbally, and in the informed consent form, then asked to sign the agreement, only if the participant felt comfortable doing so.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by first transcribing the interview between me, the researcher; and the participant. After reading through the transcription, I gave each sentence a code. Coding is the process of reading through the available data, putting it into categories using codes developed by me, then using those categories to develop themes (Monette et al., 2014). When coding was complete, overarching themes, and subthemes were pulled from the codes, then used as data.

The Grounded Theory Method was used to support analyzation of the collected data. This method focuses on allowing the researcher to find their theory within the data. The theory develops as the researcher analyzes the collected data (Monette et al., 2014).

Findings

The following is a presentation of the findings from the qualitative research conducted with after-school program educators ($n = 4$). The purpose of the research is to determine what has led to the academic achievement gap for students of color, and the supports after-school program educators believe are necessary to minimize the achievement gap. As a result of the interviews, four distinct themes were discovered. Within the four primary themes, subthemes were found. The primary themes that were discovered are as follows: (1) positive and impactful environment; (2) representation of students of color in society; (3) the school system; and, (4) home environment. Subthemes were found within each of the four main themes. Within the theme 'positive impactful environment' were two subthemes, relationships and academic support. Within the theme 'representation in society,' one subtheme of racism was found. Within the theme 'school system,' a subtheme of lack of resources was found. Within the final theme 'home environment' the subtheme found was barriers.

Table 1

Themes/Subthemes and Sample Responses from Participants

Theme/subtheme	Sample response
<i>Theme 1: Positive and impactful environment</i>	
ST1: Relationships	Even if it is not academic, it is that emotional attachment with someone. I mean if you have a stable family home, to have someone outside the family that you can connect with is very important.
ST2: Academic support	The programs I work with there is a really strong academic component.
<i>Theme 2: Representation of students of color in society</i>	
ST1: Racism	Anytime you see yourself on TV it is negative, or it is such an overblown or a crazy kind of a role.
<i>Theme 3: School system</i>	
ST1: Lack of resources	<i>I know a lot of teachers want to develop that. They just don't have the time.</i>
<i>Theme 4: Home environment</i>	
ST1: Barriers	<i>A lot of their parents need interpreters for conferences because they have low English skills.</i>

Note. ST = subtheme.

Positive and Impactful Environment

Relationships. During the interviews, all of the participants ($n = 4$) discussed their belief in the importance of positive, supportive adult relationships for students of color. The participants stressed the importance of having adult support outside of the home. It is something that each participant stated as being an imperative part of educational success for students of color. While each participant stated this form of support is built into after-school programs, only ($n=1$) participant stated that this level of support can be found within the school system. Each of the participants have seen the positive impact relationships with a caring adult has had with the students. In their experience, these relationships provide students of color with the support they need to succeed educationally.

The following is a quote from a participant who believes that support has a high impact on students. The quote is pulled from his response to the question “What impact does having the involvement of a supportive adult have in the lives of students?”

Oh, wow, so the impact is high. One thing we always talk about is high academics with high support. So, how do we let our scholar know that we expect you to succeed to the highest ability we know you can go to, but also having that high support... it is very important for scholars to have a support systems, but with that support system comes some caveats. With that support systems it needs to be positive, supportive, authentic, it needs to tell them what is real even when they don't want to hear it... that support system needs to be able to be well rounded, it needs to be able to be vulnerable, so we can show kids how vulnerability looks like. Often, support systems think they need to be this strong sort of sense of support, but support systems are human beings...

This participant went on to discuss the way in which black males have been led to believe that they are not allowed to be vulnerable, so he intentionally creates an environment where students are exposed to adults that are willing to be vulnerable, as well as a place

where students are safe to be vulnerable. He provides the students with mentors that embrace vulnerability, and who do not have a ‘man up’ mentality.

When discussing the diverse backgrounds of their students, and in response to the researcher asking how their program appropriately and effectively accounts for that, one participant spoke about the importance of developing relationships with each student. She said their program has been focusing on building relationships in the past year, and that has benefitted students greatly.

Even like with our kids when they act up, we have a relationship with their parents so when they're acting up, we know why they're acting up. And so yes they're still going to be reprimanded, and yes there is going to be consequences for their actions. But it is going to be I know this is what is going on at home, and I know this is why you're doing what you're doing, but this needs to stop here, but let's talk about what is going on. It is about helping them, and they are going through a lot of stuff, but it is about helping them to understand...

The same participant also had this to say about the role the teacher play in their after-school program, and how impactful they are on the students. “... *I think we underestimate our work as a surrogate family. Even the other stuff it's an aunt or an uncle. It is someone outside of their family that cares for them and it's a safe place...*”

This participant believed that a supportive adult, even if they are family members outside of the home, positively impacts their students’ ability to succeed in school.

In contrast to the reports from ($n=3$) participants, one participant ($n=1$) to state they see high levels of support during the school day, reiterated the importance of providing students with relationships outside of the home that are positive and supportive. The particular demographic of students this participants is classified as English Language Learners. Given the addition barriers they face, this participant stated out-of-home support is important to their educational success.

...I mean a lot of the kids have supportive parents, but some of the kids have both parents that are working all the time, and they have to take care of the younger kids, so there is no adult in their life that they have to look up to, or that they have to go to for help. And so, school is where they spend the majority of their day. So, if they can't have connections here with adults, then I cannot imagine how lost they would feel going through life...

The same participant went on to say the following concerning the support that her school provides for its students.

... I think it is so important for them to have adults at school that care for them. Whether it is teachers or support staff. Well, the principle walks around here and talks to students, but even like the secretary is super engaged with kids, and she knows almost all of them, and it makes a big difference.

Each participant shared that they are able to provide students with a supportive adult in their after-school program, and that this has a positive impact on the academic achievement of students of color. Having adult both inside and outside of the home that reiterate the importance of an education, and support the students does have a positive impact on a student and their education.

Academic support. During the course of the interviews, each participant ($n=4$) made it clear that providing additional academic support for students is related to academic success. Given the limited restrictions on curriculum in after-school programs, and the freedom to incorporate creative learning into their programs, participants stated that this learning environment leads to a higher rate of academic achievement. Participants also stated that they are able to move at a slower pace with students who need extra time in order to help them get the appropriate level academically. Whereas they believed that within the school system there is more pressure on educators to help their students pass standardized tests, and to teach in a manner that does not take the varying learning styles into account.

The following quote is pulled from a participant who gave this answer to the question “what do you find most helpful in improving academic achievement?” She is a teacher for English Language Learners at a public school during the day, and an educator in an after-school program as well. In her program, she uses a creative teaching style to help students grasp the curriculum, and to learn in a way that is fun for them.

I think that with the after school program I can be a lot more flexible in the amount of responsibility I am placing on the kids. In school I have to teach, then I have to model, then they can try. In the after school program, the teaching is more like a partnership with them. It is like, I have something I want to teach you today, but I want to know what you already know about it, and maybe you can actually help me to teach this to the group. And, as a group we can teach each other. I think that is really powerful, and I think that it makes them really connected to what we are doing that day.

She also had the following to say regarding incorporating her student’s individual interests into her after-school program, stating that allowing her students to choose what they are interested in, and utilizing that in their learning has led to higher rates of success. *“I just feel like those topics aren’t super academic, but they’re still engaging them and they are still hitting all of the things that I want them to learn.”* Her students are using graphic novels to learn how to read and write. She is allowing them to choose their own topics so they can write their own novels, and she learned that if she allowed them to write about their own interests, rather than a topic she assigned to them, they were more involved and excited about their learning.

Another participant spoke of their use of creative teaching for a particular student in her program, and how they have been using her interests to help her learn in a way that is fun for her, and in a way that makes it easy for her to learn. She believes that this is a way to reach kids that the school is not able to reach due to the limited resources they have that allow them to teach kids in the unique ways they are able to learn.

We have a young girl who is five, in first grade, and she is probably at a preschool level when it comes to letters. She wants to own a restaurant, so we have her write up a menu. We write the words for her and she copies it... for her, it is like 'this is kind of fun.' We have fake food for her, and all this stuff... I think after-school programs are able to teach the kids in the way that they can learn, because there are no other real constraints on them.

In response to the question “what kind of growth have you seen in students that have participated in after-school programs?” One participant attributed academic growth to the additional time students are spending on academics, as well as the flexibility the students have to work with an educator that is willing to teach them in a way that makes sense to each individual. *“I definitely have seen academic growth in math and reading, because they’re spending at least an extra hour a day that is really concentrated... you know, working at their level, and building their skills.”*

Representation of Students of Color in Society

Racism. During the interviews ($n=4$) of the participants discussed the way students of color are represented in American society, and noted its negative impacts on youth of color, and their access to an equal and quality education. All three participants discussed the negative manner in which people of color are presented in the media, and the lack of positive representation of people of color in the pedagogy used in the school system. Participants stated that it is this system of racism within school structure that has led to the academic achievement gap. The reasoning behind this belief was that educators have a belief about a student that is supported by popular culture, and their pedagogy, they are going to interact with students with this belief in mind. When educators interact with students in this manner, it reinforces the belief that they are not capable of succeeding. One participant stated this as she spoke of one of her students and their interaction with a teacher.

In his homework assignment it had been to write four sentences, but the teacher had crossed out four and written two. And one of our teachers crossed out two and wrote four. When you do that you are telling a kid he is stupid and can't do it. Yeah... whereas we're like 'yeah, it's going to be hard. I will sit here with you, but we are going to do the full four.'

One participant pointed out that the school system was created and designed at a time when the cast majority of students were White males. For this reason, he attributes the structure of the school system to the higher rate of success of White students. He also spoke to the fact that it is not solely an issue of economics, because lower class white students still succeed at a higher rate than lower class black students. The following quote was pulled from his response to the question “how might you describe factors that contribute to the achievement gap between white students and students of color?”

...the education system is set up for White males to succeed. I mean, we know that based on our ancestors and based on when the education system was set up in the 1800's, the only people that were able to get an education was White men. So that is basically what it is. So, even when we think about the poor White sector, while they don't succeed at the rate of middle-class white students, they succeed at a higher rate than poor Black students...

Also falling within the subtheme of racism, ($n=3$) participants shared their experiences with students' of color and their internalized racism. From their perspectives, American culture represents people of color in a manner that is negative, and untrue. However, this message is prevalent in the American society and youth of color have internalized this message. This internalization has led students to believe that being a well-educated person of color equates to denying their heritage and culture. One participant stated they intentionally discuss common myths many of their students had internalized. The following is a quote pulled from the interview with this participant regarding internalized racism.

I bring them myths, I bring them about 10 to 15 myths that are in the world about black males. I ask them all the time, and it never fails-- even the same group of

kids, I throw two more kids in that group they go back to the 'it's true!' but I throw facts like... there are more black males in jail than there is in college... From the perspective that they see, and from the media they're like, 'oh yeah, there's more black males in jail than in college.' I tell them about the true facts. I tell them 'no, that's not true it's more about the disproportion of black males in jail, right?'

Even though the participant had taken the time to discuss the stereotypes about black males with his students of color, shared statistics and literature with them to help combat this idea, his students always reverted back to believing the negative stereotypes.

Another participant discussed her view on internalized racism, and its impact on the students in her after-school program. Her agency made a purposeful effort to incorporate black history into their program throughout the school year so their students would understand their important place in history. She said the following about an interaction she had with a student regarding the program's integration of Black history.

I had one kid say 'why are we still learning about Black heroes? It's not February.' Oh God! But they have internalized that, right? We can talk about institutionalized racism; they have internalized that. We just only learn about it in this one month, not realizing the impact their ancestors have had.

She believes it is a problem that students of color, particularly Black students learn about their ancestors during one month of the year, and that Black History is something that has yet to be integrated into American History, rather than just Black History. This is something that black students then internalize, and fail to see the important impact their ancestors have had.

School System

Lack of resources. When discussing the current school system, the achievement gap, and students of color, all participants ($n=4$) reported a lack of appropriate resources within schools as a participating factor of the achievement gap. *"I would say the biggest*

factor to the achievement gap is the lack of resources at the schools.” The subtheme ‘lack of resources’ included the following factors identified by participants: lack of varying methods for measuring a student’s success; strict pedagogy that does not reach students with diverse learning styles; high constraints on teachers; lack of sufficient funding; teaching to the test; limited representation of minorities in teaching materials; and finally, poor school facilities.

One participant discussed her frustration with the idea of “teaching to the test” which essentially means that teachers have to teach students in a way that will allow them to pass standardized tests, but does not necessarily lead to learning for all students. She had been speaking about her frustration with testing, so she was asked if she believes the focus on testing leads students to fall within the achievement gap.

Yes. I mean those [tests] are just like the math testing throughout the year, which is just to see if they are going to pass the MCA’s. I mean, that’s what it is for. There are better things that teachers and students could be spending their time on. You know? Plus, it is only addressing right brain learning, so there is this a whole world of interesting and different things that they could be doing to be better well rounded.

She believes that there is a lot of focus placed on testing so that schools can continue to receive funding, and this puts pressure on teachers to focus on testing.

One participant spoke about her dislike for testing, and expresses that teachers in the schools do not like it either. She states that not all students are not able to learn from one style of teaching. Stating that testing limits both teachers and students, so it should not be what the schools focus on. The following quote is pulled from her response to the question “how might you describe factors that contribute to the academic achievement gap between white students and students of color?”

I think I have always hated the common core testing standards, and I think teachers do too, because they have to teach to that. It doesn't account for everything else that is going on. I think people try to fix it with this overarching blanket and I think that just doesn't work. It doesn't work for adults, why would it work for kids?

One participant spoke worked with an after-school program that is held in the school where she teaches students that are English language learners. She spoke about how school funding impacts both her after-school program, and the resources available during the school day. She works in a more affluent neighborhood, and has students with high needs. However, because the number of students with high needs is lower than other schools in the district, her school does not qualify to receive the resources the students need.

This is a prime example... families are in this neighborhood, but because of that, the resources at this school are a little bit less... if that makes sense? They look at schools that have title one and they think 'ok, let's give all this extra support to this school because they have more need.' My other school is title one and they get busing, they also get extra interventions during the day and here it just is not, but we still have need. But, because we don't have as much need, we don't get that.

While she is still able have a program with her students after school, number of students she is able to reach is limited. Additionally, she spoke about the lack of resources during the school day and that she believes that may have an impact on the achievement gap as well. While many students in her school could benefit from the additional funding that is provided to a school if they qualify for title one funding, there is not a high enough need. For this reason, many students that already have limited resources are not provided with extra support from the school.

Home Environment

Barriers. For the subgroup barriers, ($n=3$) participants agreed that many of the students in their after-school programs face barriers at home that make it difficult to focus on learning. They stated that often their students come from environments where they are constantly trying to survive, so school not a priority. One participant ($n=1$) stated that while there are distractions at home for the students, he does not believe this determines academic success. While he agrees that often home environment negatively impacts a student's ability to fully participate, many of his students are able to meet their academic goals regardless of their home environment. He made this statement based on his experiences in a school where the majority of their students come from difficult backgrounds, yet are still able to succeed academically. The first quote comes from his response to the question "how might you describe factors that contribute to the academic achievement gap between white students and students of color?"

...there are more factors that contribute to the achievement gap that people would say and I would, I would say 'eh, I get it, but it is not the sole determining factor.' Like, there's the myth of the fathers as a factor...there aren't black fathers in the home. 'If there were black fathers in the home kids would act better in school', but I throw that myth out. I would say eh, I get it, it's important, but it is not the sole factor. ...A lot of people talk about teen pregnancy and the lack of structure in a home, and I would say 'eh, not true. That is also a myth.'

In contrast to the reports from one ($n=1$) participant, three ($n=3$) of the participants spoke to the impact the home environment has on students, and that it takes extra support from outside supports to counter these barriers. The following three quotes were pulled from ($n=3$) participant reports regarding the barriers they see their students facing. One participant noted that she believes one of the greatest educational barriers for students is their home life. She had the following to say regarding this belief:

...the challenges at home, actually, I think are the greatest challenge. If you're worried about the problems that were going on in your family the night before, or you're homeless, or haven't eaten. Or, you're worried about going home for the weekend or spring break, because you don't have any food to eat. That is what you're going to be thinking about, you know? Not about whether or not you're doing your homework.

Another participant noted the barriers she sees her students facing in their homes.

She stated the difficulties that arise when young students are sent home with homework, yet their parents can't read their assignments, or read with their children.

I think we need to take into account where people come from, and their stories, and we have some parents that don't know how to read, and we give kids a homework assignment saying you need to read with your kid for twenty minutes. Well, if parents can't read, they aren't going to show their kids that they can't read.

In response to the question 'how might you describe factors that contribute to the academic achievement gap between white students and students of color?'

one participant had the following to say:

I think that home life is also a super important factor. That could include, well for my students, it could include that they do not have support for homework, or involvement in after school activities, because they don't speak... a lot of their parents need interpreters for conferences because they have low English skills. Yeah, I think that is a huge factor is that lack of home support.

Summary

According to the participants in this study, the academic achievement gap is a complex issue with many contributing factors. The participants stated reasons that were attributed to racism in America, a lack of resources in American schools, and insufficient support for students of color. The participants were educators in after-school programs who worked with students of color to increase their academic achievement. While it is a work in progress, they attributed the incorporation of active adult support, creative

methods of learning, and additional academic support to the increased academic success of their students.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine what aspects of after-school programs impact academic achievement for students of color. While much of the research findings aligned with previous research surrounding academic achievement, some findings were not found in previous research. This discussion section will address the similarities and differences found in this and earlier research.

Little research has been conducted regarding the impact of supports found in after-school programs on academic achievement, so I used the Ecological Systems Theory to help understand why it is important to look at this topic. Because this theory takes into account the microsystem, exosystem, mezzosystem, and macrosystem when looking at individuals and systems, it offers a broader understanding of how to best work with people given their diverse backgrounds and experiences. Each participant spoke about the different systems, how they impact their students, and the importance of utilizing this knowledge to maximize their students' successes.

Positive and Impactful Environments

The first theme found when looking at academic achievement for students of color was related to the importance of relationships outside of the home. Generally, the results of this study were congruent with previous research findings. However, some of the areas highlighted in previous research were not discussed by participants in this study. Academic achievement for students of color was positively impacted when a supportive adult was present in the student's life (Herbert & Ries, 1999; Hurd et al., 2012; Williams & Portman, 2013). Participants in this study did not focus on in-home relationships, while prior research discusses the positive relationship a supportive, attuned parent in the home

of students of color has on academic achievement (Serbin et al., 2013). This research aligns with previous findings which suggest that providing students with a mentor, or positive adult increases their academic achievement. Given the current and previous findings about the impact of a supportive adult, if more school systems incorporate a program, or develop a system that allows students to build relationships, they will see an increase academic achievement and student attitudes regarding education.

Another aspect participants highlighted as being important to their programs was the extended focus on academics. While participants' reports of increased academic achievement were congruent with previous research findings, they were not involved in programs that measured changes in academic achievement. It was stated that the school system's focus on test scores has made them weary of holding their students to a standard, and measuring their ability to meet that standard. Their reports of higher achievement were based on their experiences and witnessing the academic advancements being made by their students. The increased focus on academics in their programs led to an increase in academic achievement of students of color (Rapp-Paglicci et al., 2011; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014; Herbert & Reis, 1999). Given that participants reported an increased focus on academics, versus testing, impacts academic achievement, suggests that future research should continue to look into how 'teaching to the test' has inhibited learning for students of color. If future research findings align with these findings, school systems will have more information to aid in changing their current system of education.

Representation of Students of Color in Society

The most common theme found when asking participants about the cause of the achievement gap involved racism. However, this finding was not highlighted in any of the previous research. All four participants ($n=4$) stated that the misrepresentation of people of color in society has impacted the achievement gap for these students. While ($n=4$) reported that there is a misrepresentation in society, ($n=3$) stated that this misrepresentation has led to both racism and internalized racism within the school system. As previously stated, this was not addressed in the previous research, and should be further researched. As it was one of the more common themes in this study, its lack of representation in earlier research is a matter of concern. The findings from this study should lead researchers to further investigate how the cultural representation of students of color impacts academic achievement. Given that all the participants agreed that this misrepresentation has had an impact on their students, it is difficult to dispute their reports. As the achievement gap continues to exist, it is important to continue to evaluate its causes.

School System

A lack of resources in the current school system was discussed by participants, and congruent with previously conducted research. While the participants in this study focused on the resources in the current school system, previous research has focused on how *No Child Left Behind* has created a school environment that leads teachers and administrators to focus on ‘teaching to the test’ (Erskine, 2014; Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). Participants also reported a lack of ‘creative learning/ creative teaching’ in the current school system, and highlighted creative learning/ creative teaching as being

successful in reaching the students that cannot learn in the standardized manner schools are using to teach. This idea was also found in previous research that focuses on incorporating arts into the classroom.

While participants did not specifically mention using ‘the arts’ in their programs, they focused on creative teaching styles which was also highlighted in previous studies. Students who are involved in programs that have a focus on incorporating arts and creativity into their pedagogy had improved academic performance (DeMoss & Morris, 2004). Given the reports from participants, research should continue to evaluate how the testing culture has impacted students of color. The participants of this research agree that it has had a negative impact, and thus further research should continue to evaluate that impact.

Home Environment

The final theme that resulted from this research was home environment. While participants stated that there are many barriers found in the homes of students of color, they did not believe it was as much of a factor as the previously stated themes. Due to the difficulties that families have in providing the appropriate resources for their kids, it is believed that coming from a lower socioeconomic background has an impact on the academic achievement of students of color (Serbin, et al., 2013) Participants also drew attention to the number of student of color with parents who cannot read, or speak English, and how this negatively impacts the student’s ability to complete assignments in an appropriate and timely manner. While this did not directly correlate with previous research, it did support research stating that students are going to have a higher rate of

academic success if they are in a home with an adult that is supportive of the student's academics (Herbert & Reis, 1999).

While the participants agreed that home environment has an impact on student learning and attitude towards education, they did not believe it was the sole or major contributing factor for the achievement gap. This does not align with findings in general research, which has named home life as a determining factor for the achievement gap. These findings should direct current and future research to determine what other structural factors may lead to the academic achievement gap.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths. This qualitative study had both strengths and limitations. The qualitative nature of the study allowed participants to share their own experiences and to expound upon the questions asked. Due to the semi-structured interview process, participants were able to respond to questions without limitation. The researcher was able to clarify meaning to minimize any confusion. The information collected in this study will be used to further the existing data surrounding academic achievement for students of color.

Another strength of this study was the diverse group of participants. While there was only one male identified participant ($n=1$), participants identified themselves as being White ($n=1$), African American ($n=1$), Asian ($n=1$), and Latina ($n=1$). Because the participants came from different ethnic backgrounds and agencies, they were able to offer answers based on their broad professional and personal experiences. While the number of participants is small ($n=4$), their responses, based on their diverse experiences and backgrounds, are more generalizable.

Limitations. In addition to the strengths, there were limitations to this study. One limitation is the small number of participants. Given the time constraints to complete the study, the number of participants had to be limited to four ($n=4$). Recruiting individuals who fit the inclusion criteria proved more time-consuming than time allowed. Given the limited number of participants, the findings from this study cannot be applied to the general population.

Another limitation is related to the qualitative nature of the study. While there are positives to conducting a study using a qualitative method, there are also limitations as a result of doing this form of research. One being that participants may have felt pressured to answer questions, even if they felt they did not have enough experience to answer accurately. This potential pressure may exist due to the researcher being present and directly asking the participant questions.

Implications for Clinical Social Work

While students of color continue to fall behind academically, due to the negligence of the school system, it is important that social workers continue to advocate for the needs of these students. Research has shown that a supportive adult can make the difference in academic achievement for students of color (Herbert & Ries, 1999). Incorporating this knowledge into one's practice can change the academic success and experience for students. For this reason, it is important that social workers continue to provide support to students, especially those who are at risk for falling behind academically. The profession should also advocate that the school system provide students with an adult that encourages them academically, advocates for them, and offers support.

Additionally, because the negative representation of students in society was reported as a cause for the academic achievement gap, working with students to understand that they do not need to fit within the societal expectations, as well as providing education as to what these stigmas are is imperative. Also, openly discussing how these stigmas have impacted the students thus far is important. It is not until students and administrators have an understanding of how this misrepresentation negatively impacts the pedagogy used to teach in public schools, as well as how many youth of color view their own education that positive change can be made. Those in the social work profession should continue to educate those in the education system, as well as students about these misrepresentations and their impacts.

It is also imperative that we continue to research successful interventions for the achievement gap, students of color must no longer be left out of the educational system in this country. The social work code of ethics calls social workers to increase the well-being of those who are oppressed, vulnerable, and living in poverty. Given that this is the experience of many of the students of color included in this study, it falls within a social worker's ethical duty to advocate for the rights of this population.

Implications for Future Research

The academic achievement gap between students of color and White students has a long history in the United States. Since the National Assessment of Educational Progress began tracking the gap in the 1970's, there has not been a consistent narrowing of this gap. While research has been conducted to determine why the gap exists, there is minimal research that examines how to change the structure of schools to best meet the learning needs of all students. Participants in this study stated racism within the current

school system as a cause for the current academic achievement gap. While that was not a contributing factor in previous research, each of the participants for this study believe it is, so it is important to conduct further research in this area. While school systems do not have control over how society depicts students of color, they do have control over incorporating pedagogy that positively and accurately depicts their place in history. Researchers should continue to assess how often schools incorporate historical facts that are relevant to all student cultures and histories. In addition to assessing occurrences, it is important to research how inclusion and exclusion of people of color in pedagogy impacts students.

Additionally, previous research, as well as participants in this study, state that creative learning opportunities lead to higher levels of student learning (Respress & Lufti, 2005; DeMoss & Morris, 2004). However, creative teaching and the incorporation of arts in the current school system has been diminishing over the past few decades. It has had a greater decline since the implication of *No Child Left Behind* (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011; NEAToday, 2014). Further research must be conducted to determine if the decline in creative teaching methods has impacted the academic achievement gap for students of color. If so, the reasons for the decline should be researched.

Conclusion

The current research highlights ways to support students in increasing academic achievement. Participants noted holes in current policies and structures that have led to the academic achievement gap. While they pointed out gaps in current policies, they also have experience with interventions that have been successful with their students. While they have not been tracking the success of students in a standardized manner, they have

witnessed growth in their capabilities and grasp of material. The academic achievement gap is a complicated issue with many possible contributing factors. However, there are many individuals who are working with youth, and creating programs to help mitigate the risk of youth of color falling behind academically. Research needs to continue in order to ensure students of color cease to fall behind academically.

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Appendix A

Letter of Introduction

[Name of School Social Worker/ Educator]

Email address:

Dear (name),

My name is Ryann Adkins, and I am a master's student in the St. Catherine University-University of St. Thomas School of Social Work. My research study is being supervised by Dr. Kari Fletcher, who is my Chair at the University of St. Thomas. Prior to contacting you, I was approved to conduct research on this subject by the University of St. Thomas IRB. I am contacting you to ask if you would be willing to participate in my current research study investigating possible methods of increasing academic achievement for youth that are "at-risk" of falling behind academically. The purpose of the study is to talk with school social workers that work with kids in after school programs and/or educators who work in after-school programs to learn more about how these programs address the academic achievement gap. As I'd mentioned, information gathered through my study will help to explore possible methods of intervention. You are being contacted because of you work as a school social worker or an educator in an after-school program. Ultimately, my research will be completed for a clinical research project, and will be published online. Additionally, I will be presenting the findings of this study at the University of St. Thomas in May of 2016. You are welcome to attend the presentation this spring, should you be interested in what was found.

I want to thank you again for expressing a willingness to be interviewed for my study. I would like to schedule a time to meet with you at your earliest convenience in-person, and am flexible to coordinating arrangements for your interview either by phone or by email. The interview will take place in the location of your choosing. Once our interview has been scheduled, I will send you a consent form that you can sign and have for your records. If you have questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Ryann Adkins, Master of Social Work Student. School of Social Work

St. Catherine University-University of St. Thomas

2115 Summit Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105

Appendix B

Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
GRSW682 CLINICAL RESEARCH PROJECT
844046-1

**Title of Study: How Do After School Programs Address Academic
Achievement for At-Risk Youth?**

I am conducting a study that explores how after school programs address academic achievement for at-risk youth. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because of your experience as a school social worker or after-school program educator, as well as your experience with at-risk youth. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Ryann Adkins, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University-University of St. Thomas and supervised by Dr. Kari Fletcher. It has been approved by the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is explore a how after school programs address academic achievement for at-risk youth. Research has shown that youth involved in after-school programs typically have a higher GPA, graduation rate, and school attendance rate. For this reason, I would like to explore the idea of incorporating supports found in after-school programs into the academic system.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: to agree to be a part of this study, to sign this consent form prior to commencing the interview, to participate in an interview that is expected to last 30- 45 minutes. The interview will consist of 10 open-ended, semi-structured questions. The interview will be audio recorded. After the interview, I will be transcribing the interview, and analyzing your responses. Responses will then be coded and used as data for the research project.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study has a minimal risk of potential discomfort. To ensure that risk is low, I have received approval from the Institutional Review Board prior to conducting this interview. Additionally, I have worked with my research chair and committee as a further precaution. To help mitigate risk, you will choose the location of the interview to help minimize any potential discomfort.

There are no benefits.

Confidentiality: All identifying information will be kept confidential. Audio recordings will be kept in a file on my locked computer. The transcriptions will be kept in my locked cabinet until May 15th, 2019. On that date, all information will be destroyed. Transcripts will be included in the published version of this study, but any identifying information will be kept confidential, and will

not be included in the study. The participant will choose the location of the interview to ensure confidentiality and safety.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will only be used with your consent. Should you decide that you do not want it to be used, the data will be discarded.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Ryann Adkins. If you have questions at any time, you may contact me. Or, you can reach my research chair. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to being audiotaped.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a bit about your work?
2. Can you tell me about your work with after school programs?
3. How have you come to understand academic achievement? And the role of after school programs in terms of helping address this gap?
4. How might you describe factors that contribute to the academic achievement gap between white students and students of color?
5. What kind of growth have you seen in students that have participated in after-school programs?
6. What impact does having the involvement of a supportive adult have in the lives of students?
7. What goals have students been able to work toward/meet as the result of participating in an after-school program?
8. What do you find has been most helpful in improving academic achievement?
9. Is there anything else I forgot to mention that you would like to add?
10. Is there anyone else I should talk to?

Appendix D

Resource List

Online resources for School Social Workers

National Resources School Social Work Resources

1. School Social Work Association of America
<http://www.sswaa.org/>
2. National Association of Social Workers (School Social Work)
<http://www.naswdc.org/practice/school/default.asp>
3. School Social Work Pinterest
<https://www.pinterest.com/explore/school-social-work/>
4. The American Council for School Social Work
<https://www.acssw.org/>

Resources for supporting academic achievement

1. Minnesota Department of Education
<http://www.education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/DropPrev/index.html>
2. Minnesota Alliance with Youth
<https://mnyouth.net/work/gradminnesota/>
3. National Center for Homeless Education
<http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/ibt.php#.T3MbPvJ1PdG.email>
4. University of Minnesota “Check & Connect”
<http://checkandconnect.org/default.html>
5. National Dropout Prevention Center/ Network
<http://dropoutprevention.org/>
6. Alliance for Excellent Education
<http://All4ed.org>