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## A Critical Exploratory Analysis of Black Girls' Achievement in 8<sup>th</sup> Grade U.S. History

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to utilize an ethnically homogeneous design to examine Black female student U.S. History content-specific knowledge. The study aims to elucidate the importance of single-group analyses as an alternative to between-group comparative designs. The present study utilized a critical, quantitative, descriptive research design to examine the achievement of Black girls in U.S. History from a strength-based and growth-focused perspective. The study contributes to the literature on Black girls' achievement by applying a quantitative approach to intersectional research. This study utilized two subsamples of Black 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls from the 2006 and 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress ( $N = 4,490$ ). Mean differences in Black girls' specialized U.S. History content knowledge were assessed using both descriptive statistics and an analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results indicate statistically significant growth overall, and on the democracy and world role domains. Data also indicate that scores on the democracy and culture domains were statistically significantly higher than scores on the technology and world role domains. This study provides implications for middle grades U.S. History achievement and the specific needs of Black girls.

### INTRODUCTION

The racial achievement gap is one of the most persistent and pervasive issues in education research. However, targeted curricular or pedagogical interventions remain elusive, especially in the area of U.S. History (Heafner & Fitchett, 2015). Some posit that it is impossible to address the achievement gap without first addressing the equally persistent gender gap (Whitmire & Bailey, 2010). Specifically, some contend that researchers should consider the large gender achievement gap between Black male and female students (Varner & Mandara, 2013). The majority of gender achievement research suggests that male students outperformed female students, particularly in the STEM content areas. Over the last decade of administrations, Black girls tend to make more academic gains than any other gender, race, and ethnic groups on achievement tests as well as ACT and SAT exams (Buchmann, Condrón, & Roscigno, 2010; Fleming, 2002; Zwick & Sklar, 2005).

Black girls represent the sole female subpopulation recognized in the literature for consistently outperforming their male counterparts (Young, Young, & Capraro, 2017). Black girls historically outperform Black male students in almost every measured academic

domain (Varner & Mandara, 2014). For example, Black boys consistently have lower grades and test scores than Black girls across all K-12 grade levels, but more noticeably in the middle grades (Michelson & Greene, 2006). Historically, decades of data indicate that graduation rates have followed a similar pattern for Black students. In 1976, Black women earned 57% of bachelor's degrees among Black students, and in 2014 this number increased to 64% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). Despite this trend, they are characterized as "falling through the academic achievement cracks" as an ignored or underserved student group compared to Black males (Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2014). Given the mounting evidence substantiating the achievement of Black girls compared to Black boys, a concerted effort exists to support the instructional and emotional needs of Black males.

### Problem Statement

The current literature lacks research examining the academic achievement profiles of Black girls in specific U.S. History content domains. These achievement profiles would allow researchers to develop prescriptive interventions that can guide U.S. History content-based instructional practices tailored to close "knowledge gaps" and eliminate the need to exclusively investigate

“achievement gaps.” For example, after each assessment, NAEP releases questions from the test to the general public. The NAEP results do not typically provide performance results across constructs. However, the Nation’s Report Card does present gaps between racial and gender groups. If the NAEP provided the aforementioned pertinent data, the astute U.S. History teacher could assist students with test items and questions from previous NAEP exams. Students’ performance on the NAEP scale can be understood best by knowing the types of questions students performing at different proficiency levels can likely answer correctly (NAEP, 2017). Unfortunately, much of the available research utilizes between-group designs involving Black and White students or male and female students.

One major limitation of ethnic or gender comparative designs, however, is that when group differences are found, investigators are left to speculate on the cause of those differences (Dotterer, Lowe, & McHale, 2014). These activities perpetuate the trend of “gap gazing” and fail to yield information that it is practically significant for classroom use (Young, Young, & Capraro, 2018). Homogeneous within group content-oriented designs could allow researchers to identify causes in achievement differences between groups by pinpointing content-specific knowledge gaps. Thus, the purpose of this study was to utilize an ethnically homogeneous design to examine Black female students’ U.S. History content-specific knowledge. This research design choice helps to address the limitation that exists when researchers compare groups of learners to each other, rather than the achievement or assessment standards.

### **Black Girl Development in the Middle Grades**

Student academic and social development in the middle grades is well researched, yet given the nuanced experiences of middle grades education, divergent opinions exist. Students in middle grades have the propensity to grow academically or remain stagnant during the middle school years. Coelho, Marchante, and Jimerson (2016) discuss the complexity of changes facing those in middle school, including academic, physical, mental, emotional, and social adjustments. Holas and Huston (2012) consider whether middle schools are harmful to students. Thus, it is incumbent upon teachers,

counselors, and educators to push students to excel beginning in Pre-kindergarten and through middle school.

Research has shown an academic decline as students move from elementary school to middle school, but some have challenged the validity of that finding, because students who transfer into a welcoming, facilitative environment see motivation and performance maintained and improved. Piscatelli and Lee (2011) posited that to improve student academic performance schools should also focus on social, emotional, and material needs of students. Therefore, recent research suggests the social, emotional, and physical characteristics of the school community are also important in improving student academic performance (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Other researchers argue that the relationship between school climate and achievement is weak and may be related to only one or two studies comparing academic performance across schools with different school climates (Voight & Hanson, 2017). Despite some divergent viewpoints, the majority of the literature asserts that the middle grades are a crucial developmental period, especially for dually marginalized learners of color, such as Black girls (Young, Young, & Paufler, 2017). In the next section, we provide specific considerations for Black girls in the middle grades.

Black female students in middle grades have additional challenges added to their nexus with schools, teachers, and educators. Not only are they going through puberty and peer-related issues, but they also must contend with race, culture, and social justice issues. According to decades of previous research Black girls are overrepresented in exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., suspension and expulsion) in relation to White and Hispanic girls (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2011; Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002; Raffaele Mendez, & Knoff, 2003; Taylor & Foster, 1986). These discriminatory discipline practices begin in elementary school and affect Black girl academic achievement (Blake et al., 2011). Research concludes Black girls also tend to receive disciplinary actions for minor behavior infractions, such as chewing gum, defiance, and disruptive behaviors (e.g., profanity and disrespect) (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Morris & Perry, 2017; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff,

2003; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Vavrus & Cole, 2002).

A plethora of factors relate to Black girls disconnecting from school. However, racism and institutional bias remain two of the most salient. Ford (1996) maintains whether it is overt or covert or at the individual or the institutional level, racism interrupts the healthy development of those persons subjected to it. It “hinders their ability to function at their full potential as both children and adults and increases their levels of stress” (p. 74). The effects of racism have an acute impact on Black girls due to their existence in two marginalized groups – female and Black. Developing a healthy self-concept in the middle grades is one mechanism to address the effects of racism and sexism on Black female learners at this stage.

Townsend, Neiland, Thomas, and Jackson (2010) argue, “The self-concept of Black girls is influenced by attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs concerning their ethnic group” (p. 275). Additionally, Black female students with a healthy identity during the crucial adolescent developmental periods should also possess a robust ethnic identification, which is necessary for a healthy identity (Salazar et al., 2004; Townsend, 2002; Townsend, Grange, Belgrave, & Fitzgerald, 2006). Black girls who possess a healthy identity do better academically in school in addition to having a sense of connection and pride in ethnic group membership because their self-identity is related to positive feelings about school and positive self-perceptions concerning academic ability (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1997; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001). Developing these healthy traits is essential to academic success in all content areas but given the nature of social studies these traits are of the utmost importance (Hansen & Quintero, 2017). In the middle grades, these developmental trends are distinctly more pronounced.

### **The U.S. History NAEP**

The U.S. History NAEP is in its infancy compared to the other NAEP assessments. While the mathematics and reading assessments date back to the late 1960's, the first administration of the U.S. History NAEP was not until 1994. The U.S. History NAEP is a hybrid assessment that incorporates both multiple-choice items and constructed-response items. The constructed

response items consist of short answer and extended response items. These items are used to assess students' U.S. History knowledge in four core areas, structured around general themes of U.S. History. U.S. History content knowledge is essential to the development of democratic citizens; it is incumbent for students to know and understand the significance of history in America, including democracy, world rule, culture, and technology (NAEP, 2017).

The primary constructs (democracy, world role, culture, and technology) measured on the U.S. History NAEP examination can be useful indicators of future civic participation. Hence, students who know and have a working knowledge of their history can become more involved in the history of the US. These four areas are described by NCES as the historical themes assessed on the U.S. History NAEP (NCES, 2011). The culture theme focuses on the cultural traditions and heritage developed through the interactions between different racial, ethnic, and religious groups in the US. The democracy theme focuses on American political democracy development from colonial times to the present. The third theme assessed is technology. This theme focuses on the impact of America's transformation from a rural frontier economy to an industrial superpower on society, ideas, and the environment. The world role theme addresses the transition from isolation to global responsibility. Finally, the composite score represents the overall score on the U.S. History exam and is calculated as the aggregate to the scores in each of the individual domains. In the next section, we review the participation and performance trends for Black girls on the U.S. History NAEP.

### **Black Girls Achievement Trends in the U.S. History NAEP**

As of the Fall, 2017, 50.7 million students were attending public elementary and secondary schools, and 5.2 million were attending private elementary and secondary schools. Eight million of these students were Black students, and approximately half of these students were girls (NCES, 2017). NAEP data have been collected periodically since 1969. During each survey administration year, researchers collect data from 30 to 60 students from each of the eligible 100 schools on average. Thus about 2,500 students attending about 100 schools take the assessment (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, &

Maczuga, 2017; NAEP, 2011; NCES, 2016). These data indicate that Black girls taking the U.S. History NAEP are representative of a variety of schools and communities. Black girl representation is necessary to address mediating and moderating demographic factors.

According to NCES (2014), the U.S. History NAEP was administered to 11,200 students across the US. In 1994, 259 Black students took the test. In 2004, the number was 265, an increase of only six students (NCES, 2014). Data from the 2004 assessment indicated that 47 Black students were at or Above Basic, six were at or Above Proficient, and no students scored Advanced (only one White student of 277 and zero Hispanic students out of 257 scored Advanced on the four-area national assessment). The U.S. History exam has many contextualized assessment items that attempt to address the historical experiences of Black people and other minoritized people of color. Data indicate that Black students underperform on the U.S. History NAEP despite some efforts from test designers to incorporate items that are pertinent to the cultural backgrounds of Black students.

For example, one of the released questions on the NAEP tests asks students on the advanced level to “describe and explain how Black people participated in the Civil War and the outcomes of their efforts” (NAEP 2014 U.S. History Assessment). Although this item includes a reference to the contributions of Black people, it is essential to consider that if Black students are not informed about the contributions of Black people to the Civil War, it is irrelevant to consider this item as somehow more accessible to Black students. Contrarily, this item could be more problematic for Black students that realize that these stories and histories were not presented in their middle grades classrooms. Therefore, understanding the historical significance of events is tantamount to the achievement of Black girls in U.S. history and should be an important consideration for teachers, researchers, and parents. Given the human connections and cultural foundations of social studies education, it is vital that Black students in general and Black girls specifically be represented in the history classroom through curriculum and access to Black female teachers.

Problematic gender constructs affect most of the issues that face Black children today, and thus the achievement of Black girls deserves more

attention (Hill, 2002). Likewise, it is crucial for female educators of color to become advocates for “the social and educational needs of minority girls of color” (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 12). It is important for schools to recruit more female educators of color in all content areas but especially in U.S. History and social studies courses, which are disproportionately taught by White males, especially at the secondary level (Yakimowski, 2013, p. 10). It is also important to note that ethnic matching, although highly effective, is often impossible to achieve on a large scale given enduring teacher shortages. Therefore, we provide gender achievement socialization as a theoretical framework to support the U.S. History achievement of Black girls.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Socialization of Achievement**

Research continues to indicate there are challenges and stereotypes associated with the gender and racial achievement gaps (Larke, Webb-Hasan, & Young, 2016). Socialization is the process by which children’s beliefs, goals, and behaviors are shaped to conform to that of their social group so that they may become competent adult members of that group (Parke & Buriel, 1998). This process has substantial ramifications for students during the navigation through K-12 educational settings. The socialization processes and subsequent identity development of Black girls are distinctive because of the interaction of racism and sexism, which perhaps is better conceptualized as gendered racial socialization (Thomas & King, 2007). The forced, premature maturation of Black girls within the Black culture itself expedites their introduction to adult responsibilities, decision-making, and behaviors well before they are cognitively competent to appreciate such actions (Blake, Keith, Luo, Le, & Salter, 2017). Their socialized adult identities are formed while they are yet still children, which can challenge the teacher-student dynamic in the classroom setting. This process is called adultification (Grant, 1994) and results in educators’ perception of Black girls as more adult-like and less innocent than children the same age (Evans, 1988; Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014; Morris, 2007). The social concern from educators in Grant’s (1994) seminal work is that the adultification would hinder Black girls’ academic achievements (Blake et al., 2016), thus compounding the

academic effects on achievement and social development for Black girls.

Achievement ideologies can be socialized and may differ across ethnic and gender groups. These ideologies are shaped by history, experiences, and social interactions. Given the historical accounts of discrimination endured by Black students in U.S. society, many parents believe that education is the only way their children will have opportunities in a world where they are consistently confronted with racism (Franklin, Boyd-franklin, & Draper, 2002). Thus, Black girls can either be seen as 'at risk' or as 'resilient' due to the attainment and risk of education in the history of America (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). The achievement of Black girls (and women) exceeds that of other women of various racial groups (Kaba, 2005), but is often ignored and rarely exemplified as academic excellence and resilience (Sanders & Bradley, 2005), leading some researchers to suggest they hold invisible status in relation to race, gender, and education (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007).

Imparting the value of long-term educational achievement is, therefore, an essential socialization goal for Black parents (Hill, 2002). Within the Black community, this message is imparted through gender socialization patterns that tend to better support achievement in Black girls. In communities such as Oakland, California, where Black girls had been left behind due to multifaceted, multilayered efforts to save Black boys from the school-to-prison pipeline, there is now a national movement partnering Black communities and schools to launch Black Girls Achievement Programs that also aim to prevent Black girls from entering the school-to-prison pipeline and to create pathways to college (Oakland Unified School District, 2017).

Parenting practices also are frequently associated with achievement (Hill, 1997). The relationship between parental involvement and student achievement is robust and remains one of the significant indicators of student academic success. However, considerable research on Black parental involvement portrays Black parents as deficient because they visit or volunteer at their children's school irregularly (Luster & McAdoo, 2002). Contrarily, in comparative analyses, Black parents account for the highest frequency of home-based

involvement practices (Jeynes, 2003). It is important to note that there is a discrepancy between teacher practice and teacher belief, as teachers often do not encourage parental involvement as much as they expect it. Teachers may not open lines of communication and offer invitations to participate to low-income Black and Hispanic parents due to lack of cultural knowledge, general discomfort with individuals of another race/ethnicity, or language barriers (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009, p. 38). In a study of Black school involvement, Suizzo, Robinson, and Pahlke (2008) found that participants expressed the importance of preparing their children for school because Black students had to be more advanced than their non-Black peers upon entering school to maintain good academic standing. Thus, much of the school-related parental involvement that takes place in the Black community is situated in the home and involves preparing students to navigate the educational system successfully.

Parents are instrumental in helping children develop positive self-concept and identity through socialization (Thomas & King, 2007). Child-rearing practices are typically the mechanism through which these ideas are socialized. Furthermore, many socialization practices are highly dependent on gender (Raley & Bianchi, 2006). Consequently, research consistently concludes that differences in socialization lead to differential achievement outcomes for Black male and female students (Annunziata, Hogue, Faw, & Liddle, 2006; Kapungu, Holmbeck, & Paikoff, 2006; Mandara, Varner, & Richman, 2010). These differences affect student success across the entire achievement spectrum. According to Wood et al. (2007), Black students' achievement on tests is directly related to differences in parent socialization based on gender (Wood et al., 2007). Historically, Black girls have been given priority with parents when deciding which child to send to college (Blau, 1981). Subsequently, 69% of Black girls graduate from high school compared to only 55.6% Black boys (Murnane, 2013). Investigating the differences related to these gender patterns of school achievement warrant further examination (Meece, Glienke, & Burg, 2006). Gender differentiates these parenting practices and thus leads to differing outcomes in Black girl achievement. However, for this study, establishing Black female content knowledge baselines was paramount.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to utilize an ethnically homogeneous design to examine Black female content-specific knowledge. Achievement gap analyses and educational reform efforts habitually seek to identify programs and teaching methods that target the social, emotional, cultural, and psychological dimensions of Black students. These efforts provide a conceptual lens that is necessary for working with diverse populations of students, but little is known about how Black students subject-matter knowledge may influence achievement differences. Furthermore, between-group analyses impede the identification of within-group content specific strengths and weakness. For example, if Black student achievement is always compared to their White counterparts, the focus is always based on closing the gap when attention should be placed on identifying the knowledge and skills that need remediation. This research study excludes the ethnic and gender comparative distractors and thus eliminates the need to speculate on the causes of between-group differences, placing Black female content knowledge in the forefront. Two research questions guided this study.

1. How much has Black female U.S. History content knowledge grown in a decade of NAEP administrations?
2. How is Black female specialized content knowledge differentiated on the NAEP?

## Methodology

This study utilized two subsamples of Black 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls from the 2010 NAEP ( $N = 4,490$ ), to gain a baseline understanding of U.S. History achievement of Black girls. The participants in this study were part of a representative national sample of Black girls. Thus, the students were selected from schools with varying levels of diversity and socioeconomic compositions. Data were extracted from the public use data provided within the NCES data Explorer online module. Examination of the data proceeded logically from descriptive to comparative analyses. First, descriptive statistics examined the characteristics of the two subsamples within the dataset. Mean differences between Black girls' U.S. History scale scores for the 2006-2014 8<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP administrations were calculated and accompanied by 95% confidence intervals and  $p$ -values.

Finally, differences in Black girls' specialized U.S. History content knowledge were assessed using both descriptive statistics and analysis of variance (ANOVA). For this study, we isolated Black girls as the population of interest, and then analyzed their group performance on the four subsets or item categories tested in the U.S. History NAEP using their mean scores as the dependent variable. Statistically, significant mean differences were examined using the four NAEP U.S. History scales from the 2014 administration as outcome variables: (1) Cultures; (2) Democracy; (3) Technology; and (4) World Roles. Appropriate post hoc testing (Scheffe's test) and a subsequent plot of the 95% confidence intervals for the mean scale score point estimates followed the ANOVA results.

We chose a 95% confidence interval by convention as a stricter measure (Zientek, Thompson, & Yetkiner, 2010). An appropriate interpretation of these intervals is necessary. A 95% confidence interval does not indicate that a point estimate correctly represents the population parameter with 95% certainty, but rather that if an infinite number of confidence intervals are constructed than one can be 95% certain that the population parameter is present. To access the differences in performance between the 2006 and 2014 administrations, mean difference confidence intervals were created. The mean difference confidence intervals were calculated using the following formulas:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Lower Limit} &= (\mu_1 - \mu_2) - (t_{CL})(SE_{m_1} - SE_{m_2}) \\ \text{Upper Limit} &= (\mu_1 - \mu_2) + (t_{CL})(SE_{m_1} - SE_{m_2}) \end{aligned}$$

$\mu_1$  represented the mean of the 2014 Black female student scores, and  $\mu_2$  was the mean of the 2006 scores. The  $t_{CL}$  represented the  $t$  critical for the 95% confidence intervals, found using Microsoft Excel macro, and  $SE_{m_1} - SE_{m_2}$  is the difference in standard errors retrieved from the NAEP Data Explorer (NDE). The confidence intervals were calculated in Microsoft Excel using the confidence macro present in the available excel macros. To perform these calculations, one needs the mean, standard deviation, and population size, all of which were retrieved from the NAEP data explorer database.

## Results

The results of this study indicate that Black girls'

achievement has increased in across all domains of the U.S. History NAEP. However, as seen in Table 1, the magnitude of these increases varies by domain. All mean scores shown in Table 1 fall within the basic or below the basic level of achievement. In response to research question 1, the data in Table 2 suggest that Black girls had a

statistically significant increase in performance overall, based on their composite score mean differences. Additionally, domain-specific statistically significant increases were observed in Democracy and World Role.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and 8<sup>th</sup>-grade Black girl U.S. History Performance*

	Year	<i>N</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>CI</i>
Composite/Overall	2014	404	249.38(26.42)	[246.46, 252.30]
	2010	420	250.35(26.64)	[247.80, 252.90]
	2006	645	245.03(28.24)	[242.84, 247.21]
Cultures	2014	414	253.50(25.70)	[250.85, 256.14]
	2010	423	254.31(26.07)	[251.83, 256.79]
	2006	510	253.67(27.58)	[251.28, 256.06]
Democracy	2014	300	251.72(29.86)	[248.06, 255.39]
	2010	308	252.63(29.26)	[249.36, 255.89]
	2006	495	244.63(31.27)	[241.87, 247.38]
Technology	2014	363	267.51(24.59)	[241.85, 247.43]
	2010	401	245.57(24.72)	[243.15, 247.99]
	2006	574	242.14(25.94)	[240.02, 244.26]
World Role	2014	219	244.43(30.42)	[239.80, 249.06]
	2010	261	245.79(30.71)	[242.07, 249.52]
	2006	452	235.58(33.08)	[232.52, 238.63]

**Table 2***Growth in 4<sup>th</sup> grade Black girl U.S. History Performance from 2006-2014*

	<i>d</i>	<i>CI</i>
Composite/Overall	.16*	[.03, .28]
Cultures	-.01	[-.14, .12]
Democracy	.23*	[.09, .37]
Technology	.90*	[.76, 1.03]
World Role	.27*	[.11, .44]

A goal of the present study was to test for differences between Black girls' mean scale scores on the Cultures, Democracy, Technology and World Role NAEP. Research question 2 sought to examine the differences across mean scale scores for Black girls on specific U.S. History themes or domains. In response to research question 2, the ANOVA results were statistically significant,  $F(3, 1,389) = 10.00, p < 0.0001$ . Thus, unique differences exist between the U.S. History theme or domain scores for Black girls. A Scheffe post hoc test indicated that a statistically significant difference was observed between the mean scores in culture compared to the technology and world role domains. However, there was not a statistically significant difference between the culture domain and the democracy domain. The democracy domain

mean scores were also statistically significantly higher than the technology, and world role mean scores. Appropriately, the democracy scores were also not statistically significantly different compared to the culture scores. Finally, the technology and world role scores were not statistically significantly different from one another. A pictorial representation of the mean differences is provided in Figure 1. Figure 1 presents the 95% confidence intervals in bar graph form for Black girls' mean scores on each of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History content strands. The data suggest that Black girls score similarly on the Culture and Democracy scales, but statistically significantly lower on the Technology and World Role scales based on the lack of overlap between the confidence interval bands.

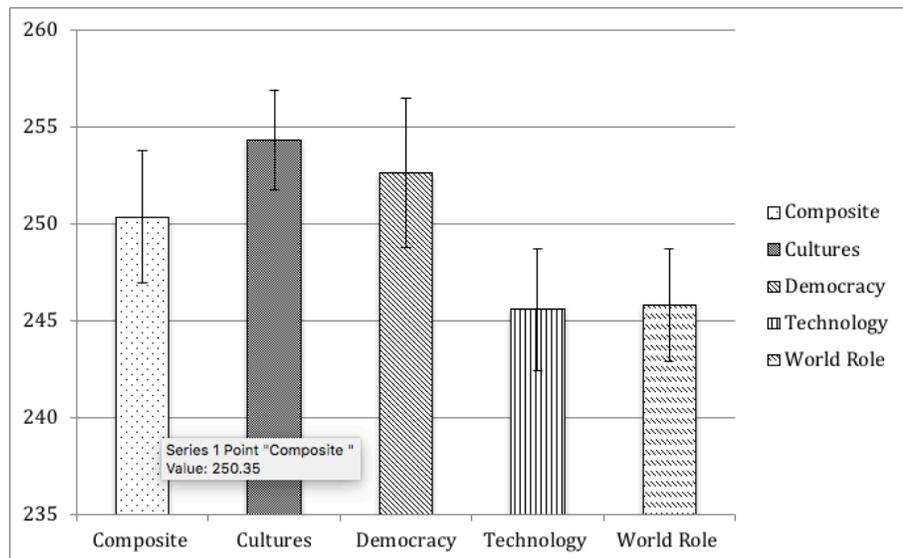


Figure 1. Bar graphs with 95% CI for Mean Scale Scores for the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade NAEP U.S. history Assessment Measures

### Limitations and Considerations

This study adds to the literature on the achievement of Black girls, specifically in middle grades social studies. However, it is essential to address limitations and considerations related to the interpretation and generalization of the results of the current study. One limitation pertinent to this study was a lack of access to individual items. Items on the U.S. History NAEP assess two domains or item types: (1) historical knowledge and perspective; and (2) historical analysis and interpretation. The domain historical knowledge and perspectives include: knowing and understanding people, events, concepts, themes, movements, contexts, and historical sources; sequencing events; recognizing multiple perspectives; seeing an era or movement through the eyes of different groups; and developing a general conceptualization of U.S. History (NCES, 2011). This domain is the more basic of the two domains, but it encompasses a vast amount of knowledge and skills that support historical understanding. The second domain historical analysis and interpretation includes: explaining issues; identifying historical patterns; establishing cause-and-effect relationships; finding value statements; establishing significance; applying historical knowledge; weighing evidence to draw sound conclusions; making defensible generalizations; and rendering insightful accounts of the past (Lapp, Grigg, & Tay-Lim, 2002). This domain is more concerned with the student's ability to apply the historical content in a manner that is meaningful. Access to these items would allow the researchers to ascertain the types of items that Black girls as a group mastered and likewise their struggles.

Another limitation of this study is the inability to observe the performance of the same Black girls over time. Because NCES does not track NAEP students from year to year like their longitudinal studies, it is impossible to directly connect the fourth-grade performance of one girl to her subsequent eighth-grade performance. As noted earlier the U.S. History NAEP themes address: (a) change and continuity in American democracy: ideas, institutions, events, key figures, and controversies; (b) the gathering and interactions of people, cultures, and ideas; (c) economic and technological changes and their relation to society, ideas, and the environment; and (d) the changing role of America in the

world (Lee & Weiss, 2007). Additionally, these four overarching themes are applied to a set of eight chronological periods of U.S. History. These periods include: (a) beginnings to 1607; (b) colonization, settlement, and communities (1607 to 1763); (c) the revolution and new nation (1763-1815); (d) expansion and reform (1801 to 1861); (e) crisis of the union; civil war and reconstruction (1850 to 1877); (f) the development of modern America (1865 to 1920); (g) modern America and world wars (1914 to 1945); and (h) contemporary America (1945 to present). These themes in the U.S. History assessment serve as the content for the assessment, and like the science assessment, the content is supported by historical skills and practices. If longitudinal performance data were available, a more coherent assessment of any prior lack of knowledge could be rendered. More specifically, these data would help to identify possible curricular concerns affecting the performance of Black girls in U.S. History from elementary classrooms to the middle grades.

### Discussion

The current study examined a sample of Black female students who have taken the NAEP test, a standardized test given to eighth graders across the nation. This study sought to answer two research questions:

1. How much has Black female U.S. History content knowledge grown in a decade of NAEP administrations?
2. How is Black female specialized content knowledge differentiated on the NAEP?

Regarding the first research question, the results from this current study reveal Black girls' achievement has increased across all domains on the U.S. History NAEP. Being cognizant of the scoring methods of standardized testing allows us to understand the scoring and scales which allow users to draw sound conclusions based on the scoring across domains, race, and gender. Standardized testing programs report transformed test scores, also called scaled scores, rather than report percent-correct scores taken from the raw score points. Scaled scores are used to measure the difficulty of the test questions. "This standardization allows scores reported from a test to have a consistent meaning for all test takers" (Tan & Michel, 2011, p. 1). Standardization is important in the context of the present study as the scores are compared

across time for different groups of Black girls. As noted earlier these data generated from this study are relevant because they are not currently presented in the *Nations Report Card*.

The NAEP performance report or *Nations Report Card* only lists scores for Black students. It is of utmost importance to establish a baseline for the achievement of Black girls (and to disaggregate the scores between Black boys and girls) as they navigate the educational system in the middle grades. These results are important because they provide a counter-narrative to refute the perpetual achievement gap discourse that promotes deficit-oriented educational paradigms. We would be remiss not to interpret the scores within the context of the NAEP's prescribed achievement levels. Despite statistically significant growth between 2006 and 2010, Black girls' achievement in U.S. History remains at or below the basic level on all tested domains and overall.

The second question examined the differentiation between the specialized U.S. History achievement scores for Black girls on individual categories. The data suggest that Black girls score highest on the culture section followed by democracy, technology, and world role respectively. Statistically significant differences were observed between the culture scale and all the other scales except democracy. Likewise, the democracy scale scores were statistically significantly higher than all the other scales except the culture scale. When assessed as a whole, the data suggest that Black girls' performance is higher in the democracy and culture domains, compared to the lower but similar scores in the technology and worldview domains. In eighth grade the test questions are distributed across the four themes as follows: Cultures 30%; Democracy 30%; Technology 20%; and World Roles 20% (Lee, Grigg, & Dion, 2007). Thus, the two themes/domains with the highest levels of achievement are also the two domains with slightly larger proportions of items on the exam.

The U.S. History NAEP is one of many standardized exams that students in U.S. schools are charged with completing each year. Given the lack of emphasis on social studies in many elementary and middle schools compared to mathematics and English language arts, one has to consider student motivation to perform as a contributing factor that is beyond the control of

the researcher. The results of the present study may reflect the lack of variety in social studies content exposure at the elementary and middle grades levels, especially in urban schools where the acquisition of reading and math skills are given priority due to high stakes testing, and the availability and quality of instructional materials reflect that priority, which allows the social studies curriculum to go underfunded and under-resourced. The master schedule in elementary schools may allow up to 120 minutes of reading instruction and 90 minutes of math instruction daily whereas science and social studies instruction account for between 40-90 minutes weekly, which amounts to approximately two lessons a week where students receive basic, comprehension-level activities for science and social studies (Hinde, 2009).

More importantly, it has become an educational trend in elementary schools for students to experience social studies content thematically integrated with literacy instruction, where the emphasis has been placed on reading and writing skill-building for state assessment preparation purposes (Smith & Irvine, 2012). Therefore, Black students in such situations have not been given the educational opportunity to learn social studies content to the depth and complexity required to have a proficient grasp of the historical, social, political and economic concepts needed before entering the middle grades. Additionally, teachers must be cognizant that the socialization and adultification can hinder Black girls' academic achievement (Blake et al., 2017) if not handled in a manner that values the intersectionality of gender and race (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). In the next section, we provide implications for teaching and learning in the middle grades.

### **Implications for Black Girls in the Middle Grades**

The achievement socialization of Black girls in the middle grades is highly contingent upon the interactions between their sphere of socialization. This group includes parents, peers, teachers, and other influential forces. For our discussion, we chose to focus on parents, teachers, and the curriculum given that they represent the most explanatory social agency factors. In the sections that follow we enumerate some of the specific implications related to the

socialized achievement of Black girls in U.S. History.

1. *Parents possess experiential knowledge of U.S. History that can be leveraged to support the achievement of Black girls in social studies.*

Parents are instrumental in helping children develop positive self-concept and identity through socialization (Hughes, Kiecolt, Keith, & Demo, 2015). Historically, Black parents have been differentially more academically affirming towards girls than boys, but a concerted effort is needed to focus these practices toward the development of stronger academic identities in Black girls. Mothers must capitalize on the unique cultural influences of the intersection of their race and gender. This could be accomplished by reflecting on past experiences and interactions that were influenced by memorable events, places, or people in U.S. History. For instance, a trip to the salon can become an opportunity to discuss how Madam C.J. Walker, the first Black millionaire and by many accounts the first self-made U.S. female millionaire, revolutionized hair care for Black people forever. Discussing her contributions to U.S. History directly addresses the technology and culture theme assessed on the NAEP.

2. *Teachers must provide opportunities for Black girls to make connections to the local and global community, through thoughtful classroom experiences.*

Black girls need U.S. History instruction that leverages multiple experiential and cultural representations to provide culturally relevant content specific contextual explanations of historical events. This is essential for the middle grades as the U.S. History content received in these grades is directly related to subsequent achievement in high school. Teachers must provide Black girls with an opportunity to learn U.S. History meaningfully. Moreover, teachers are significant contributors to the achievement socialization academic identity of Black girls. For instance, teachers impart content knowledge and historical facts that can affirm or discourage Black girls from enjoying the social studies in the middle grades. To this end, teachers need to be equipped with, and fluent in, a variety of pedagogies and asset-based approaches. For some young Black female learners, it is difficult to comprehend how their existence in the US is

pertinent to issues facing others around the world. Bridging international connections between the experiences of Black girls and other girls internationally is one way to support the achievement of Black girls in the world role domain. Telecommunication and digital tools can facilitate international cultural exchanges that create opportunities for Black girls to connect with other girls across the world.

3. *The middle grades U.S. History curriculum should serve as a natural progression to rigorous high school social studies.*

Middle school social studies curriculum is designed to help students progress in critical thinking, social consciousness, reasoning, and democratic perspectives. Curriculum developers should consider the experiences of Black girls when developing instructional materials to create authentic opportunities to engage in relevant social studies tasks. For example, Black girls should have an opportunity to *do* social studies rather than *learn* social studies. U.S. History curriculum in the middle grades has the potential to provide this opportunity. Furthermore, assumed gender socialization patterns are inherent in the chosen middle grades student life experiences that do not necessarily reflect the practices of all racial groups. We suggest that curriculum developers should explicitly incorporate examples of adaptations that take into account the unique intersections of race and gender when developing exemplars in curriculum documents.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we hope that this study helps to inform critical classroom practices to support the sustained achievement of Black girls in social studies and other middle grades content areas. The results of this study indicate that Black girls face a myriad of challenges in middle grades social studies. However, the data also indicate several areas of strength. Building on these strengths is essential to the development of a sustainable understanding of U.S. History in the middle grades and beyond. This can only be realized through the cooperation and dedication of appropriate socializing agents. Furthermore, the diversification of the social studies teacher workforce is a viable mechanism to support Black girls by providing them with ethnically and gender-matched academic socializing

agents, for it is their participatory obligation to contribute to the success of Black girls early and often.

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