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The Stares to Achievement: African American Youth Resist Risk and Rhetoric to Achieve Academic Success

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THE STARES TO ACHIEVEMENT:
AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH RESIST RISK AND RHETORIC TO ACHIEVE
ACADEMIC SUCCESS

by

CHÉ WYATT

(Under the direction of Lorraine Gilpin, Ed.D.)

ABSTRACT

For African American students, academic achievement is often discussed in terms of student deficits and cultural deficiencies. Citing high dropout rates and the achievement gap, focus is often centered on understanding African American achievement in terms of school failures. As such, African American students are, at times, recognized negatively in terms of their academic abilities. Moving away from this deficit perspective of understanding African American students and their school achievement, this study examines the standpoint of six African American students who, despite possessing characteristics that complicated their school experiences, achieved success. Interrupting common discourse and recognizing these students as holders of knowledge, this study engages African American students in sharing their perspectives on how their understanding of their racial identity, and the perception others hold regarding their identity affect their achievement in school. Through critical race theory and narrative inquiry, this study attends to the students' perspectives on their struggles, their determination, and their successes as they journeyed through high school. The stories told interject fresh perspectives into the discourse and suggest an avenue for further investigations of African American student achievement.

INDEX WORDS: Critical Race Theory, Experiential Knowledge, Identity, Race, Voice

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents who told me I could, and have always believed I would accomplish anything I chose to do. I am thankful for having parents who are willing to drive anywhere to support me and help me achieve my goals. Without my parents, my educational endeavors would not have been possible.

I thank my Aunt Carolyn for working with me and showing me this was possible. When I was 15, she walked into my grandmother's house armed with accomplishment, Doctor of Education. On that day, I decided I *could* go beyond my initial goals.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my family. Thank you for your support and encouragement. I especially thank Chanél, Darryl, Jr., Jakiya, and Jaquavious for being my first students. Thank you for allowing me to “test” my initial lesson plans on you all. You all have helped me grow professionally.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Context of the Study

For African Americans the desire to pursue education and literacy has traditionally coincided with the desire for progress and hope. Since the time of slavery until the Civil Rights movement, African Americans have resisted U.S. laws and customs developed to restrict, control, or deny African Americans the opportunity for literacy (Williams, 2005). Risking the threat of death, amputation, incarceration, and beatings, African Americans managed, either through ingenuity, trade, or sheer will to develop some degree of literacy (Cornelius, 1991). Literacy gave African Americans access to information and freedom to develop independent ways of knowing (Williams, 2005). Thus, the pursuit of literacy learning has historical significance and has traditionally been one which included constant struggle. During the pre-Civil Rights era, the quest for learning and the desire for proficiency represented and was synonymous with establishing one's identity as competent and worthy (Hilliard, 2003; Watkins, 2001; Williams, 2005). In this way, for African Americans, the right to be educated and the desire to be literate have been intricately linked with the development, understanding, and projection of self. In fact, for African Americans, the thirst for knowledge paralleled the desire for self-determination and the struggle for human equality.

This idea of pursuing literacy as a way to develop dignity and build self-worth was evident throughout the fifties and sixties (Perry, 2003). During this time period unlike during times of slavery, reading and learning to read were not illegal, however, voter registration laws requiring citizens to pass a literacy test in order to vote amplified

the understanding that literacy represented status and significance (Perry, 2003). In other words these laws which were upheld throughout the south reinforced the idea that “being literate, getting an education in the Black collective consciousness are all acts that affirm one as a human, as a person of worth, ...” (Perry, 2003, p.44) From this we learn that education has been a priority in the Black community since the time of slavery and we know that African Americans have protested and sacrificed for the right to become literate (Rury, 2002). We also learn that the way in which a person understands his or her identity can be directly related to his or her education. However, as one peruses today’s headlines, it is nearly impossible to ignore the current dilemmas that African Americans face in terms of their educational achievement. In spite of their historical quest to become educated, today, African Americans’ experiences with schooling are often characterized by reports of inadequate achievement (Perry, 2003). There are over one thousand news articles on the internet, alone, with the subject of understanding minority student failure. Within some to those news reports and prevalent in much scholarly and political discourse is an analysis of the factors that cause student failure and contribute to the achievement gap (Kellow & Jones, 2008; Murrell, 2009; Steele, 2009). “The achievement gap between Black and White students is defined as the difference between the average score for Black students and the average score for White students” on standardized measures of assessment (NCES, 2009, p. 4). The profuse level of media exposure concerning the achievement gap often draws the focus of achievement towards characteristics of the student. According to Kellow and Jones (2008), these reports often have negative implications for African American students and reinforce stereotypes of intellectual inferiority. A Stuart Math (1997) documentary on integration in Shaker

Heights highlights the connections that are made about academic achievement and identity as one female student explains that her White peers look at her and think “you are not as good as me.” To further this point, an African American student from the Scholar Identity Institute indicated, “[society believes] that the young Black man isn’t gonna go to college, the young Black man is going to drop out, and is gonna live up to being nothing” (Jackson, 2008). As indicated by these students’ statements, education and literacy are intertwined with African American identity and students’ struggle with education is related to their struggle to demonstrate competence through achievement.

Given the rich academic tradition developed within the African American community during the pre-Civil Rights era (Perry, 2003; Watkins, 2001; Watkins, 2005), it is nonsensical to overlook and important to examine current disparities in educational performance for African American students. Thus, many individuals involved in the contemporary conversation, including educators, policy makers, students, and parents, are concerned with student achievement. For African Americans, especially, the concerns regarding academic success generate great alarm. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), a division of the U.S. Department of Education (2007), records dating back to 1975 indicate that Black students have consistently underperformed and are outscored on achievement tests in the areas of reading and math. Further, an additional report reveals that African American youth drop out of school at a higher rate than most other Americans, and the average regular graduation rate for African American students falls at just above 60 percent. By contrast, the average regular graduation rate for White American students is listed at 80 percent (NCES, 2009). These reports have also contributed to the discourse on African American student

underachievement (Irvine, 1991). Additionally, these reports acknowledge a crisis in the African American community and demonstrate a clear need to examine the educational experiences of African American students. Consequently, the aforementioned factors warrant the question: How can institutions of learning alter the current trend of unequal achievement for African American students?

“Education, like any human interaction, is a set of relationships between groups” (Stovall, 2005, p.203). The ways in which schools structure interactions between students and personnel often affects academic achievement (Davis & Jordan, 1994). As students and school personnel are not disconnected from social realities, school environments are a reflection of society. As Stovall (2005) notes, some groups have historically received different treatment that delayed or served as an impediment to their success. Ladson-Billings (2009) acknowledges that this phenomenon is occurring in educational settings through the impact of concepts such as meritocracies and colorblindness. Noguera (2003) argues that the inequitable practice of disciplining different groups of students contributes to the marginalization of those students.

If schools are true meritocracies, students who have the greatest ability would be the most successful regardless of race or any other factor. Under such notions, general analysis of the disparities in achievement for African American students would suggest that African American students who are unsuccessful on standardized tests have greater deficiencies than their peers and are unable to achieve success in school (Ladson-Billings, 2009). In other words, under the notion of meritocracies, if the student is not successful, the student is lacking or defective.

The concept of colorblindness, the idea that schools are race-neutral, creates problems for attending to the needs and concerns of different groups of students within the school (Ladson-Billings, 1994). If educators do not account for the different needs of their diverse student population they can neither adequately address race-related patterns in student achievement, nor address the role that racism or race-related problems play in educational settings (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006).

Some race related issues occur in the form of disciplining procedures. According to Noguera (2003), in many school districts, minority students are more often suspended, expelled, or on the receiving end of the most severe punishment. Noguera (2003) contends that this focus on discipline often causes school personnel to disregard the individual needs of its students. This practice, Noguera continues, distracts teachers from finding ways to increase academic engagement and to enhance the academic rigor that provides the foundation for academic success. The focus on order and discipline instead of academically engaging instruction often conveys to students that they are incapable of success, and it does little to alter the current achievement gap between students of color and their peers (Noguera, 2003).

Much of the literature on the achievement gap includes, but is not limited to, studies on deficiencies in African American cultural and racial development, social and economic deprivation, stereotypes, and social, oppositional, cultural, and academic identities (Bourdieu, 1986; Carter, 2003; Irvine, 1991; Moje, 2000; Oyserman & Harrison, 1999). Literature often conceptualizes African American students as problematic and centers on the cultural and economic disparities that prevent African American students from excelling (Murrell, 2009). This research, however, will offer

deeper insight as to how African American students negotiate racial identity, racial perceptions, identity, and achievement as they journey through the U.S. system of education. With this in mind, in this study, I posit that the contemporary academic successes and failures of those in the African American community are linked to historical race based struggles with social identity and I affirm that student achievement is, as it was historically, closely linked with social, cultural, racial, academic, and individual identity (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Thus, in order to accurately understand the current status of the educational environment for African Americans, it is important to look at the social hierarchy of America's past. In doing so one discovers that U.S. history is filled with disparities between racial groups. If one delves further, one would notice that the discrepancies flow consistently with the issues of racial injustice that have plagued our society.

With this in mind this research seeks to answer the following question:

How does a selected group of African American students negotiate their knowledge of self and the perceptions of others in terms of their academic identity?

- a. How do African American students understand their racial identity in terms of their academic identity?
- b. How do their racial identity and the perceptions of others affect their behavior?
- c. How do their racial identity and the perceptions of others affect their academic performance?

Situating Identity

During high school, I was a part of the M to M program that bussed minority (usually Black) students to higher performing schools where the majority of the student body was of a different race (majority upper middle class and white). Our initial transition into the school was smooth. The students were friendly, teachers seemed fair, and many of us felt that we would have better opportunities at the school. However, as we were promoted from grade level to grade level, the Black student body diminished. Along with this trend were increasing rumors and insinuations of our assistant principal's negative beliefs about African American students. Since I worked in the school office, along with several of my friends during various times of the day, we were able to observe inconsistently administered disciplinary actions. It seemed to us and the African American parents, who were gathering signatures to form a protest group, that many Black male students, who had maintained average grades and good conduct, were suspended at greater rates than white male students who maintained average grades and good or questionable conduct. As we noticed more and more of our Black classmates being suspended or expelled for what we believed were minor infractions, several students began to talk and expressed concern over feelings that Black students were not wanted at the school. I remember students telling me that they were going to leave and return to their home schools because they felt that no matter what they did [in the school] they were not wanted there. (Ché, personal reflection, 2010)

As reflected above, my African American peers began to recognize themselves, not only as *other*, but as unaccepted members of our school community. Their understanding of how they were known in the social context of our high school was

directly related to *messages* that they received from those in authority positions within our school. Therefore, the African American students in my school were encumbered with the task of recognizing themselves as *other* and realizing the implications of that designation within our school environment. This *other* designation meant that those in leadership positions identified students by their differing characteristics and perceived students as potentially problematic. This type of experience can have an effect on how students come to know themselves and develop their identity. Our identities are our understanding of ourselves derived from a negotiation between those attributes we assume and those that are projected onto us by others (Woodward, 2004). In this way, identity is just not who we are and how we project ourselves in the world, but it is also a conscious and subconscious response to an understanding that we generate of ourselves based on our understanding of the ways that others know us. As identities are the meanings one occupies within a specific context; within the context of an interaction, the actions of pertinent others affect the meaning that each person derives from the situation (Stets & Burke, 2005). Meaning can be derived from these experiences through analysis and evaluations of our accounts of a specific situation based on how we are positioned within the social interaction, such as the teacher to student relationship, and the particular consequences or results that are consistently reproduced within the context of that relationship (Mohanty, 2000). In effect, the actions of others provide information that individuals use to situate his or her sense of self. Thus, parts of our identity are formed as we process our experiences and interactions with others. “Our identities are ways of making sense of our experiences... and through them, we learn to define and reshape our values and our commitments” (Mohanty, 2000. p. 43).

Since adolescence is a time to explore one's identity and make discoveries regarding one's understanding of self, the interactions that take place within the school setting are vital in that they provide information/knowledge that students use to develop a definition of self (Tatum, 1997). Tatum observes, "the parts of our identity that do capture our attention are those that other people notice and reflect back to us" (p. 21). As such, part of our identity development is processed through our recognition of the ways that we exist differently from others. For African American adolescents, this often means that race becomes a significant factor in identity development. According to Cross's (1991) model of nigrescence, a theory of racial identity development, African Americans can undergo a shift in identity brought about by an event that causes a new awareness of the implications of one's racial status. The event or series of events that trigger an identity metamorphosis occurs, according to Cross's model, at the second stage of racial identity development, the encounter stage.

The Cross (1991) model details five stages of racial development: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. The encounter stage, however, is the stage that can cause a person to change his or her view of themselves and change how they understand themselves in terms of how they believe they are viewed by others (Cross, 1991). In other words, at this stage, a person re-assesses his or her identity. In the next stage of Cross's model, immersion/emersion, the person begins to change his or her way of being. This can mean that the person tries to submerge themselves within an environment that is better suited for who they believe they are becoming. As I ponder the events that took place in my reflection, I realize that this level of development was evident in the students who determined to leave the school

in search of a place they felt would better suit their emerging understanding of themselves. This stage is often characterized by disappointment, frustration, anger, determination, and/or motivation. Thus, individuals, at this stage of development often try various ways to represent their new views of themselves. In this way, adolescents are thought to be exploring various ways to represent who they believe themselves to be and look for ways to redefine their identity. Thus, those in late adolescence and/or early adulthood attempt to discover ways to deal with the racialized challenges that they may encounter. Evolving from the process of immersion/emersion, a person enters the fourth stage, internalization. At this stage, one begins to develop a more mature sense of his or her social identity. In other words, at this stage, a person becomes secure and grounded in his or her racial identity. Cross's fifth stage, internalization-commitment, is an extension of the fourth stage. This stage is characterized by commitment to act upon issues that are of concern to the Black community (Cross, 1991).

In this way, racial identity is a significant part of how African American youth experience their world. As it is one of the most salient features of identity, it is a pertinent factor in the examination of the ways in which African American youth attach meaning to their experiences with others within their schools. With this in mind, this research is written from the perspective that identity is lived, experienced, and enacted and, therefore, is directly linked to the relationships or interactions we have with others (Moje, 2006). With this thought and believing that learning is an interactive process, schools are ideal for social interaction. Thus, within the microcosm of a school environment, social interactions provide the circumstance for identity formation. Along these lines, an individual's identity is not solely personal; in fact, identities are formed within a social

context involving the image we have of ourselves and our understanding of how we are viewed by others. Moreover, according to Moje (2006), identity is situational and is reliant upon how we are engaged and with whom we are engaged. To this degree, identity formation is impacted by our social location, experiences, and interactions. For this reason, identity is, in many ways, fluid and is lived through our actions and interactions with others. As such, identity is subject to public view and recognition (Moje, 2006). This means that identities, as they are enacted /lived, are judged and interpreted by others. “When one acts in a certain way, ... those who see the person evaluate her actions in relation to their own ways of knowing, doing, and believing” (Moje, 2006, p.135). Other people’s interpretation of an individual’s way of being can have consequences for the individual. The way others respond to an individual’s identity can affect an individual’s sense of identity within a given context (Moje, 2006; Woodward, 2004)). For example, in the above reflection, students in my high school, who initially believed that our school environment was inviting and conducive for learning began to feel that they were unwelcomed and viewed as deviant intruders. With this feeling, many acknowledged that they would rather attend their local schools, even though they knew those schools did not have good academic reputations. To this extent, Moje (2006) asserts that teachers and administrators can recognize students’ identities by means that can affect their learning. Tatum (1997) expands this idea by declaring that only specific identity types are supported within the context of school environments. In this way, identity recognitions hold a degree of power and can impact the ways in which students develop their academic identities. For instance, if an individual’s projected identity directly clashes with the way an authority figure recognizes the identity, that person may find that they

are rejected. When schoolhouse officials recognize a student's identity as a problem the student often finds that the consequences for this problem are his/her burden to bear. Historically, minority students have found that the consequences can extend from rejection, reduced funding, curtailed freedom, and denied access to enlightenment through advanced coursework (Anyon, 1997; Moje, 2006). Thus, these recognitions contribute to the ways students exist within an academic setting.

Facing these circumstances, minority students often discover that they must negotiate ways in which to confront this reality. As their identities are subject to interpretations that may not be consistent with the way they intend their actions to be interpreted, this creates an imbalance, a personal conflict, consistent with Cross's (1991) encounter stage, where an individual must re-negotiate their understanding of who they are and how they exist in the world. According to Mohanty (2000), individuals begin to redefine their sense of self as they come to discover how he/she is positioned within the context of their environment. This point is made evident in Lee's (1999) research on low achieving students. Lee conducted a study of 40 high school students to investigate the causes of school failure. In this study, student participants indicated that they internalized their teachers' negative assessment of their character and developed a sense of hopelessness. Lee further indicated that students' interpretation of their teachers' apathy created a circular affect that often led to student apathy and passiveness. Also students in Lee's study expressed a sense of powerlessness derived from feelings of rejection from members of the school community who are expected to guide their learning. In this sense, students indicated their interpretations of their teachers' expectations left them feeling dejected and unwilling to actively participate in the process of schooling. The intent of

Lee's study is consistent with the aim of this research; to allow students to impart knowledge regarding their own perspectives of how their experiences in school affect their academic performance.

In this light, I hold that the student perspective is a relevant way to better understand that students experience school in a way that affects their identity development on at least three levels. Students enter schools with a certain sense of self that is influenced or becomes altered by their social interactions and their perceptions of how others view them. This insight impacts the ways that students understand themselves as learners and how they experience schooling. Opening the dialogue to include student perspectives should not only empower the students; making them a greater part of the education process, but also enlighten educators by informing them of other ways to understand and connect to their students.

Situating the Personal

“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” (Tatum, B., 1997)

In high school, my query was similar; I wondered why all the Black kids were sitting together during the pep rally. More precisely, I wondered why there was so much segregation in a desegregated school. There was not any significant racial tension amongst the student body; most of us interacted well in class, during extracurricular activities, and during outings. So why did we choose to sit with people who we most resembled when we were given free choice and what did these seating selections reflect? As a member of the drill (dance) team, I usually occupied the gymnasium floor during pep rallies and I could see very clearly that Caucasian and many of the Asian students sat together on the bleachers and the Black students sat together (with minor exceptions).

Further, as the years went by, I began to notice a change in the seating arrangement; African American students who once were, but were no longer, members of athletic or academic groups during our sub-freshman and freshman years began to sit together with discontented and apathetic expressions on their faces. In private, they would confide to a group of Black students that they just were not “thinking about” the school anymore. They expressed a belief that the administration and some teachers did not give a [expletive] about them. In other words, they also felt that school officials were not concerned about them and they were either on their way out, contemplating leaving, or willing to wait it out until graduation. Tatum (1997) explains “that in racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism” (p.62). The Black students in my class seemed to be responding to what they believed were race related inconsistencies in student treatment. They felt that their racial identity overshadowed their identity as student, normal, and educable. They expressed thoughts of being outcasts.

My experience in this school was not similar to those students. I was actively involved in school activities on some level throughout my entire high school career. I did not occupy a space of favorite student status among the faculty but I was accepted and thought of as a good student. Teachers expressed their content with my consistent work habits and because of this status; they were slower to reprimand me on the few occasions that my behavior did not match their requirements. In terms of discipline, I was privy to short talks (reminders of behavior) after class, similar to how many of my white friends were disciplined. I felt that I existed within a select group of African American students that were not thought of as troublemakers. In fact, I remember thinking that I existed in

the middle, not accepted but not rejected. Though, from my vantage point, I noticed the difference in disciplinary action directed toward my fellow African American peers as opposed to that directed toward my White peers and I still wonder to what extent the differential treatment affected the students' ability to achieve in school. Through my observations, I learned that race mattered in terms of educational experiences. In my school, African American students were made aware that their pigmentation could place them in conflict with their educational desires. Although, my experiences were different; I did not experience discrimination directly. However, I, along with my fellow African American classmates developed an understanding that our blackness had an effect on how others viewed and responded to us. With this viewpoint, I approach this study from the perspective that race is a non-negotiable aspect of identity that affects the ways that African American students experience school.

In reflecting on my own experiences during my years as a high school student, I recognize the roles that race played in my classmates' and my educational experiences. I understand that racially related issues may have worked to influence who would successfully continue to attend this school and who was taught in this school. Additionally, I reflect on the voices of discontent often echoed among my African American classmates. Many believed that most of us (Black students) were not welcomed and would not receive fair treatment. As a result, African American enrollment constantly changed. These incidents register significantly in my recollections on being a student in an U.S. classroom. Consequently, I believe it is noteworthy to examine the experiences of students who are enrolled in contemporary U.S. high schools. As these students share their experiences, it is my hope to address the issues that serve as barricades, preventing

African American students from achieving academic excellence. Additionally, my intention is to suggest change in the ways students are perceived and how they are educated.

Significance of the Study

At its very best education should strengthen our capacity to be fully self-actualized in whatever setting we find ourselves. In such a setting every interaction in the classroom matters... (hooks, 2003, p. 92)

This study, *The Stares to Achievement*, is so named because it recognizes that African American students are viewed differently and they are often confronted with unique circumstances that create challenges for them socially and academically (Tatum, 1997). Studies indicate that a disproportionate number of African American students are misjudged by their teachers and unwisely placed in special education programs. For example, N. Howard's (2003) study indicates that teachers can misjudge their student's abilities because of assumptions made about the child based on racial identity. Further, in many urban school systems, more African American students are enrolled in special education programs than non-minorities, and fewer African Americans are likely to take advanced placement courses. White students score higher on standard units of measure than African American students (Cooper & Jordan, 2009). According to Baker (1999) all of these factors place African American students at a greater risk of school failure. Students at risk for academic failure are less likely to identify with their school or perceive themselves as a vital part of the school (Baker, 1999). This data reveal a great deal about what is, or is not, happening with African American students within the four walls of the school building. As this trend is disturbing it has garnered the attention of

educators and scholars who persist in seeking ways to change the trend, address factors that place African American students at-risk for school failure, and reform schooling.

For African Americans, the struggle for education is deeply rooted in U.S. history. According to Williams (2005), during the period of slavery, African Americans associated literacy learning with freedom and pride. Being literate was a way to escape the perils of slavery and to disassociate from the negative stigma associated with slavery. Thus, African Americans worked vigorously to obtain an education and to become more than *just slaves* (Williams, 2005). In the late 1800s until the 1950s, Anderson (1988) and Watkins (2001) reveal that discriminatory laws that were enacted agitated African Americans' quest for literacy. However, even with segregation and discriminatory laws African Americans maintained a rich respect for a literate academic tradition. Until approximately 30 years ago, it seems that most African Americans embraced education. However, today, a significant number of African American students seem to disassociate themselves with the education process (Irvine, 1991). Irvine (1991) draws parallels between high dropout rates and a system of sending African American students from familiar all-Black schools to unknown White community schools. Due to this shift in ideology among African American students, as a researcher, I am compelled to wonder why many African American students have become disengaged in the education process. Test data reveal that the magnitude of students who fall into special needs categories (i.e. special education, behavior disorder...) are minorities. Baker (1999) indicates that this factor disproportionately places African American students at higher risk of school failure. Teachers can only interpret the data and try to improve teaching practices; but if a researcher wants to know why students are not achieving success in schools, especially

those at higher risk for school failure, the researcher should involve those students in finding the answer. With the understanding that students may not be able to articulate educational theory; but believing that students can articulate their dissatisfaction and their connections with school, this study is significant because it allows the students to tell how and, most importantly, why it seems they have disconnected from their education.

Framing the Study

Since this inquiry recognizes that racial, social, and cultural identity are significant factors that impact the educational experiences of African American students it is appropriate to frame this study through the lens of critical race theory.

Critical race theory (CRT) was initially recognized and developed as a legal theory concerned with exposing the ways in which racism operates through law and throughout society (Parker & Lynn, 2009). Emerging from two distinct perspectives, critical legal studies and the civil rights movement, CRT examines the relationship between the law and racial power and it recognizes the inherent burdens of institutional racism (Roithmayr, 1999). Particularly, CRT is concerned with questioning dominant ideology that systematically disadvantages people of color. Since schools are institutions of learning and are thought to function as meritocracies, but do not appear to operate as a system where student achievement is balanced, irrespective of race, many critical race scholars have sought to utilize CRT as a way to reposition the dominant concepts of race and racial identity that pervade education.

According to Taylor (2009), Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate IV are credited with bringing CRT to the forefront of educational discourse. Ladson-Billings (2009) recognized the need to establish a language for discussing the inequities of

education that resulted from years of discrimination and she felt that CRT's use of voice scholarship was a key component in challenging the dominant philosophies that pervade educational theory and practices (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Richard Delgado is credited with developing legal justification for presenting stories, or voice scholarship, as a way of knowing that allows for the introduction of moral analysis into legal scholarship (Tate, 1997). Additionally, Daniel Solorzano and Tara Yosso (2009) suggest that CRT, which endeavors to create a space for those whose voices and experiences are underrepresented, should also develop an approach to analyze the research that is specific to the process. Solorzano and Yosso are credited with introducing this approach to analysis as critical race methodology. These scholars have created a way to explore CRT analysis in education and their endeavors provide a foundation for this study.

According to Delgado and Stefancic (1995) CRT advocates several major tenets. While not universally accepted among all critical race theorists, they provide a foundation for racially based inquiry. Two of the main tenets that permeate this study are the understanding that race is a byproduct of social construction and the belief that there exists a unique voice that can articulate recurring or unifying ideas based on the experiences of racism and inequitable treatment.

Further, as I conduct this study, I draw on what Solorzano and Yosso (2009) term a critical race methodology approach throughout this study. Critical race methodology centers race, recognizes the ways in which racism exists and acknowledges the power of racism, questions established research, attends to the racially oriented experiences of people of color, and utilizes multiple disciplines in order to gain knowledge (Solorzano &

Yosso, 2009). From this approach, this research is guided by the following five perspectives.

1. Structural racism. Racism is pervasive and is central in understanding the experiences of African American students. Structural racism generally refers to a system of social structures, policies, and practices that generate and maintain race-based inequities (Yosso, 2006). For the purposes of this inquiry, however, structural racism is used as a way to examine how social structures, such as schools, maintain policies and practices that disadvantage African American students.
2. Dominant ideology. Traditional research often leads to policies and practices that marginalize people of color by imposing a standard way of acting, speaking, thinking, and knowing that has traditionally represented a white male perspective (Hilliard, 2003). This dominant ideology is imposed on students through the daily practices of schooling. This inquiry seeks to challenge this dominant ideology and to expose the factors that prevent African American students from maximizing their full potential.
3. Social justice. Schools are places where students learn about themselves and others. As such, schools have the power to effect social change. Due to bias assessments of standardized tests, African American students are often stigmatized as underachievers and are further marginalized (Hilliard, 2003). This inquiry aims to provide an alternative way to understand African American students as achievers.

4. **Experiential knowledge.** Knowledge can be acquired through experience. Students inform this research effort by providing stories and counterstories which are meant to help the reader gain a better understanding of the issues that affect their academic experiences.
5. **Transdisciplinary.** To gain a greater understanding of how perceptions, identity, and race affect African American achievement, this study seeks to contextualize racial identity and perceptions through a psycho-social and a socio-historical lens.

Clarification of Terms

Race – According to a dictionary reference, race is defined as “a group of individuals within a biological species able to breed together” (Mish et al. 1997, p. 603). This definition places race within a biological context but fails to address its social connotations. From a sociological perspective, race has a very different meaning. In fact, as it relates to biology, race loses much of its meaning since as human species we have many biological similarities. Instead race becomes meaningful when we recognize its historical significance. According to DeCuir-Gunby (2006), race from a socio-historical perspective is a socially constructed category that has historically been formed and redefined as it satisfies the needs of various groups. This definition of race parallels a major tenet in CRT, differential racialization.

Racism - Delgado and Stefancic (2001) define racism as a system of practices that lead to the mistreatment of one group by another based on a condition of belonging to a particular race or ethnic group.

Majoritarianism – According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), majoritarianism is the view that the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of the dominant culture are standard and normal.

Voice – According to Dixon and Rousseau (2006), voice is “the assertion and acknowledgement of the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge (p. 35). According to Ladson-Billings (2009), “the voice component of CRT provides a way to communicate the experiences and realities of the oppressed... (p. 24).

White privilege – According to Dyer (2008), whiteness is termed the power of invisibility. According to the power of invisibility, whiteness is the norm. As all other races must be classified, researched, or probed to identify their characteristics and decipher their differences, white is the racial standard. All other differences are judged according to how they are not white. This invisibility, non-classification, lends itself to privilege. McIntosh (2004) describes white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets... special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” that advantage some because they have white skin (p. 188).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Black achievement in the public school setting has become a widespread topic for discussion. Hence, there is a great deal of literature and research on the topic. Based on the discrepancies in measures of standardized assessments, much of the research centers on identifying the causes of underachievement. Accordingly, much of this literature is focused on African American students, their families, and their culture. The crux of that research has centered on determining the major cause of underachievement and the findings were generally framed from a deficit perspective (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Moving away from the deficit perspective of understanding achievement in the Black community, this literature review examines the ways in which African American students experience education in terms of their identity and their culture. In the first portion of this review, identity is discussed in terms of how one's identity mediates the ways in which individuals understand and respond to their experiences. The second portion of this review centers on culture and examines whether cultural differences can be utilized to empower students of color. The final portion of this review analyzes the ways that race influences student experiences and their perceptions of education and academic achievement.

The Role of Identity

Identity is a general term used to describe how an individual is recognized by others or how an individual views him or herself both as a human being and in relation to others. It can refer to one's self-concept, self development, role behavior, and /or to a

particular group affiliation (Woodward, 2004). Additionally, identity is primarily understood in a social, cultural, and/or psychological context and is marked by (socially constructed) categories that are subject to differing interpretations (Kruks, 2001). Alcoff (2006) describes these categories as fundamental, contextual, and relational. Thus, social categories affect how one is perceived, how one perceives and interprets his or her experiences and interactions, and they affect how one is positioned in the world. Alcoff (2006) states, that “it [social categories] contributes to one’s perspective on events – to one’s interpretation of conversations, ... and social theories, - and it determines in part, ... one’s status within the community; and the way in which... what one says and does is interpreted by others” (p.92). Within the context of this literature review, identity is analyzed through a social context.

Identity is extensively interpreted in terms of its definition and implications. Identity studies are complex and diverse in nature and have generated heavy debate among researchers and ideologists. Some identity theorists offer interpretations of social behavior based on the belief that identity is static in nature; while other theorists declare the fluidity of identity development (Hogg, M., Terry, D., & White, K., 1995). The effects of social interactions are interpreted based on how one understands identity. Essentialists view identity as constant and focus on the idea that individuals within a group share common experiences that are essential to group membership (Mohanty, 2000). Essentialists are often criticized for implying that the personal experiences of members of marginalized groups, without proper analysis of relevant majoritarian influences, abate other ways of knowing (hooks, 1994). Postmodernists assert that identities are contrived social constructions that tend to be ambiguous, or indefinite.

Identity, by postmodernists' accounts, is produced from unreliable narratives which are based on subjective accounts of experience (Mohanty, 2000). Thus, identities may fluctuate based on the shifting nature and accounts of social interactions. According to Alcoff (2000), theorists who make this assumption believe that "identities are not and can never be accurate representations of the real self" (p.321). Post positivist realists declare that identity, not only accounts for one's lived experience but it also involves recognition of the social categories in which an individual exists. Thus, post positive realists, explain identity by positing that "the different social categories (such as gender, race, class, and sexuality), that together constitute an individual's social location, are causally related to the experiences she will have" (Moya, 2000, p.81). In other words, in order to understand identity, one must recognize that there exists an interrelatedness of social categories, such as race and gender, which both effect and situate the experiences that an individual will have. For example, a person who is recognized as a wealthy, Black female may experience a situation differently than someone who is recognized as a Black male who lacks financial means. In this way, an analysis of identity must include recognition of an individual's visible attributes and the ways in which they contribute to how one would encounter the world (Alcoff, 2006).

Alcoff (2006) explains that our racial and gendered identities provide a lens through which we view, respond to, and understand our experiences. Our social location within our racial and gendered bodies prompts in us a different point of reference and different perceptual access. This idea does not equate to a claim of essentialist knowledge, however, it does mean that ways of knowing are accessed differently depending on one's social location. In other words, individuals perceive an experience

based on their own background knowledge and points of reference that are related to their gendered and racial experiences (Alcoff, 2006).

Given that, as Heyes (2009) reports, race and gender along with other social identifications influence how we experience our realities, there are several divergent ideological frameworks that are centered on explaining the significance of identity within social structures. One viewpoint on identity includes the belief that identities are social constructions that can only be recognized through the subordinate characterizations that position the identified person as subjugated. Other analysis includes whether or to what degree one's identity can make them more susceptible to stereotyping, marginalization, voicelessness, and/or powerlessness (Alcoff, 2000). Additionally, much debate converges on the understanding of norms and how the process of normalizing can create the position of the *other*. Some theorists assert that within a social setting particular ways of doing, being, and knowing create an environment of exclusion and marginalization which establishes a privileged or a *normal* way of thinking that carries a greater weight within larger society (McLaren, 1993). From this standpoint, the authority to speak is granted to those whose knowledge has already been confirmed and accepted as truth. Contrasting viewpoints, then, are disputed on the basis that there is no existing objective evidence to support a differing point of view. From this perspective, doubt arises relating to the authenticity of knowledge generated from experience. However, for those who believe that their experience and social location create a way of knowing that directly contrasts dominate practice and theory, this stance is very discouraging (hooks, 1994). Thus, in terms of identity, a crucial concern is the epistemology of experience. Hence, the next portion of this review will converge on identity and experience.

hooks's (1994) analysis of experience echoes the conflict created in institutions where hierarchal relationships exist. Like McLaren (1993), hooks acknowledges that, experience, untheorized is problematic, but she also recognizes that the telling of personal experience, along with critical analysis, has a significant value. She further emphasizes that experiential knowledge is a vehicle used to access unique ways of knowing and can be used to inform how we know and understand what we know. Problems arise, however, concerning whether experiential knowledge disrupts the process of knowing. Criticisms from Fuss (1989) echo this concern. Fuss questions how one should account for experience and she questions whether narrative accounts of personal experiences will advance the discussion or simply create confusion. Fuss argues that accounts of personal experience are often used to invoke an authoritarian stance that silences and further marginalizes the other. She advocates the idea that experience is too shaky to be reliable and she questions what types of experiences count in a way that grants particular people the right to speak about their marginalized positions. However, Rossi (2005) interjects that if one thinks of experience as a "multi-layered account of human engagement with the world ... [that] functions as explicitly differentiated from other elements of that engagement," then it is possible to conceive that experiential knowledge can be a valuable tool used to create a more complete theory that is more inclusive and doesn't exclude or marginalize experiences or views on the basis that they are unsubstantiated and, thus, unreliable (p. 276). hooks (1994) agrees with this sentiment, acknowledging that one's account of his or her lived experience is unique and can enhance knowledge and create a richer way of knowing. Lived experience, according to hooks, allows for an understanding that is not easily voiced from a detached point of view or conveyed from

an account of historical facts. Instead, hooks proclaims that there is a special way of knowing, a privileged standpoint, that includes a “unique mixture of experiential and analytical” knowledge which emerges from the “passion of experience, the passion of remembrance” (p. 90). Thus, peoples’ experiences, combined with their social and historical locations and their cognitive awareness, grants individuals a unique position for understanding their realities and constitutes a valid way of knowing (Moya, 2000). Henze (2000) echoes this idea in his interpretation of epistemic privilege as a unique knowledge one holds or acquires by interpreting the effects of experience as it relates to one’s social positioning.

This belief in a privileged standpoint grants those, whose perspectives and experiences have traditionally been marginalized, the authority to speak for themselves and to assert their place in a society that can overlook the importance of their perspectives. “Critical Race Theory... [demands] personal expression that allows our experiences and lessons, learned as people of color, to convey the knowledge we possess in a way that is empowering to us and ... empowering to those on whose behalf we act” (Calmore, 1995, p. 321). Calmore’s (1995) assertion is what many critical race theorists equate as the *voice* component of CRT. Voice, as Dixon and Rousseau (2006) explain, is the act of speaking about and recognizing the significance of the individual and communal experiences of African Americans in such a way that they are acknowledged as a legitimate way of knowing. Ladson-Billings (2009) explains that the voice component, naming one’s reality by communicating experience, is the first step in dismantling dyconsciousness.

Those that are dysconscious tend to view their way of thinking, or being as universal and they fail to recognize that a power differential exists within a socially stratified community that disadvantages some and privileges others (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Further, dysconscious individuals are not able to recognize institutional discriminatory practices; but they believe that as society operates based on meritocratic principles, inequities are acceptable. Thus, the voice component of CRT is an important tool used to reveal and challenge majoritarian views and practices (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The voice element of CRT signifies a theme of common experiences that counter dominant narratives. In this sense, the voice element does not imply that there is only one common voice that represents all people of color. Instead, the voice component allows for distinctive stories of individuals but recognizes the commonalities of experience. Thus, distinctive stories provide for a richer and deeper understanding of how discriminatory practices affect people of color.

CRT scholars believe that the voice element can be used to counteract inaccurate, discriminatory, or stereotypical views regarding people of color. The voice component can be used as evidence to document discriminatory practices and to enlighten moral reasoning (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Matsuda (1995) suggests that “when notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, are examined not from an abstract position but from a position of groups who have suffered through history,” their explicit descriptions can be used to document institutional as well as overt racism (p. 64). According to Matsuda (1995) this process is essential if one wants to affect change.

Hence the use of narrative is an important instrument that situates and contextualizes problems of discrimination, racism, and marginalization. Therefore,

stories, counterstories, and narrative analysis are utilized often among CRT scholars. This approach is vital to critical race theorists because as Lawrence (1992) explains, “human problems considered and resolved in the absence of context are often misperceived, misinterpreted, and mishandled” (p. 2281). Further, in order to offer greater insight into the experiences and realities of people of color, CRT scholars have used fictional elements as well as authentic narratives to offer a greater, more in-depth assessment of experience. These narratives can act as counterstories that counteract the grand narratives which have existed to silence the experiences of people of color.

Noted author, Toni Morrison, often depicts this method in her writing. Morrison uses her writing to reclaim the power lost through silencing and excluding the other (Davis, 1982). Her stories serve as a powerful example of how stories can be used to rename, reclaim, and reposition people who are marginalized through social norms and discriminating behavior. According to Davis (1982), Morrison demonstrates that power can be gained by naming one’s own experiences and defining one’s own reality. This is done by placing the experiences of her Black characters at the center of the narrative. In doing this, she exposes the irony of the disregarded but distressing reality that African Americans face when they are misnamed or renamed something other than who they believe themselves to be. Davis recognizes this as an ontological experience in which one is affected by and through (mis) recognition. This (mis) recognition or misnaming, according to Hall (1990), has “the power to make us see and experience ourselves as ‘Other’” (p.225). This experience of being named, if not resisted, can cause an individual to internalize this misnomer and to see him/herself, not as who he/she believes him/herself to be, but as others perceive him/her to be. According to Hall (1990), these

misrepresentations of people and their experiences, if internalized or left unexamined, have the effect of normalizing the marginalization of the *Other*. For Davis (1982), this internalization can lead one to aspire to an abstract ideal imposed by another's views of what one is or ought to be and it leads individuals to relinquish the control of defining one's self. There is greater opportunity for those who maintain a position of authority to exercise the power to name and define the *other* in a hierarchal social system.

Consequently, in a society where hierarchal relationships exist, the emergence of an unbalanced system of power can be maintained by excising the ability to define other individuals.

Counterstories serve to represent the perspectives of people of color. They challenge attitudes, discriminatory behavior, stereotypes, and the inequitable distribution of power and resources within hierarchal social structures. Stories, those that are fictional and those that reflect an actual account of personal or communal experience, can be used to interject a different perspective into dominant ideology and compel readers to interrogate the ideology, conditions, experiences, and social locations of the individuals involved in the stories. Narratives, such as the actual accounts given in Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991), Gail Thompson's *Up Where We Belong* (2007), or Ann Arnett Ferguson's *Bad Boys* (2001), provoke imagery and inspire empathy that accords others the ability to *see* into the mind of marginalized individuals and to vicariously experience the realities of their world. In these narrative accounts, readers are given the opportunity to understand the reality of injustice, discrimination, and marginalization as it is experienced by the individual.

A key component to CRT narratives is the language. Often, the way language is utilized and expressed is as important to the narrative accounts as the story that speaker is trying to convey. The language acts as a portrait used to paint a picture in the mind of the reader. Further, as explained by Duncan (2006), language can work as a portal that draws people in and connects them revealing a unique view of difference. Morrison (1992) captures this sentiment when she writes, “I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive ‘othering’...” (p. X). Language, in this way, is reflective of reality and can be used to communicate the strife and the strivings of people whose experiences are displaced or ignored. CRT scholars believe that the language used, the way stories are presented, has the potential to transform by creating a more vivid and perceivable outlook on bound beliefs and ideology. As such, the language of stories and counterstories is a vital instrument used to introduce into established ideology a different way of knowing that can, as Freire (1993) explains, explicate “limit-situations”, conditions that hinder transformation (p.92).

In order for there to be transformation, those individuals and groups who are marginalized must speak on their own behalf. As Freire (1993) asserts “human existence cannot be silent...” (p.88). Those whose views, perceptions, and realities have been altered, distorted or silenced must assert their right to speak their truths. Using Freire’s theory to further explain, there cannot be a complete understanding of a theme or event if it excludes the perceptions and realities of the people whose lives are intimately affected. Therefore, individuals must speak their own truths.

Traditionally, marginalized people have been left out of dominant discourse because of disputes regarding who should be accorded epistemic privilege. However, in order for transformation to occur, individuals must speak and act on their own behalves. This act of agency, “a person’s socially acknowledged right to interpret and speak for herself” recognizes that individuals and groups who are marginalized are better positioned to advocate for themselves (Henze, 2000, p. 23). There is power in words, according to Anzaldua (2009). Individuals can reclaim identity, readjust the ways that they have been perceived or misperceived by speaking for themselves. This act of agency, according to Anzaldua (2009), requires individuals to recognize that experience matters and to recognize that they have a right and a duty to speak of their experiences. While different individuals have different experiences, those experiences are mediated by their social location and provide a unique interpretive framework from which one views their world. According to Henze (2000), collective accounts of individual experiences, mediated by individual interpretations, establish well-founded positions necessary to impact change. In this way, effective acts toward transformation begin with the individual’s willingness to share his or her interpretations of their experiences and how they have been affected by those experiences.

According to Murrell (2009), African American students have an urgent need to address the mischaracterizations and stigmatizing images that often beset them. For, as Murrell declares, in terms of achievement in school, African American youth are always regarded negatively. Using the gap in achievement as evidence, African American youth are often considered less competent and, in some ways, *unteachable*. In this way, Black students are relegated to marginal positions and are received differently within the

school. This treatment can affect students' self-concept and it can affect how students are perceived within the learning environment (Irvine, 2009). To this extent, it has been theorized that African American students have innate inadequacies that prevent them from achieving academic success (Murrell, 2009). Additionally, the over-abundance of placement within special education programs creates the image that students of color are more likely to have behavioral and learning disorders (Cartledge & Dukes, 2009). These deficit perspectives of African American learners also extend into their home environments and their communities. Within their home environments, Black youth, according to some theories, are deprived of the intellectual stimulation necessary to develop the cognitive skills that facilitate achievement (Cartledge & Dukes, 2009). These perspectives of African American students provide cause for analysis and a basis to address, from their unique perspective, their experiences with school.

The voice component of CRT seeks to dislodge dominant theories of cultural inadequacies and to challenge views that render African American ways of being and knowing insufficient. Mainstream theories grounded in the understanding that students of color are culturally deficient devalue the cultural knowledge and abilities that students of color possess (Yosso, 2006). When these beliefs are challenged, students of color can not only use their stories to understand the pattern of racial discrimination and bias, but also students can empower themselves by naming their reality and inserting themselves within the conversation about African American achievement.

Yosso (2006) reveals that the tendency to look at African American students from a deficit point of view is a form of racism that is pervasive within institutions of learning. Analysis of the deficit perspective reveals that students of color and their families are

considered at fault for the lack of student achievement for two main reasons. African American parents do not value education and do not provide academic support for their children and students of color do not develop the cultural awareness and skills set that is conventionally recognized within schools (Yosso, 2006). To combat this assumed deficit, educators often establish programs designed to teach acceptable cultural norms and values to students of color who *lack* this knowledge. Under this guise of education, students must accept this perceived cultural knowledge as truth and begin to act accordingly. In this way, students' prior knowledge is disregarded and students are pressed to become receivers of information who do not question or challenge what is being taught. As Freire (1993) contends, this banking method of education works to limit or inhibit the cognitive development that could provoke critical analysis of the contradictions between the lessons taught in school and the reality of the students' experiences. According to Freire (1993), if schools are successful, students will continue to be collectors of information until, through an existential experience, they discover the inherent contradictions of this way of being or until they enter, what Cross (1991) terms the encounter stage, and face a circumstance that causes them to readjust the way they think of what they know about themselves. This encounter may "shatter the relevance of the person's current identity ...[causing the person to] radically rethink his or her own conception....in order to be ...transformed (Cross, 1991, p.105). For Freire (1993), students will not gain true understanding until they begin to question, analyze, and evaluate "problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world..." (p. 81). As students develop a deeper consciousness by questioning and challenging what they encounter, they begin to understand not only that there is not just one way of being or

behaving, but also they come to realize that the act of questioning and evaluating can challenge the cultural norms that present themselves as contradictions to the students' experiences.

Within the school system, school policies, practices, and the curriculum are all influenced by established cultural norms (Yosso, 2006). In other words, cultural norms dictate what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable in terms of the policies and practices implemented by school officials. As such, educators often place emphasis on the differences between their *normative* cultural practices and the cultural variances of students of color. As Roithmayr (1999) explains, in schools students of color are taught that the cultural expressions that they have learned in their home are “primitive, mythical, backward” but by contrast, they are taught that the lessons learned “in their classrooms are objective, historically accurate, and universal” (p.4). In censuring cultural difference, educators advance the deficit thinking and proclivities that render the cultural practices of students of color, objectionable (Yosso, 2006). Ogbu (2008), for example, emphasizes that African American students do not embrace traditional learning strategies because they equate it with rejecting of their own cultural norms. Instead, African Americans don an oppositional stance that rejects standard means of behavior. Ogbu (2008) explains that as African Americans students bond through a collective identity there can be a tendency to associate academic success with the dominant group who, for some, are the traditional embodiment of success. In this way one response is to reject the process of schooling due to the collective belief that these institutions promote assimilationist views. For the individuals in Ogbu's (2008) study embracing school values is “equivalent to giving up self-respect” and rejecting one's own culture (p. 20). Yosso (2006) declares that this way

of viewing African American culture is incomplete and does not recognize the cultural significance of academic success. By examining standardizing notions of culture and cultural practice as it relates to students, students of color can challenge these and other implications that their cultural practices are flawed.

According to Banks (1991), cultures are diverse and can refer to the ways in which people behave, the language they speak, codes or symbols that are used, the artifacts they produce, and the values that they uphold. Although, there are numerous ways to understand culture, its characteristics are not fixed and students of color can and do represent their culture in a variety of ways. Majors and Ansari (2009) find that students can use their culture in ways that affirm them and counter faulty views about their culture and their intellectual abilities. This ability to counter conventional theory is important because theories regarding African American culture and cultural deficits are often used to explain student failures (Yosso, 2006; Majors & Ansari, 2009).

In an attempt to provide structure for using culture to theorize educational success, Bourdieu (1986) hypothesized that cultural knowledge is garnered through one's education and upbringing and he asserted that cultural interests and practices were closely linked to an individual's familial ties and level of education. Bourdieu also believed that the extent to which one's home and family background accorded them privilege is dependent upon how these practices are valued or undervalued within society. Thus, it follows that the degree to which one's cultural knowledge is accorded privilege in schools, depends upon the degree to which those cultural practices are accepted and included in society. Using terminology generally found in economic theory, Bourdieu explained that culture and cultural knowledge have value in an educational market.

Bourdieu postulated that there are educational benefits for students who are culturally enlightened. Following this reasoning, he suggested that there are greater scholastic gains for students who possess more cultural capital. Cultural capital is the cultural knowledge that is gained through school and home education that can eventually give individuals greater social advantage. According to Bourdieu, since this type of capital is limited, power and social mobility can be maintained by groups or individuals who hold more cultural capital. Thus, for Bourdieu this understanding of cultural capital can be used to explain cultural and social reproduction. This occurs because cultural capital is inherited and passed on to privileged groups within society in a manner that excludes individuals who lack these particular cultural norms (Bourdieu, 1986).

Though Bourdieu offered his theory as an explanation of social structure, it has been used as evidence that some communities lack cultural wealth and are culturally deficient (Yosso, 2006). From this perspective, one can assume that only certain types of culture are valued and that all other forms of cultural expression exist in comparison to a standard culture. This creates a cultural hierarchy that privileges some types of cultural knowledge and devalues other forms. Within institutional settings, students of color often find that their type of cultural awareness is not valued because their cultural knowledge is not aligned to the cultural understandings that are valued within the school. Additionally, as T. Howard (2003) points out, in many cases educators initiate teaching and learning from a perspective that requires prior knowledge of the mainstream culture which includes behavior, values, and beliefs. This way of practicing education extends privilege to some while excluding others.

CRT scholars aim to shift the belief that cultural capital is limited to specific ways of being. Concluding that the traditional view of cultural capital is too narrow since it exclusively mirrors White, middle class values, CRT scholars seek to reveal additional ways of understanding cultural capital (Yosso, 2006). By centering the focus on African American experience from a historical context, scholars argue that Black students have a wealth of cultural capital (T. Howard, 2003; Yosso, 2006). From this perspective students of color possess a wide range of knowledge, skills, and abilities that constitute their cultural wealth. In fact, Yosso (2006) asserts that people of color cultivate their cultural knowledge in at least six different ways. These include: aspirational capital, the ability to hope for the best; linguistic capital, the knowledge gained through various communication styles; familial capital, the knowledge passed on through families regarding ways of coping and navigating life; social capital, a network of human resources who provide support for one another; navigational capital, the ability to traverse through social spaces; and resistant capital, the skills and knowledge that allow individuals to oppose and challenge inequality (Yosso, 2006). Yosso (2005) explains that each of the six build upon one another, thereby creating an extensive degree of cultural wealth that helps students of color process their interactions with others.

Carter's (2003) research provides a concrete example of these forms of cultural capital. Her study asserts that both mainstream and non-mainstream cultural capital are valuable to African American students and she shows the ways in which students' negotiation of the two often affect their academic identities. Carter expresses that non-mainstream cultural capital can be used to help youth develop and maintain a healthy self-esteem and to gain acceptance among their peers. Carter reveals that non-mainstream

cultural practices aid students in their ability to handle situations of institutional discrimination. She explains that students use their cultural knowledge to rebuff negative assertions about their academic desires. Carter demonstrates that as students learn to navigate between these two cultures they are better able to cope. In this way Carter's study demonstrates, as Yosso (2006) theorized, that students of color possess a wealth of cultural resources that they use to empower themselves and to challenge the notions that they are culturally deficient.

“As part of the challenge to deficit thinking in education, it should be noted that race is often coded as ‘cultural difference’ in schools.” (Yosso, 2006, p.173) The next section of this review examines the role of race in schools.

When race is believed to be only a social construct, it denies the realities and the impact of a person's race on his or her life (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). However, attempts to classify and *race* people based on objective characteristics can be problematic when one considers that biologically, there are very few rigid markers that fit the ways that humans classify themselves (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). With this in mind, race can be thought of as a social construct that has a real effect on the lives of people living in a racialized body. As Williams (1991) states:

The simple matter of the color of one's skin so profoundly affects the way one is treated, so radically shapes what one is allowed to think and feel about this society, that the decision to generalize from this division is valid. (p.256)

Milner (2009) supports this view by maintaining that in terms of education, race is not just an abstract idea based solely on social constructions but race has a real effect on

Black students in terms of their learning experiences and learning opportunities. After conducting several studies of African Americans and student achievement and comparing the results of other, similar studies, Milner asserts that teachers are found to have lower expectations for Black students. Thus, these students are taught less and are not challenged enough. Further, Milner found that Black students are placed more often in special education classes and are not recognized for their intelligence. Instead, Milner adds, teachers often report that they notice these students' behavior and can only reflect on the ways that student behavior and attitude is different than traditional student behavior. To illustrate, Milner cites instances when African American students were subjected to harsher disciplinary actions than their white counterparts. In fact, according to Milner, documentation exists that suggests policies in public schools effectively treat Black students as though they are criminals, punishing them more severely and providing them less opportunity to recover and learn from mistakes. In other words, based on punishments, students are often discouraged and are rarely nurtured and encouraged to express their talents. Thus, according to Milner, teachers often see student differences as wrong. Davis and Jordan (1994) echo this sentiment and conclude that teachers and administrators often seek to control student differences by placing emphasis on discipline instead of academic instruction and activities. This negative evaluation affects students because it takes time away from teaching and learning and it removes them from the learning environment. Noguera (2003) points out, that negative evaluations distress those students who are deemed academically deficient, from a traditional standpoint, and who are most often removed from the school population and placed in isolation. This treatment parallels the treatment that adult criminals receive in society. Noguera

compares the tendency of school systems to disproportionately punish and drive away poor, low-income Black and Latino students to the expanding prison population and challenges educators to question the practice of overwhelmingly punishing African American students in ways that do not benefit them academically.

As Milner (2009) and Noguera (2003) suggest, racial identity for African American students, affects the way they experience school. Their research efforts have recognized that a relationship exists between African American identity and academic opportunity and their studies suggest that there is a connection between how students are perceived and treated and their racial identity. Although racial identity is a socially constructed concept, researchers recognize that an individual's racial classification as African American can have a *real* affect on how that individual relates to the academic process (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, and Zimmerman, 2003). Further, since racial classification is a social construction, one's racial classification does not bind all African American students to interpret their experiences in the same way. Researchers have found that the ways in which individuals recognize themselves influence how they interpret others' behavior and how they define themselves through their experiences (Chavous et al, 2003). Thus, research exists that uses the ways that people see themselves in terms of their racial identity as a way of understanding how individuals understand and respond to their academic experiences (Chavous et al, 2003). In other words, research has focused on the relationship between how people see themselves and how the understanding of self affects how they respond to their experiences. This type of research examines the way individuals regard their identity as a way to understand how individuals respond to their circumstances. In attempting to

understand the experiences of African American students attention must be paid, not only to the ways they are treated, but also attention must be given to the ways these students perceive what is happening within their environment. As such, the next portion of this review reveals the ways that an individual's perceptions about and understandings of race affect his/her academic experiences.

Many researchers have demonstrated that being a part of a group of people who have historically experienced racial discrimination affects how one experiences school (Steele, 2003; Watkins, 2001; Williams, 2005). Researchers have asserted that the degree to which African Americans feel connected to their racial identity influences their academic performance (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, & Zimmerman, 2003). Thus, studies on African American identity have focused on connectedness. Meaning, researchers are focused on determining to what extent African Americans feel connected to the Black community, in terms of traditions, culture, heritage, and awareness of racial bias. Moreover, according to Chavous, et al. (2003), individuals who feel strongly connected to their race and believe that others possess positive perceptions regarding their race were found to have positive attitudes about academic activities and have a solid attachment to school. Additionally, students who feel a strong connection to their race, but perceived high levels of racial bias from others also held positive academic attitudes. By contrast, individuals who did not feel a strong sense of connectedness and who possessed knowledge of racial bias did not have positive views about academic endeavors (Chavous, et al., 2003, p. 1086). These students also had the highest drop-out rate. In their study, Chavous, et al. (2003) found that for African

Americans, having a strong sense of connectedness to race is related to having strong motivation toward academic endeavors and is connected to academic success.

Other research recognizes that connectedness and awareness of racism alone, do not address how well or poorly students fair in terms of academic achievement.

Oyserman and Harrison (1999) suggest that there is a third component to racial identity that should be associated with academic achievement. Connecting achievement to one's sense of self is the third factor that links African American students' identity to their school performance. According to Oyserman and Harrison, the understanding of self as achiever is an important part of self-esteem development. For these authors, African American students who feel connected to their community, possess an awareness of racism, and are able to connect achievement to their vision of self, will most likely apply a greater effort in achieving success in school (Oyserman and Harrison, 1999). Thus, these studies can be related to Yosso's (2006) and Carter's (2003) findings about cultural capital. Students in the studies conducted by Chavous, et al. (2003) and Oyerman and Harrison (1999) demonstrate that students who possess familial capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital are more successful in school. These students possess a strong sense of racial identity, resist negative stereotypes, and believe that they can achieve academic success.

However, the work by Claude Steele introduces a different dynamic in understanding identity, identification with academics, and academic performance. In *Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African American Students* (2003), Steele uses the term, *stereotype threat* to interject an explanation as to how students of color understand themselves within the context of education and how

this understanding could lead to academic achievement or withdrawal. According to Steele, stereotype threat is “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Steele, 2003, p. 111). Steele maintains that a sense of connectedness to a particular group as well as an understanding of stereotypes or biases against that group can cause poor academic performance. In other words, students can be impacted by their understanding of how others see them. In his study on stereotype threat, Steele found that students underperformed when they felt that their performance could reflect negatively on the group with which they identified. Plainly stated, in one observation, African American students, who perceived that test performance was associated with intellectual ability, scored significantly lower than their Euro-American counterparts, who possessed similar academic ability. Steele maintains that because all students included in the study were determined to be academic equals, poor student performance during this study can be linked to the negative stereotypes regarding black intellectual inferiority, not actual ability levels. Additionally, for Steele, the threat of “being judged and treated poorly in settings where a negative stereotype about one’s group applies” can be so detrimental that it may cause students to disengage in academic endeavors (Steele, 2003, p.112). Turner (1997) echoes Steele by pointing out that one can feel pressure and anxiety from being part of a group that is generally recognized as academically inferior in such a way that it actually interferes with one’s abilities to perform. Turner’s (1997) assessment and Steele’s (2003) study speak to the need to interject a different viewpoint about the academic abilities of students of color. Since stereotypes can delineate the boundaries of how individuals view themselves and others they can also represent a space in an

individual's psyche that impacts the perceptions people have of their own abilities (hooks, 2003).

T. Howard's (2003) study also deals with perceptions. T. Howard allowed high school students to describe their perceptions of their academic identities and their perceptions of how others view their academic abilities. T. Howard defined academic identities as an understanding of self in relation to academic performance. In T. Howard's study, students reveal that parent expectations, student-teacher interactions, and the desire to attend college played a significant role in developing their academic identities. T. Howard's study demonstrates how students acquire cultural resources from their parents and their education. From their parents, students learned that they can counter negative racial attitudes and treatment by performing well academically which, in turn, would increase their chances for success. Also, significant in the study is the role of racial identity. Students revealed that they possessed a keen awareness of how their racial identity affected their interactions with teachers and their understanding of how they are to perform academically. In other words, some students report feeling that because of their racial identity, they needed to outperform other racial groups in order to be perceived as competent.

Expanding on this idea, Friend (2009) expresses the idea that racial socialization, "a culturally-specific parenting practice by which African American parents indoctrinate their children with the attitudes, perceptions, values, and behaviors that parents deem appropriate for their ethnic group," is a key factor in helping students learn the coping skills necessary to achieve academically (p. 7). This research echoes Yosso's (2006) findings that parents invest in their children's cultural capital. According to Friend's

(2009) research, students, whose parents enlighten them of potential, school-related racially bias perceptions, are found to develop better coping strategies that inform their academic identities and improve their academic performance. Providing students with this type of foundation, not only enlightens them, but also empowers them and gives them the social tools they may need in order to be successful.

To conclude, identity matters in the way individuals attain knowledge. In fact, our experiences are mediated by our identities. This means that our way of knowing is unique to who we are. However, students of color often find that their way of knowing and their experiences are often excluded, treated as wrong, or not viewed as pertinent to dominant ideology. This way of thinking effectively silences the experiences of students of color. With this in mind this literature review examined how experiential knowledge is understood and utilized by groups who are marginalized and left out of dominant discourse. As indicated in this review, groups or individuals who are marginalized find that they need to alter traditional theories or beliefs that place them in a negative light. A vital component to altering dominant ideology is the construct of *voice*. The voice element is needed for people to express their ways of knowing from their points of view. In this way, the voice element provides a way to challenge the views that students of color are deficient, culturally deprived and most deserving of harsher punishments. This review examined the notion that students of color lack cultural resources that support their academic goals and it exposed the pattern of inequitable punishments that these students experience. Moreover, this review affirms that there is a need to examine the experiences of students of color. Finally, this review recognized that students'

perceptions of themselves and others affect their point of view and their perspectives on their educational experiences and their academic achievement.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

“The best stories are those which stir people’s minds, hearts, and souls and by so doing give them new insights into themselves, their problems and their human condition.”

(Reason, 1981, p. 50)

I approached this study from a place of wonder. From the time I entered into an integrated high school and took notice of the differing ways my peers and I experienced high school, I wondered how our experiences shaped us and who we would eventually aspire to become. As I considered this study, I spent several hours alone and with former school mates recalling our stories and remembering the experience of recognizing ourselves as different in an integrated school. In those days and at our age we did not understand the concept of the *other* but we felt that we were perceived as different. Although, many of us perceived those experiences as negative, we felt inspired to prove we were not different, but just as capable as our peers. However, as I recall, many of my African American classmates did not feel inspired; instead, they expressed feelings of frustration and resented their *different* status and those feelings often resulted in the students alienating themselves from school related activities. These experiences as a student have created for me an expanded sense of wonder. For this reason, I find myself wanting to understand how experiences in school impact how African American students think of themselves and how this affects their academic identity. More precisely, this research is guided by the following question: *How do a selected group of African American students negotiate their knowledge of self and the perceptions of others in terms of their academic identity?* With this in mind I seek to gain insight from students

regarding how they make sense of their experiences in school and how that understanding impacts them academically. Consequently, I have embraced narrative inquiry because, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have observed, narrative inquiry is a means for studying experience. “Stated simply..., narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Webster and Mertova (2007) enhance this way of understanding narrative inquiry by indicating that there is an interconnectedness between narratives and experience. This means that stories can be used to help individuals understand their experiences.

Narrative inquiry offers researchers a distinct lens through which they can explore the ways people experience the world. Through the recollection and accounting of personal stories, narrative inquiry is well suited for addressing and analyzing those critical events that affect and influence how we understand ourselves (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In this way, stories help individuals to become cognizant of, evaluate, and interrogate their experiences (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). Further, as Webster and Mertova (2007) denote, narratives provide a way for individuals to offer insights into educational experiences that are traditionally excluded by more standardized methods of inquiry. Citing Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi’s (2005) study, Webster and Mertova (2007), demonstrate how children were often mischaracterized in ways that caused some children to become academic underachievers and others to become high achievers. Webster and Mertova (2007) argue that, in the Shields et al. (2005) study, the use of narratives provided a powerful and compelling example of students’ experiences in a way that allowed teachers to reposition their way of thinking and reconsider their approach with children.

According to Chase (2008), researchers see narratives as a way to develop meaning by interrogating the experiences and actions of others. Through narratives, narrators (participants) can convey the significance of the story from their point of view. Further, narratives allow the narrators to share their personal thoughts, their emotional states, and the meaning that they have associated with the experience. In this way, the narrator's story is unique to the individual. The distinctiveness of the stories told by the narrators (participants) is critical to understanding how students are affected by perceptions about their identity and how their perceptions relate to their academic performance.

As Chase (2008) and Webster and Mertova (2007) suggest, narrative inquiry can be thought of as inquiry into social experiences and social interactions and used to interrogate and decenter the norms of institutionalized practices. To do this, researchers must place the narrators (participants) at the center of the study and allow them to voice their reality. To situate the narrator's voice, emphasis is placed on developing a thorough understanding of how the narrator positions himself within the story. This means that the researcher must attend to the ways in which the narrator (participant) reveals his/her understanding of self, historical location, and social/cultural alliances. This additional knowledge helps to provide context for the narrator's (participant's) experiences. Using narratives, researchers can utilize these understandings of their participants to decipher how the participants derive meaning from their experiences and develop their beliefs about who they are within the context of a specific institutional environment. To this extent, researchers view narratives as lived experiences and often place a great deal of

emphasis on the narrator's voice; how the narrator positions himself/herself within the narrative (Chase, 2008 & Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Additionally, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry is three-dimensional. In other words, narrative studies center on three-dimensional space that encompasses descriptions of interactions, movement through time, and recognition of the significance of place/location. In this way, in order to derive meaning from the experiences of others, narrative studies are centered on a particular location, personal and social interactions, and narrative studies address how participants' stories about past experiences affect their present understanding about themselves. This kind of inquiry is intended to encourage the reader to experience the narrator's experience. Studies conducted in this way provide access into the narrator's perspective and give the reader a more authentic view of the narrator's experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative inquiry is considered action-oriented in that its purpose is to accomplish a goal. By this Chase (2008) acknowledges that narrators see their stories as a way to either explain, inform, challenge or act in some other way. Further, according to Chase (2008), the narratives within narrative inquiry, can instigate positive changes and awareness that previously had not existed. To this effect, the stories of people whose views have been excluded or overlooked can challenge traditionally accepted assumptions and social biases. In other words, narratives can disrupt the majoritarian stories that render marginalized groups as deficient or inadequate. Chase (2008) further suggests that one of the goals of narrative inquiry is to "break the stranglehold of oppressive metanarratives" that inform dominant views of what is considered truth (p. 83). Traditionally, mainstream scholarship has recognized the experiential knowledge of

African American students as a deficit and has overlooked the value of learning from students' experiences (Bernal, 2002). By acknowledging students' voices and seeking to understand what students know and how they come to know, this inquiry is intended to acknowledge students as "holders and creators of knowledge" (Bernal, 2002, p 121). As Ladson-Billings (2000) concludes, there is great need for scholarship that will directly confront the social norms and symbols that "depersonalize us" (p. 272). In accord with Ladson-Billings (2000), He and Phillion (2008) advocate for inquiry which challenges dominate narratives that render students of color as deficient. This type of narrative inquiry, termed critical narrative inquiry, exposes silenced stories and decenters dominate narratives. In this way, narrative inquiry, from a critical perspective aspires to provide informed understanding and seeks to enhance or alter misguided assumptions (He & Phillion, 2008). Inquiry, in this way, not only seeks to explore the experiences of groups of people who are traditionally placed on the margins of research, but this inquiry also challenges conventional research literature by centering the knowledge held by underrepresented and often mischaracterized groups of individuals (He & Phillion, 2008).

This way of viewing narrative inquiry corresponds with the course of this research. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write, people live storied lives and our lives are filled with stories of our experiences. Along with this reasoning we can ascertain that African American students, who are often the subject of much discourse concerning the achievement gap, have stories to share regarding their academic experiences. As such the participants in this study articulate their individual interpretations of their high school experiences. The students provide insight as to how they situate their African American identity and perceptions of their identity in their understanding of academic achievement.

The focus on providing space for and recognition of the participants' voice aligns well with the fundamental tenets of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The critical narrative approach allows me, as the researcher, to center the voice of my participants and recognizes and validates their stories as lived experience. This approach grants the participants the opportunity to name their own reality and to provide context for their experiences (Hermes, 1999). One of the ideas brought forth by critical race theorists is to insist that the voices and the experiences of people of color are recognized (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). As Bernal (2002) points out, stories from students of color demonstrate that they are holders of knowledge that can demystify, disrupt, or inform public perception. With this reasoning, Ladson-Billings (2009) offers that educators can use the voice scholarship inherent in critical race theory as a way to challenge the dominant educational discourse that excludes the positions of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The action oriented nature of narrative inquiry is also consistent with major components of critical race theory. Critical race theory calls for a critical analysis of the human relationships that exist within schools to reveal how established norms inhibit specific groups from addressing their needs and concerns (Stovall, 2005). In this way, critical race theory examines dominant ideology and provides a basis for challenging hegemonic discourses that silence and marginalize African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Considering the ways in which the process of narrative inquiry overlaps with the goals of CRT, critical narrative inquiry informs the way in which I organize this research effort.

My use of CRT as a lens of focus in this inquiry acknowledges race as a factor by integrating narratives told from a racial viewpoint. Further, as consistent with the goals of

CRT, my desire is to use critical narrative inquiry to challenge any mischaracterizations, create awareness, and to extend the discourse on African American student achievement. In other words, this study provides a space for students to tell stories that could challenge any misinformed notions of their identities, create awareness of the skills and knowledge students possess, and to extend the discourse of African American achievement beyond the cultural deficit or difference model. This means that through this study, I intend to center student narratives in a way that validates and recognizes as legitimate the knowledge that students can contribute to the discourse on education and achievement.

Doing Narrative Inquiry

As researchers, we are not always privy to another person's experiences. We gain access to others' experiences through the stories that are relayed to us by others. When doing narrative inquiry, researchers often seek these stories through interviews. Narrative analysis is an interactive process that can be divided into the following three stages: telling, transcribing, and analyzing (Riessman, 1994). During the first stage, telling, the researcher should generate open-ended questions that stimulate narrative responses (Flick, 2006). According to Riessman (1994), open-ended questions give more control to the narrator and allow him/her to construct more meaningful responses. In addition, the open-ended questions should be followed by more probing questions. These questions are constructed to clarify any portions of the narrative that were unclear. These questions are usually unscripted and are used solely to generate a more meaningful discourse. The next phase of narrative inquiry, as told by Riessman (1994), involves transcribing. During this phase, researchers convert the initial interview into a rough transcription. Then they go back and re-transcribe portions of the interview so that it can be analyzed in greater

detail. Transcribing is an essential step in the process because interpretive categories often emerge during this phase. During this stage the researcher can note and clear up any ambiguities between the researcher and the participant. Follow-up interview questions are often generated during this stage (Riessman, 1994). Analyzing is the third stage. It is closely related to the transcription stage in that analysis develops through the process of listening to the recordings and interpreting the transcripts (Riessman, 1994). As Riessman (1994) explains, during the analysis stage, “close and repeated listening, coupled with methodical transcribing, often leads to insights...” that deepens our understanding of the narrative (p. 253).

Literature on African American students indicates that students’ racial identity is a significant factor that affects how students experience school (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Additionally, reviewing reports from NCES (2007) and recognizing that African American students are experiencing school success at a significantly lower rate than their European American counterparts provides the basis for this inquiry. Therefore, participant interviews provide a way to attain knowledge of how students who are considered at-risk overcame the challenges they faced in school in order to graduate.

According to the U.S Census Bureau (2001), there are specific conditions or characteristics that place students at a higher than normal possibility of being named at-risk by educators. These factors include being retained in a grade, having dropped out of school, having a child or becoming pregnant during one’s school age years, and being raised in a single parent household. Additionally, using surveys collected from eight different schools systems among several states, Shirley Wells from the National Dropout Prevention Center (1989) reaffirmed the findings of the U.S. Census Bureau and

concluded that there were several additional factors that educators used to label students as at-risk. Wells (1989) found that placement in special education programs, having been cited on multiple occasions for truancy, and having a large number of counseling or discipline referrals were all factors that indicated a potential for being labeled at-risk. Further, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (1992), low-socio-economic status and low scores on standardized achievement tests were also factors that affect students' academic potential.

Although, these characteristics are listed as factors that educators use to determine whether or not to consider students at-risk, they do not automatically ensure that students will fail. According to Land and Legters (2002), traditional ways of identifying whether students are labeled at-risk are expanding to include elements such as teacher efficacy, student and teacher perceptions, variations in parental involvement, student motivation, and programs of study. These factors, once included could provide a richer way of understanding why students are considered and labeled at-risk. However, as these factors have not been considered on a wide scale prior to this study, they are not included in this research. Therefore, in terms of this study, the following factors are used to signify whether students were considered at-risk of failure during their school careers. These factors include being retained in a grade, having low scores on standardized test, having dropped out of school, having been cited on multiple occasions for truancy, having a large number of counseling or discipline referrals, having a child or becoming pregnant while in school, and being raised in a single parent household or being a part of a family with a low socioeconomic status. Students were expected to identify whether they were affected by any of the aforementioned factors.

Included in this study are the experiences of both African American males and females. Since studies indicate that African American males are more likely to be placed in special education programs, more likely to be suspended, more likely to drop out, and are more likely to be cited for disciplinary issues, their perspectives provide a great deal of insight as to how students of color negotiate their understandings of their black identity in terms of their academic identity (Davis, 2009). Further, although African American females fare better than the male counterparts, Black female students find that they are also subjected to biased treatment from educators (Woods, 2009). African American females are more likely to be directed towards more *feminine* career choices and are discouraged from taking more assertive positions in the class (Woods, 2009). Moreover, according to Evans-Winters (2007) female students are more likely to be praised for their social skills while receiving less praise for the intellectual ability. Both male and female perspectives are needed in order to identify the consistent patterns of behavior that affect student achievement.

Entry and Access

The students who participated in this study represented a particular purposeful sample called a criterion sample because they were chosen based on specific criteria. According to Creswell (2007), in purposeful sampling, participants are selected because “they can purposefully inform an understanding of the... study” (p. 125). Creswell (2007) further indicates that, in terms of a narrative inquiry such as this, participant selection is a key factor that should prompt the inquirer to focus on the qualities of the individuals who participate in the study. With this in mind, I began the process of selecting participants by, first, identifying the specific criteria that each participant should possess. My goal

was to find people who could most effectively inform and deepen understanding of the experiences of successful African American students who were considered at-risk during their pre-collegiate years. This required identifying African American students who were high school graduates between the ages of 18-22 who experienced racism or race related issues while in school. Also, during their 8th through 12th grade years, these students must have possessed one or more of the characteristics of a student who is considered “at-risk”.

In establishing the criteria for this study, I determined that since my study centered on understanding how a select group of African Americans experienced school and race-related issues during the 8th-12th grade, I needed to select students who were, indeed, African American students with race related experiences. I chose 18–22 year olds because I wanted students who would have had an opportunity to develop some critical distance from their experiences with high school. It was my hope that the distance, the time between graduation and the interview, would allow the participants to be more reflective about their experiences. According to Cook-Sather (2006), “when students have this opportunity, they derive insights about their ... learning experiences” (p. 353). However, I also chose students whose graduation date did not exceed five years because I wished to speak with students who would have relative ease in reframing the events of their high school experiences. Finally, I chose students who met the at-risk criteria and had successfully completed high school because research about these students is limited. As I began the process of research, I discovered that there was a great deal of information about at-risk students and examinations of school failure but not a great deal of

information about their successes. For this reason, I specifically sought students who met these criteria.

After establishing the initial criteria, I reached out to friends, family members, colleagues, and associates to find a pool of potential participants who ranged in age from 18-22 years old and had successfully completed their high school education. From this, I was given the names and contact information of 31 high school graduates who indicated that they would be interested in participating in this study. After sorting through the list of names, I found that 17 of the 31 individuals provided sufficient contact information and met the age requirement for the study. Since all of these individuals were referred to me and I did not know them prior to receiving their names and contact information I called and emailed each of them to both introduce myself and to confirm their interest in speaking with me about their experiences in school. Ten of the 17 potential participants responded positively and after several phone calls, emails, and text messages, each of them agreed to promptly complete the pre-questionnaire and return it to me through email. Finally, of the ten who agreed to participate, I received nine completed questionnaires, five from females and four from males.

The questionnaire was designed to learn more about each participant and their high school experiences. Each participant was asked questions that were intended to aid in determining whether the students experienced racism or race-related issues and whether they met any of the at-risk criteria during their 8th -12th grade school years. However, after reading the returned questionnaires, I found that, while many of the students were forthcoming about their race-related experiences, only a few of them were forthcoming about their living arrangements or their grades or their behavior while in

school. For this reason and because I was unclear about whether each of them met the criteria, I determined to interview all of the nine respondents.

Participants and Setting

“The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). For the purposes of this study, six of the nine participants were chosen to share their stories. Three of the participants did not meet any of the at-risk criteria. However, six of them were selected because, they not only met each of the criteria, but each of the participants shared stories about their unique experiences which provided rich insight into their perspectives on how they experienced school. Each of the participants had experienced a level of racism during their years in school which created for them a new perspective on their identity. Their stories ranged from academic and/or behavior issues, to interpersonal conflicts, to athletic concerns. All of the participants are currently enrolled in various four year institutions in the Southeastern United States and they are all seeking degrees in either arts, sciences, or business. Each of the participants is in a different stage of their academic career and each student arrived at this stage from various social locations. Two are seniors, two are freshman, and two are classified as sophomores. Of the six, four of the participants are female and two are male. Although they all expressed excitement to have achieved this level of academic success, they arrived at this stage through varying degrees of support. Two of the participants grew up in a home with and felt the support of both their biological parents, three grew up with and were supported by one biological parent, their mother, and other extended family members, and one was eventually placed with grandparents but expressed a deep appreciation for mentoring programs and mentors. All

but two of these students grew up in the Southeastern part of the United States and all but one of these students grew up in urban areas. One grew up in the Midwest, one grew up in the Northern United States, and three expressed concerns about the slow pace of and/or the lack of economic growth in the areas where they lived or were educated. Finally, while in school, three of the six had interactions with either the counselors or administrators because of concerns of inappropriate behavior or lack of motivation.

The interviews were conducted in locations that were familiar to the student participants. As Mears (2009) points out, the interview setting is an essential part of the interview process because productive interviewing requires environments that allow the participants to feel both comfortable and safe. Consequently, the participants were asked to choose a time and the setting for their individual interviews. Each participant chose a site that was either at or near their home or in their dormitories and the interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience. This allowed the participants to feel a level of comfort which encouraged them to speak freely and candidly.

Data Collection

Qualitative researchers endeavor to discover a deeper level of understanding that results from careful inquiry and analysis. As such, data for this research investigation were collected through dual means. Desiring to gather meaningful data, I employed both a pre-interview questionnaire to generate an understanding of the circumstances that surrounded the participants' educational experiences and face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to get a detailed account of how the student participants perceived their experiences.

Critical race theory (CRT) informs the course of this research effort. As consistent with CRT, this research effort involved the participants in naming their own reality. By presenting a questionnaire to African American students ranging in age from 18 to 22 who have been considered at-risk, my goal was to gain understanding of their perceptions of their environment, racial identity, teachers, and academic identity. As previously mentioned, there is not an abundance of research on the achievements of at-risk students. In fact, this area of research is relatively limited. Knowledge gained through exploration can be used to aid other students who struggle through their educational endeavors. Thus, by conducting structured and semi-structured interviews of the targeted students, I sought to gain understanding of how these students' experiences and perceptions influence their academic endeavors.

Before I conducted individual interviews and as a way to select participants who were articulate, communicative, and able to share more rich and meaningful data, I asked the initial participants to complete a questionnaire. Through this questionnaire I gathered some general information regarding each participant. The questions required them to give a brief summary of their backgrounds including race, age, sex, parenting status (if any), high school location, and school experiences (including grades received and behavior exhibited). This information was useful in providing context for the study and initiating a starting point for discussion. This information was useful because it encouraged them to share their experiences with me.

Individual interviews were conducted with each of the participants. The purpose of the interview was to provide a space for the participants to express their thoughts in their own words, from their point of view, using their language and their narrative. Thus

the participants were able to provide insight on what they know and have learned through their experiences. In this way, the interview provided a greater depth of understanding that one may not gain from hearsay or other literature written about African American students from a general perspective.

The interview questions used in this study were developed from a number of sources. Most of the interview questions used in this study were developed from specific comments and data collected from the studies conducted by Lee (1999) and Carter (2003). In addition, a number of interview questions were adapted and modified from interviews and surveys conducted by Nasir et al. (2009), Baker (1999), and T. Howard (2003).

In order to protect the rights of all participants, including those who filled out the questionnaire, students received a letter regarding the intent of the study and each of the participants was given an opportunity to provide consent by reading and signing the formal consent letter. Students were asked to determine whether they wished to participate in the questionnaire and interview process. As previously stated, students who participated in this study were selected through purposeful criterion sampling. This means that the participants possessed particular characteristics and the sample size was not determined in advance (Burns & Grove, 2003). Instead students were to be selected based on analysis of the information that they provided on their questionnaire and based on whether they met other selection criteria, such as whether they attended school in an urban area and were considered at-risk at some point in their academic lives. Ten students received questionnaires (Appendix B) designed to identify students who were best qualified to participate in the study. Nine of the ten returned completed questionnaires.

Analysis of the questionnaire provided me with insight on the participants' understanding of their education and their experiences in school (i.e. experiences with administrators and teachers). However, after analysis of the questionnaire and based on the depth of their answers about family and behavior I was not able to completely determine whether students met the at-risk criteria. Based on this realization, I set forth to interview all nine participants. Therefore, students were selected based on responses to the questionnaire, responses during the pre-interview sessions; the time spent conversing before the interviews began, and how well they were able to articulate the ways that these experiences presented a significant impact on their school performance.

The participants joined me in a one-on-one interview (Appendix C) process designed to allow the students the opportunity to express their thoughts and understandings. To clarify points made during the interview, I contacted two of the participants by phone. One participant sent an email to make additional comments. The other clarified her points over the phone. I took notes on this telephone conversation and recorded those notes on the participant's transcript.

Data Analysis

When doing qualitative research, data analysis is an ongoing process. "To analyze qualitative data, the researcher engages in the process of moving in analytic circles.... One enters with data... and exits with an account or narrative.... In between, the researcher touches on several facets of analysis" (Creswell & Creswell, 2007, p. 150). From a review of methods among several researchers, and for the purposes of this study, six steps are identified and used for analyzing and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2009). They include (1) organizing and preparing the data for analysis, (2) reading through and

reflecting on the data, (3) coding the data, (4) using the coding process to identify themes, (5) organizing the themes into categories, and (6) interpreting and presenting the findings.

Organizing and preparing the data is the first step in the process (Creswell, 2009). In terms of this study, organizing the data included downloading the interviews from my digital recorder onto my computer and organizing them into files. The interviews were transcribed and placed in the appropriate participant's file. Each participant's file was classified by a student number. From that point forward all participants were identified by their student number. As I engaged in the process of downloading, transcribing, and filing the interviews I was able to better focus on what the participants were saying.

After organizing the data, I began to read each transcript in an effort to get a general impression of the data as a whole. This process involved making notes in the margins to record the participants' general thoughts, ideas, and tone. The goal was not to apply predetermined ideas but to *discover* the underlying meaning of the participants' words. As Seidman (2006) suggests, "the researcher must come to the transcripts with an open attitude, seeking what emerges as important and of interest from the text" (p. 117).

The next step of data analysis was coding. Coding is the process of breaking the text into smaller chunks that are organized into categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2007). According to Ratcliff (2008), coding is a tool that aids in the process of identifying patterns and organizing the data into themes that facilitate interpretation. As Creswell (2009) suggests, I initiated this process by starting with one transcript and identified the major ideas that emerged. After completing this for the other transcripts, I was able to identify similar ideas and classify them by topic. Those topics were translated into codes

and the codes were marked on each transcript. In this way, the codes emerged from the data.

Using the codes, the researcher begins steps four and five. During this phase, I began the process of classifying the text into themes and categories. This involved identifying themes and patterns (Glense, 2006). During this process, I began with a small number of categories and refined and expanded them as I spent more time analyzing the data. In some cases, I found that I needed to create additional categories as new themes and patterns began to emerge.

Step six, interpretation, allows the researcher to move beyond text, codes, themes, and analysis into developing meaning (Glense, 2006). Moving into this realm included comparing and contrasting my themes and categories with existing literature. In this way, I was able to compare which themes were consistent with or diverged from current research. This method of comparing and contrasting aided in developing my interpretation of the data.

Once the data were analyzed and checked for themes and patterns, the data were reviewed and evaluated based on how they relate to the research questions. The data were presented through the use of student quotes and interpretations. Further, the data were used to demonstrate how students negotiated their understanding of themselves as African American students, their interpretation of bias perceptions, and their academic identity.

Credibility

The qualitative researcher shall employ methods that credibly capture and represent the meaning and impact of the participants' perspectives (Mears, 2009).

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings and interpretations authentically represent the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2007). Within the context of this research study, the strategies used to credibly represent the data include using member checks which encourage the participants to give feedback on the data, and enlisting the help of a peer reviewer.

In member checking the researcher takes the data and analysis back to the participants to solicit their views on the findings and interpretations. According to Creswell and Creswell (2007) this validation strategy is an important step in upholding the credibility of the study. As this study is reliant upon situating students' voices in the forefront of the discourse of academic achievement, perceptions, and racial identity, it is necessary to provide a contextual basis for how students experience education. With this in mind, I conducted follow-up interviews with particular participants in an effort to clear any misconceptions or misunderstandings. This allowed the participants the opportunity to add additional details that they felt may be helpful for the study. For the purposes of this research, all of the participants received a copy of both their individual transcripts as well as a copy of the final analysis and each was asked to verify them for accuracy.

Peer reviews are external checks that aid in supporting the credibility of the study. In the case of this study, after writing each chapter, I submitted each chapter to the peer reviewer who, read and reviewed each chapter and highlighted her thoughts and questions. Then the peer reviewer asked questions concerning the method of data collection, the criteria for participants and, the interpretation of findings. Finally, the peer reviewer asked additional questions to help as I worked to identify the way I would present my findings.

Limitations

A potential limitation to this study involves the students' ability to recall, in intimate detail, the circumstances of their experiences. As this study seeks to understand student's high school experiences it is important that the participants are able to recall these events vividly. A second limitation of this study is that interviews do not capture events in real time. Interviews provide a source of data that is based on the recollections of the participants and they are not based on directly observable behavior. In other words, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reflect, the data are limited to how much or to what extent the narrators (participants) are willing to share their goals and the tactics or mental state that existed as they learned to cope with expectations and the nuances of their journeys through school. Therefore, attention must be given to building a rapport with the participants and ensuring their confidentiality so that they will feel secure in providing their insight and enlightening this study.

CONCLUSIONS

Reports regarding discrepancies in academic achievement for African American students fuel inquiry based research regarding achievement. Thus, African American students are often the subject of studies concerning academic performance. Through this research effort I endeavored to discover ways that African American students handle the obstacles that slow their progress. Additionally, I hoped to gain some knowledge from students as to how teachers, administrators and community can help change the current educational environment in order to better educate students. Within this frame, this study is important for both teachers and students as it allows teachers to understand their students as unique individuals with diverse skills and needs and it also allows students to

discover and understand how to overcome barriers that hinder their educational process. In terms of CRT, this study seeks to uncover new paths to social justice and to remove the misperceptions of racial stereotypes and to help others to re-vision all students and their potential for academic success.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF DATA: STUDENTS' STORIES

Narrative inquiry as a methodology allows for an exploration into the storied lives of individuals. In this work, it is essential to recognize the stories shared as transitional or in progress (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). This means that people and their experiences do not exist in isolation and therefore their stories must be told in a manner that conveys the layers of each experience. In honoring this way of doing narrative inquiry, what follows are stories told from a three-dimensional perspective meant to demonstrate the interactive, situational, and continual nature of experiences. The data are presented through individual introductions and through the participants' (students) voices. The stories told moved the students from the present into their past educational experiences and revealed their thoughts, ideas, and reactions as they explored and reflected on the events that took place in their home and school environments.

The data are shared from the students' perspectives allowing the reader to hear and know the students and their voices. To encourage them to speak as candidly as possible each student was given a pseudonym to protect his or her identity. Italicized words that appear in brackets represent modifications that were also used to protect the participants' identity.

Ron's Story

"A child in bondage" is how Ron, a 20 year old student, from the Southern United States, describes his educational experience. Curious to understand how he came to feel as he does, I sat down with Ron to hear his story.

Ron began life as the son of a seventeen year old mother and an eighteen year old father who had both dropped out of school and who were both heavily involved with drugs and/or alcohol. Unmarried, with no jobs, or a steady income, Ron's mother was unable to provide a stable home environment for him and his siblings and as a result, Ron's living arrangements were not always secure. They sometimes found themselves without food and needing to find a safe place to sleep. If uncertainty about his living conditions was not enough to cause stress in this young man's life, then the fact that his mother was incarcerated on numerous occasions must have definitely contributed to this young man's struggle. Having never lived with his father, Ron felt that it was his responsibility to take care of his mother and his younger siblings. Not even a teenager, this responsibility left him feeling both proud and overwhelmed. These adversities helped to shape Ron's life.

Schooling for Ron included some ups and plenty of downs. Looking back on his experiences in school, he sees both his liberation and his bondage. He believes that the current system of education was not set up to promote people like him; an African American who lacked parental support and who was economically disadvantaged. During our interview Ron expressed the idea that it is a miracle for people in his situation to succeed in public school. Fighting pressure to drop out and "just be like his father", he believes he succeeded only because he was exposed to a mentoring program and he found a mentor who he recalls "looked like he had everything together." Considering the fact that there are numerous accounts of the failures of African American kids who are considered at-risk, Ron's story is inspiring.

Although Ron's relationship with education was rocky and included hurtful events that discouraged his effort, there was also a series of strategic events that encouraged his progress. In fact, during his middle school years, just around the time when it seemed to him that his fate was sealed, a few things happened to turn his life around. Finding a stable home with his grandparents and discovering a library of books that exposed him to life beyond his daily circumstance, Ron began to, as he admits, "transform." These events helped him see a way out of, what he considers, mental bondage, they ignited his academic turnaround (his F's became A's and B's), and also put Ron on the path that he is on today. Armed with new ways to view his life, Ron was not fazed by the differential treatment he says he received when he enrolled in an all-white high school. By that time, Ron was more confident in his abilities. Today, Ron is a determined young man who aspires to continue striving for excellence. He is proud that he has achieved what none of his cousins were able to do; he graduated from high school and is now attending a four-year institution in the Southern United States. Today, looking back on his life, Ron describes his school experiences in this manner:

"A child in bondage whom [sic] longed and craved for freedom" (Ron, personal communication, November 19, 2011).

For Ron, school was a place of bondage, a refuge, and a lie. These contradictions embodied how Ron initially understood himself and his relationship to education.

... I didn't feel drawn to it. And, only because when I went home I was experiencing a different situation based on the fairy tale that school was presenting to me....and being that—you learn in school—I didn't find any of the things I learned in school useful to me. [My life] was ..., more about surviving

day to day....And, it was about finding means to make money so that you could eat; or, finding means to make money so that you could live somewhere, as opposed to trying to make A's so that you could impress a teacher, or impress your classmates. It was more--It was about survival. So, school, initially, wasn't what everybody else thought it should be for me. And, because I had a mom, who ... dropped out of high school when she was pregnant with me, and my dad, also. ... school was really a different kind of world for me.... it was a void I never felt, because I could see the joy on my classmates face about their learning experience. I used to listen to them talk about how their mom and dad – how they were growing up. And, I couldn't relate. So, I always longed for something I never had. But, I felt the void because they were sharing it [with] me, but I felt it in a different perspective....school ...was a place to go to be away from the pain that I felt when I was with my parents (Ron, personal communication, November 19, 2011).

Ron woke up every morning looking forward to leaving home and going to the one place he recognized as a stable constant in his life. For him, school was a place where he could leave uncertainty behind and for that reason, Ron was eager. He was eager to learn and to be a part of something that seemed more positive. So, he quietly embraced the customs of schooling.

I was just quiet, but eager to learn. I was lost, but eager to be found. If I describe myself, I was a very responsible student.... I did participate because I understood early that everything was about balance. So, I didn't want to seem like – I was the kid that didn't want people to know of my situation. I wanted to, not

necessarily fit in; I just wanted to be present without being targeted. So, I would go along with the smiles, and the dialogue in classes, and stuff like that, but I didn't feel the same way everybody else did (Ron, personal communication, November 19, 2011).

Recognizing the meaning that school held in Ron's life, I asked him how his teachers responded to him.

I was treated like a little boy, like an infant. Like an infant that never, ever was gonna be able to blossom... I felt like I was treated like that by my teachers because of the vision that they saw [of] my mom. These teachers, they look at you and they just see a poor Black boy and... It was crazy, because of everything my mom did. It was like, "Because your mom's like this, let me talk to you like this. Because your mom's like this, I'm not gonna focus on nothing you talking about, because I see the personal example of greatness that you following." When I was in elementary school my mom came one time—it was like before that. We had tons of open houses, and student parent conferences, and stuff like that – parent teacher conferences. My mom never showed up. My dad never showed up. So, no one ever shows up to anything like that, that means that no one cares about the student. Really, that's a sign you either have a very, very busy parent, or nobody cares. Nobody cares in a sense....I was called into the principal's office in elementary school. Me and my little brother—I was in fifth grade, and my little brother was in third grade. And, this was around the time they were trying to split us up because my mom was going to jail again. So, they were trying to split us up. I was going to Texas, or something like that, and he was going somewhere else.

So, my teacher ended up saying that in the meeting, and told the principal and the woman from childcare services, that, “Nobody cares about these students. Nobody cares about [*Ron and his little brother*].” And, my little brother, he just didn’t wanna to be split up from me – split apart. And, I was like, Wow. Wow. But, in a sense it made sense - the way I thought then, I was like, I mean - Nobody cared? Really? So what? So, she really said that. She said, Nobody cares about these two, so we just need to do this and do that, so we can save all of us a headache. I’ll never forget that day (Ron, personal communication, November 19, 2011).

Watching Ron as he reflected on this time in his life, I could see his expression become more solemn so I wondered how he was affected by this revelation from his teacher.

I didn’t think nobody cared Growing up in elementary school and shaping my initial views of the world, and views of people – I didn’t think nobody cared. I got to middle school and it’s like, “Whatever.” I was kind of doing brick-laying jobs with people that I knew. Like, “Can I come work with you?” So, I would do that. And, it came to me and it was all about you. No matter what somebody says to you, no matter how much they say they’ll help you, that don’t matter. You gotta go get it yourself. And, in different situations certain people can never understand where you’re coming from (Ron, personal communication, November 19, 2011).

Feeling misunderstood, Ron looked for ways to cope.

I was longing for any kind of parent in any situation. It could have been a teacher who acted like they cared, and I feel like I would have – ‘cause I feel like I’m

emotional. I'm like – I have a heart. I really, really have a heart....So, yeah, if someone would have showed that they cared about me in middle school or in elementary school, I think everything would have been different. But, I can say now – when I was in middle school I didn't think I was emotionally attached to anything, but now I'm like yeah. Because I could have [taken] an entirely different route. I could have done an entirely different thing. I could have thought in entirely different ways. Seeing what my mom did – it was tough seeing a drug addict, seeing an alcoholic, seeing somebody – I thought I was a man only because we used to live with my aunt – my mom ... never had a job because she was always an alcoholic. And, I remember seeing my mom doing drugs one time, and it was about 3:00 in the morning. I never let my mom go anywhere alone. I always would go with her. We used to walk all the time at night. She used to sing a loud song – sing a loud song – it's crazy. And, like, when I saw her do drugs the first time, I started hollering, I remember....And, all that – ya know - cut me deep. So, in middle school I had like a whole negative attitude towards everything. I walked around like, “Oh, man, whatever. Teachers – whatever. Students–whatever. Y'all don't know.” So, it was like I was so lost....Problematic (Ron, personal communication, November 19, 2011).

Ron's problematic relationship with school did not end with elementary and middle school but his way of dealing with the problems changed dramatically.

The Young Leaders Academy formed a bond with Catholic High, they needed Black boys to come to their school and they loved what the young leaders stood for. [Also] I went to catholic high for more resources because they were limited at

Black schools. However, it was racists when I got there and very expensive...

(Ron, personal communication, February 6, 2012).

When I went to Catholic High I felt the most racism; I felt the most targeted in my whole life. And, it was like a target that, you don't belong here, and I'm gonna show you why you don't belong here. I'm gonna prove to you that you don't deserve to be here amongst us great White people. Because in every class I took, my designated seat was the first seat on the right side. That was my seat. That's your designated seat. And, in most of my classes, I was the only Black student that was in the class....So, I had no kind of connection – nobody in the school. It was a total race thing there, and I knew had to get out of that place (Ron, personal communication, November 19, 2011).

Ron entered high school with a different point of view and felt that he needed to find a place where he could excel so he transferred to a new school, an all Black high school.

Okay [in this] high school I found myself a little bit more. So, when I came to high school my mom was probably in and out of jail about six times for multiple things. My dad had went to jail like three times. I had never lived with my dad ever in my life, but I was victim to his alcoholic pleasure, or whatever. So, I found myself. Because, in middle school I had joined an organization called The Young Leaders Academy for Black men and it just opened my mind to a whole new world. And, it made me hungry. My whole life I was always competitive, even when I was young, so that's the beauty of my situation, I think. When I got to high school I started reading – something I never did in my life. And, reading more for me than anything else I did in my life because I felt liberated through the

visions of others. I used to read about Fredrick Douglass, [I would] read *The Souls of Black Folks*. I wanted to read about it, I wanted to feel how they felt really in bondage, because I felt I was in bondage. And, in high school I was sitting in class, I was quiet, but when I spoke I always felt like I spoke volumes. And, I wasn't like everybody else. I feel like I wasn't like everybody else....I felt like I was determined for greatness no matter what. I felt like no matter what I did I was gonna be great in it. It's just that self-esteem along the way of hell; I had gained a self-esteem and a confidence about myself. And, I used to talk with some of my teachers after class and gain a relationship with them. And, some of them helped me so much....I made an F on my first English paper. I made a D on my second one. I finished with a C in the class, but I was determined to do great because I always wanted to know how to write. I really, really wanted to know how to write well, and I wanted to know how to speak well...I was solely engaged in what I wanted. And, that's probably the main reason I came to [*a college in the south*], got accepted, got a ... scholarship, because I wanted something, like I want something now. And, I'm strongly engaged into what I'm in tune with. And, nothing else matters, in a sense (Ron, personal communication, November 19, 2011).

As we continued to talk and noticing the excitement return to his eyes, I asked him to tell me about a time when he felt the most successful in school and I asked who played the greatest role in his success.

I had met my mentor, [*CT, attorney*], and I had told him what I wanted in life. He had told me what I needed to get there. So, I mean, it didn't matter anymore if I

hated a subject. It didn't matter. I'm gonna get it. I'm gonna do whatever it takes to get it, because this is what I'm trying to get. And, it's like he almost confirmed for me if I do this, this will happen....I met him. He told me, "Look, you need to go for a 3.0." And, I finished with a 3.54 every semester after that. Over 3.5. Two or three semesters I made a 4.0. It was just no matter what I was really active in education. And, that's something that everybody picked up about me in high school. So, high school was a turning point in my life....The most successful time in my life is when I graduated high school. When I walked on stage I felt like I had graduated college, I had graduated—master's program – I mean, I felt like a mountain was removed. I felt free. And, it was the greatest joy I had ever experienced in my life. The greatest joy! (Ron, personal communication, November 19, 2011)

Having experienced both failures and success in education, Ron shared with me his ideas of what differentiates successful African American students from unsuccessful African American students.

I think, personally, it's the want to be great, to be successful. I feel like no matter you get in any circumstance – no matter what situation you get in, you got the mind to want to be liberated, and nothing can stop you. I think it's that first. It has little to do – well, I wouldn't say little. Good parenting – that's one thing because I know people who grew up in a good home and didn't go to college, or dropped out of college because they partied too much because they felt that they had the network of people that would allow them to get certain places - not having to work hard. So, it's the want to be great, the want to be successful. I mean, you

truly want it. I mean, want it more than almost life itself. Like, air is not the same unless you are pursuing goals that you want to achieve. You got to have that kind of desire for it. It can't be something you think you want today, and you can't let moods determine your work ethic because you'll get nothing done. You can't wait till you get mad to go to work. Your brain has got to be determined and, what's the word I'm looking for? You have to understand how to get down to business. The only thing about that is to want it. You gotta want it. What are you afraid of? (Ron, personal communication, November 19, 2011).

As Ron reflected on his experiences with education, he commented that African American students, especially the ones who grow up in situations like his, need love.

Love. Love and caring it goes so far. It has little to do with the program that schools implement that they think that will help students. That's not important. It has little to do with you giving the student extra homework. It has nothing to do with it. It's the caring. It's the, "Let me speak to you outside as opposed to correcting you in front of the class." It's the – it's just love and caring. If you think that somebody genuinely loves and cares for you in the way that they want the best for you, that's moving a mountain. It has little to do with anything these people think has to do with it.

Kim's Story

Quiet and goofy is how 18 year old Kim, a college freshman, initially described herself to me but after a reflective pause she added that she could sometimes be loud and crazy if she needed to be. Walking into her door room, Kim gave me the "I'm not sure about this," look and she began our interview with a quiet reluctance that slowly

evaporated as she became more relaxed with the process. Realizing that this story was about her experiences with school, Kim began to tell me how her experiences at school and in her neighborhood affected her understanding of race and racial relationships. Kim's reflections were thoughtful and at times delivered with humor as she recalled trying to convince the students and, at times, the teachers, at her school that Black people were no different than other people.

Kim, the older of two kids, grew up in the Northern United States where she attended school. Kim attended an elementary school that was located in the inner city neighborhood where she lived. Later, as she grew older, her parents decided to send her to a school that was not located near her home. Kim did not live in the suburban area where her middle school and high school were located. She, along with a few other African American students, was bused in from an inner city. According to Kim, there were only about 20 Black students that attended her high school and most of them woke up early to get on a school bus that would take them to school. Their school housed about 1,500 students, nearly 1,400 were White and the rest were Asian, Black or Hispanic. Kim notes that in this school she was known as "the cool Black girl," but she was not treated as an equal. Although she was "cool" with most of the students she always felt different. She knew she was only there to receive a top notch education. The school had a good reputation for its academics and the success of its alumni. Kim's parents wanted to ensure that she received that type of education.

Kim's family did not have a lot of material things. She and her younger brother did not have all of the luxuries that some of the other kids had. Her family lived in a poorly maintained apartment building in the inner city and did not experience financial

stability. This is why they were determined to make sure that their daughter received a better education and could attend college. With this in mind, they sent Kim to a suburban school for an education but they did not leave it up to the school to educate her. Kim's mother would often visit the school to talk with the teachers and kept up with her progress. Kim describes her parents as very determined to make sure she was successful in school. Kim described herself as a good student saying she earned mostly A's and a few B's in school. During her senior year, Kim applied for and received enough financial aid to attend the college of her choice.

Although Kim believes that she received a quality education from her high school, she says she could not wait to get out. She recalls graduation as the happiest day of her life because she knew she would be leaving that school and going to an HBCU (historically black college or university). After her experiences in high school Kim wanted to know what it was like to attend a school where she did not stand out as "the Black girl." Now as a college freshman, she is enjoying her time being in a place where she feels she can be herself. In fact, after agreeing to meet with me, Kim invited me into her space, introduced me to her life on campus, and freely spoke about her campus experiences.

Before the actual interview began, as I started to explain the purpose of the study, detailing that I wanted to talk about her high school experiences Kim let me know that her story started the day she realized she was Black, different. Kim's story begins in middle school when she says, upon arrival; it was all eyes on her. Walking in the door one day during the middle of the year, Kim arrived at her new school and began to feel as though everyone was staring at her.

Yeah, it was actually when I went to school division, because we lived in the city. And, then because my parents wanted a better education for us. So, I moved my seventh grade year. It was like half way done. So, I came in and everybody just looked at me different. Yeah, looks like that, like, “Wow, what is she doing here?” type of looks. Because, back in middle school, it’s less Blacks than 20. The middle school is probably 600 and there are maybe 4 or 5 Blacks, including myself and my brother (Kim, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

Kim recalls that those years in middle school created for her a newfound realization. She realized during that time that people saw her and thought of her in terms of her skin color. She says that this new understanding affected how she experienced both middle school and high school.

Okay, I didn’t really like my experience just because I felt like there wasn’t enough diversity. I went to school with a lot of White people, and it was like 1,500 students. And, then maybe 20 Blacks, 40 Asians, and like 5 Hispanics. So, it was like 1,400 White people out of 1,500. So, when you’re not white there they point you out, and everything revolves around race to them. So, it’s like you’re not – I’m a person - but you’re not you. You’re a Black person. Or, if you’re Asian, you’re not yourself; you’re the Asian person. They don’t really call you by your name (Kim, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

Throughout her time in high school Kim says that she found herself involved in several conversations about race. Annoyed, Kim would often try to explain herself to her fellow classmates. Expressing a little sarcastic humor and using animated gestures, Kim exclaimed,

[It's] Like, no one saw me as another person, another teenager, another them. It was just more they see you as a Black girl. Like, they can't get past the fact that you're Black. And, I tried to tell them over and over again, I don't wake up, like, "Oh, I'm Black today. What am I going to do as the Black me? It's just me being me living my life." But, they can't get past the skin tone difference (Kim, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

Kim recalls that teachers also had problems looking beyond the color of her skin. Kim believes that race was a factor in the way they thought of her and the way they taught her.

Well, throughout 9th through 12th grade, teachers would say things – like this one teacher, I was talking to one of my friends. Everyone was talking, and I guess the teacher didn't know my name, so she asked some of the White kids, she said, "Why don't you get that Black girl over there." Stuff like that. A lot of teachers would explain something a different way to someone, but then when I asked them a question they would dumb it down. As though, I didn't know their grammar. My mother and my father never spoke down to me, so since I was young, they've been speaking intellectually to me. So, that pissed me off, to say the least, when they would come to me and only use eighth grade level words. I can understand what you're saying (Kim, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

Kim reflects on another exchange between she and her psychology teacher.

My one psychology teacher – I don't remember the word he said, but he said something, and then he was explaining something to me. He said something, and then he was like, "Do you know what that means?" And, before I even answered he started explaining what it means – like the definition. And, I cut him off like,

“I know what it means. Don’t come at me like that.” (Kim, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

As Kim thought about her experiences in school she says she learned that the racial issues that existed in her school were born out of stereotypical ideas about African Americans. Kim says she addressed those issues because she wanted to be recognized as an equal.

Well, like as an African American, because most of the African Americans that were there out of 20, maybe 15 of us were bused in from the inner city because we were in the suburban school. So, with those 15, when most of them faced racism they would act out and fight. So, because of them, the rest of us, we would always get looked at as – if we were ever faced upon, as though we would start a fight. Or, even if we didn’t, if someone else was fighting, then they would come to the rest of us like we know something, like we’re a mafia or something. And, so I cope with those problems really by just – I address the principals, because mainly it was just the faculty that have these issues. So, I addressed them, and I just spoke to them as though I was equal to them, and then they understood where I stood. And, the rest of them that still had problems, because some of them still came to me like, “Well, are you doing this, that, and the other?” Then I would – my mom would have to address them. And, they got it ... (Kim, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

As I listened to Kim express the issues between the faculty and the African American students, I wondered whether the students received any guidance in terms of their academic goals.

Yeah, there was one teacher, and she was over Chapter 220, which was the program that bused the kids from the inner city. So, she was the only counselor that I had. And, I had to seek her out, but she developed a bond with me just because she knew the stereotypes, and the types of situations I would be going through. So, she developed a bond with me since the seventh grade. And, from seventh grade to my senior year she was my counselor. But, had it not been for her seeking me out, I wouldn't have had any guidance from any teachers, counselors, anyone but my parents and her (Kim, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

As our interview was nearing its end, Kim declared that she noticed that when students did not get the support that she received it normally ended with a negative outcome.

A lot of African American students that started going there would literally switch schools the first or second month. And, then the ones that stayed either tried to act like White people would say, an Oreo. You know, just trying to fit in with them so much that they lose themselves. Or, they would act out. And, any little racist comment or something – they might not even know they're giving you racism, but any comment like that, they would be ready to fight. So, it's either dropping out, trying to fit in, or acting out (Kim, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

While Kim is fortunate to have her parents and her counselor to help her achieve her goal she acknowledges that changes need to be made to ensure that all African American children can have the same success that she has experienced.

Just the stereotypes, like the media portrays us as this violent group of people. And, of course, there are some of us that are violent, but there are also some of us that are getting our education, trying to do better for ourselves, just like every other race. And, I don't think the people at my school realize that we are all different people. It's not like we operate on the same brain. And, I just hate that stereotype because they have – obviously they're the majority – but they don't undergo those. Just because there are multiple White serial killers or perverts doesn't mean I'm thinking every White person is a serial killer or pervert. So, I don't understand why their mindset would be because they see thugs, or prostitutes, or booty shaking girls on the media why they would think all of us are that. Just the mindset needs to be changed (Kim, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

Denise's Story

Denise, a 19 year old sophomore who describes herself as very smart and talkative walked up to me on our interview day and did just as she described, she starting talking, nonstop. Our conversation began so effortlessly that it felt as though I had known her for more than a few short months. It was clear that Denise was a little apprehensive about what kinds of questions I would ask her but she did not let that deter her from sharing detailed parts of her life. During our conversation, I started to view Denise as very personable and I began to wonder if Denise, who said she was very shy when she was a child, had developed this ability because of the fact that she moved around several times in her young life.

Denise is her parents' only biological child; they separated when she was very young. Although Denise lived with her mom, she remained close to her dad, who remarried, giving Denise a step-sister. After separating from her dad, Denise and her mom moved around a few times causing Denise to attend three different schools before her 12th birthday. One of their final moves sent Denise from an area where the schools were predominantly Black to an area where most of the students were White.

Throughout her elementary and middle school years, Denise attended school in a predominantly Black area and was a straight "A" student who always made good marks in behavior. As teachers readily expressed to her mother, she was the student of teachers' dreams. She came to school, was respectful, helpful, always did her work, and always set a good example for the other students. If another student was struggling, it was Denise who would be sent over to act as a student-helper. Teachers called her trustworthy. When they needed someone to run an errand, it was Denise. Teachers showered her with compliments on both her behavior and her academics. This high regard led to her eventual testing and placement in the school's gifted program. In this neighborhood, in those schools, Denise was at the top of her class.

Denise was also very active outside of school. She participated and excelled in golf and was active in the local church. Her mom also involved her in a leadership program designed for young women who ranged in age from 12-18. In this program, Denise eventually became a team leader and helped to motivate other young ladies in the group.

Denise's academic and athletic success coupled with her involvement in the leadership program affirmed her understanding of self. Denise believed she was a good

person and felt that she was very smart. Although when she moved out of her predominantly Black neighborhood she did not behave in an assertive manner and was very quiet, she carried with her a very positive understanding of who she was as a student and as a person.

Confusion set in however, when Denise arrived at the new school and, within a month, was accused of inappropriate behavior. Then she realized that her mother, who was always known in a positive manner by school officials, needed to protest the school's decision not to accept her daughter's gifted recommendations from the previous school. She was later tested and allowed to continue taking advanced courses but she was no longer at the top of each class and her grades began to slip. At the time of each incident, Denise did not understand why there were so many issues with her new school and was initially reluctant to associate her new experiences with any racial differences. After all, she had always thought of herself as the good, smart girl that teachers liked, so she did not understand why her new school officials did not seem to recognize her as such. Today, she questions why there was differential treatment between the two schools.

In a new school and in a new school system, Denise learned the true meaning of the chant she learned as a young girl. "Shake it off, put it in the trunk, step on it, and keep moving." This is what she did when she encountered the first signs of trouble in her new school.

Today, very confident and full of personality this is how she describes herself and her ambitions.

Talkative. My friends say that I am very animated. I'm smart. I know I'm smart. You can't tell me I'm not. I'm a confident person. I guess you could say I'm a

nurturing person. I like to listen. I'm always trying to give somebody advice, or talk to them. Like, my career path is I want to be a life coach. So, I guess I'm that person that everybody can always call on. I'll kind of go beyond measure to help, even if I have to kind of give something – even if I have to sacrifice something myself, I'll still try to help my friends out – or people I don't even know (Denise, personal communication, November 25, 2011).

Entering a new school, in a new part of town, Denise exhibited these same qualities. Always wanting to help and ever friendly, Denise found herself being accused of a serious act.

Well, I moved out here in October – no. Was it October? No, we moved out here in August, but I started my new school in October. So, I commuted for about two months, and I had an incident on the bus where I was coming to school one morning and I used to take vitamin C – chewable vitamin C because I don't drink milk. So, my mom's like "You have to get it, [Denise]." I'm like, "Okay, Mom." So, I skipped a couple days, and I took three or four out of my bottle, and I'm like eating them on the way to the bus stop. They taste like sweet tarts, so I'm just like, "These taste like oranges. Let's go." So, I get on the bus and there's a girl that sat behind me, and another girl named [Melissa]. She was a year below me. And, she was like, "Oh, what's that?" And, I was like, "Some vitamin C." And, she was like, "Oh, well what is it?" I said, "It's just a chewable vitamin C." I was like, "Here," and I gave it to her. She was like, "It tastes like candy." I was like, "Yeah, but it's vitamin C. It's like orange juice." She was like, "Oh, can I have another one?" It was my last one, so I gave it to her. I was like,

“Whatever.” I thought she ate it. I get to school, go to class, and I get pulled out of class right before lunch. And, one thing led to another, and they’re like, “Did you give [*Melissa*] a pill this morning on the bus?” And, I’m like, “A pill?” I said, “No, I gave her vitamin C.” They called my mom, told her that I had distributed drugs to another student. Then they said that the girl that I gave the vitamin to gave it to somebody named [*Cindy*], and she got sick. Well, she described the vitamin. She said it was white and it had little blue dots in it. I said, “Well, that sounds like an icebreakers mint is what she’s talking about.” And, they said okay. My mom brought the bottle to school. My grandma came to the school. I was already frantic because I thought my mom was gonna kill me. I was like, “Oh, my gosh, I’m scared. I don’t know what I did.” Blah, blah, blah. So, they suspended me for seven days and I had to go to a panel hearing to determine whether or not I would be expelled from [that county’s] public school system. And, I sat at home for seven days, and my heart just – I just remember how I felt. My heart beat fast for about the whole week. I was always nervous and shaky, because I never experienced anything like that. I came from a place where all my friends were like, “[*Denise*’s] a goody two shoes. She doesn’t do anything bad – she’s always the good child.” My teachers were always like, “Oh, she’s – [*Ms. Lisa*], we don’t know what you do, but she’s blah, blah, blah.” So, when I come here I’m just like – I don’t know what’s going on. I’ve never really thought about it as racism because I’m 14. I’ve never had to deal with anything like that. So, after that incident happened, I was just like, “Okay, what have I gotten myself into?” And, that played a big part with the whole friend making

thing, and the lady who was in charge of the whole thing; it was like one Black administrator at my school. And, I think they singled her out to do this to – to come find me. And, she told my mom that she didn't agree with how I was being treated, but that was her job. So, she had to do what she had to do (Denise, personal communication, November 25, 2011).

Denise returned to school shaken by this incident and found that not only had she been accused and charged with distributing drugs but her academic abilities were also called into question.

I never really had White teachers until I moved out here. And, I never really had a lot of White kids in my class. There were White kids that went to my school, but I came from a predominantly Black area, and then I came here and I came from a gifted program. I was in the gifted program, and I had the harder classes. And, then when I got here they wouldn't put me into classes. They were like, you know, "We need to test you again to see if you can be put into classes." And, my mom was like, "Wait a minute, I have the paper from my other school that my gifted teachers signed and said she can be in these classes. She's smart enough to be in these classes." And, so for a few months, I was in regular classes. They eventually agreed to test me, and I guess for some reason it wasn't clicking [but] I ended up in the classes, and once I got in the classes I was like I don't wanna be here (Denise, personal communication, November 25, 2011).

School changed for Denise after these incidents. For a time, she did not feel like the good smart kid. In class, she noticed some differences that caused her to question her abilities.

Maybe praise wise. The White kids were always, “Oh, good job Billy. Good job, Susie.” [Denise] – it was always, “You could do better.” And, I’m just kind of like, “But, I just got the same answer as Billy and Susie. What are you talking about?” [And with certain teachers], I just never really felt like anything I did in their class was good enough (Denise, personal communication, November 25, 2011).

With this as her introduction to this new school system and its schools, Denise was unsure about how to deal with the controversy. She had only been in this new school for a short time and she was worried about how people would view her. She was having trouble assimilating her old image with this new trouble so she sought advice from her main supporters.

My family is not the type of people that are gonna be like, “All right, it got you down.” My mom is like, “All right, you know what? You need to get it back in gear. Get back in school. I understand you’re upset.” Because, I didn’t want to go to school after that. I didn’t want to – I told my mom I was really nervous. I was just like, “Everybody’s gonna be like, ‘Oh, that’s the girl that got suspended.’ And saying things about me. Blah, blah, blah.” But, I remember I was in a group called, “[*Leadership Group*].” And, I was in it from the time that I was 12 to 18. And, it was a team leadership group, and I was the team leader. And, they were like, “You know what? You gotta shake it off, put it in the trunk and step on it, and keep moving.” And I’ve said that probably since I was about twelve years old. But, that’s what she said. She said you just gotta shake it off, put it in the

trunk, and step on it, and keep moving (Denise, personal communication, November 25, 2011).

Denise used that motto throughout her school career. Even as she recalls being jilted into reality while walking through the halls of her school and realizing that some of the people she was acquainted with held beliefs that a Black person could not become president of the United States of America.

... I remember the election time when Obama was running for president. And, we went into the cafeteria and I live in a predominantly White area, which is growing to be even—But, we went in the caf and some people had written, “No-Bama” in red paint all on the walls. And, I was like, “What?, Okay, so because he’s Black you don’t want him to be our president.” Or, “You don’t think a Black man could be our president.” And, it was a bunch of people who we actually sat down and we had joked before. A lot of them were White kids and they’re just like, “No-Bama. We don’t want Obama.” ... But, that’s just the first time I really noticed how separated the students could be (Denise, personal communication, November 25, 2011).

While experiencing race-related issues in school caused some changes in how she feels she was perceived, Denise, with the support of her mom, did not let those issues change her aspirations. She writes:

“I never let the fact that I’m Black ever influence the success of my education... I’d just moved to a predominantly White area, but the Black population grew quickly, and I was there only two months before I’d found trouble. I will say that, that year I felt really singled out.... I came from another school where I was on top

of everything. I had gotten into trouble and an almost all White administration made it seem as though they were going to use me as an example for an innocent mistake. My mindset thereafter did change as I continued on through high school”

(Denise, Pre-questionnaire, October 17, 2011)

She recalls walking across the stage on graduation day as the day she felt the most successful. She believes that all African American students can succeed as long as they are persistent and stick to their goals.

A strong base – a strong foundation...you have to be grounded and know where you want to go. You know? This is my goal; this is what I want in 15 years, 10 years, even 5 years – this is where I want to be. If I’m eight years old and I see that the kids around me are not thriving, and I know that if I continue to sit here and do the things they do and watch the things they do that I’m not gonna thrive, then I have to change my game. I have to get up every morning and do what I have to do...(Denise, personal communication, November 25, 2011).

After some thought, she continued.

I guess, not necessarily a strong foundation, but somebody there to tell you that it doesn’t have to be like this. There are other ways. There are other options. There is a way out. Even if you come up in a good area, and your parents just don’t approve of things you might see your parents do, as long as you know inside yourself this is not what I want for myself – I want better for myself – then you should be just fine. There’s always someone out here to help you (Denise, personal communication, November 25, 2011).

In addition to believing that there is help for African American students who find themselves in trouble, Denise also believes that African American students need to recognize their self worth.

I guess they shouldn't settle for mediocre. Don't settle for mediocre. You are worth more than mediocre. You see all these White kids, Asian kids, Indian kids out here in these books and you see all these Black people, which I don't think they publicize successful Black people enough. You have to read about it. You don't see it. You don't see anything on TV. It's kind of like watching the Cosby Show. Have you heard of the show The Reed's? Something like that? That's like the modern day Cosby Show. And, it's like you don't see things like that anymore, and if you do it's on TV for one season and then it's gone. When you do see Black people, it's like The Wire or we're the murderers on the TV show. I'm just like, that's not positive. That's one thing I think we need to change. Don't stand for mediocre, and read a book, or watch something positive. Why do you have to watch somebody selling drugs all the time, and blappin about, "I'm gonna do this to this girl, or do that to that girl?" I can be a hypocrite and say I don't listen to it, but I know I'm above it. So, just know that you're worth more than a mediocre grade – a "C". That B- could have been a B+. Just know you're worth more (Denise, personal communication, November 25, 2011).

Denise tries to live her words as she continues through college. At a predominantly White university, Denise says she is recognized as "the Black girl" but she knows she is more and she knows that she is a capable young lady who will succeed in life.

Dwayne's Story

Dwayne, now 22 years old, grew up in one of the more segregated cities in the Midwest. In this area, it definitely matters where you live as your address creates for some an absolute image about who you are and what you are about. As Dwayne eludes, the separation between neighborhoods can seem as solid as brick walls. And if you are from his neighborhood, people think you are “hood”, in other words, you are poor, unskilled, and maybe violent.

Dwayne grew up in a neighborhood that needed much attention and revitalization. Despite the fact that, as a whole, the city has a rich cultural history, the economic woes in certain parts of town interfere with the quality of life of its residents. The area where Dwayne grew up is surrounded by dilapidated buildings and subpar schools. The unemployment rate is high and the neighborhood suffers a high crime rate. In this area there are plenty of opportunities to choose negative paths. Dwayne knew that if he wanted he could easily become involved with drug activity or gang activity. Drug activity was rampant in his part of town because it serves as both a way to make money and a way to relieve the stress suffered from the economic disparities that are raging in this part of town. Knowing how easy it is to get involved in this way of life, Dwayne's mom aggressively conversed with her son about choosing a better path for his life.

In his community, the quality of your education depended largely on where you lived, and in Dwayne's case; the schools in his neighborhood were not considered very good. Dwayne lived in an all Black economically disadvantaged area. Since schools are funded based on property tax the schools in Dwayne's area received very little financial support and lacked the resources to provide students with an acceptable education. The

schools in Dwayne's neighborhood were old and they were not very well maintained. There were not any music or arts classes, which for Dwayne, was very disappointing because of his love for and desire to make music. The teachers in his school seem to spend a lot of time on discipline and a great deal of time re-teaching information that he had already learned.

For these reasons, and like many parents who struggle to afford it, Dwayne's mother decided to send him to a predominantly white Catholic school. Although Dwayne is not catholic, his mother felt that he would have a better opportunity if he withdrew from the school in his neighborhood and enrolled in the Catholic school. Being a single parent, Dwayne's mother struggled to pay tuition but she knew it was necessary to invest in her son's education.

For Dwayne, attending an all white Catholic school was a change from where he originally attended school. The first noticeable difference is that this school is an all-boys school. Secondly, the school boasts a Housing System that requires day-students to occasionally board overnight together which is intended to encourage student bonding and competition. Finally, the school offered more elective courses for students. In order to attend this school, Dwayne had to take public transportation and ride miles away from his neighborhood. The building was well maintained and was located in a well developed area of town. In this school, there were few African Americans and opportunities to continue his athletic pursuits were limited. Dwayne, who describes himself as a fairly decent student also found that he would encounter racial issues that interfered with his academics and his ability to find common ground with any teacher, counselor, or administrator. Although, he never had any behavior related issues in school and usually

followed all school rules, to his chagrin, he often found himself being accused of violating the school's strict dress code.

As I sat down to speak with Dwayne, he began by making references to his other interest. Dwayne had aspirations of being a musician. He wanted to continue going to the neighborhood school and hanging with his friends at night and during the week so that they could work on their music. His mother, however, concerned about the violence and the growing number of unemployed people in their area, told him that he would have to put school first. When she sent him to an all boys, all White catholic school, Dwayne reluctantly complied.

Well I didn't have a choice, really. My momma wanted me to go cause of where we lived and all the other schools in the area..nah, ...If you ever heard about [*my area*] It's rough. You don't wanna be in a public school and the next private school was real far and I didn't have no way to get there and I was next to the bus stop and that school was on the bus stop, so (Dwayne, personal communication, December 11, 2011).

After his first few weeks, Dwayne grew apprehensive. He began to think about all the factors that made his adjustment more difficult.

It was an all boys school, too. It was like a White school. That's what made it harder too and I had friends that went to regular public schools and you know you wanted to be with them at the time (Dwayne, personal communication, December 11, 2011).

After a thoughtful pause, Dwayne seemed to want to make it clear that he was not prejudiced. He explains that his experiences at the school created some racial separation within his school.

Well, my first year I was a freshman, before school, I tried out for the baseball team. I was a pretty good athlete in baseball and out of maybe 60 people that tried out, it was about 10 African Americans that tried out. None of them made the team. And I thought it was pretty weird and I was joking about it saying how they didn't want no Black people and one of the coaches actually heard me. And he said a few things. He didn't say nothing directly to me cause we didn't know each other but later come to find out, my junior year – my - math was like my favorite subject. [I made] A's all through my years in school. Come to find out he's my math teacher [during] my junior year and for some reason, all four semesters, I didn't pass and that was a little weird to me. My momma said the same thing cause I always had A's in math and for some reason, the final, my final, the fourth quarter, I aced my math test but I came up about a point short of passing. So that was like the first year I took summer school, really cause of math. And I thought that was pretty weird, I mean I thought that was pretty racist cause he did seem a little racist and I found out my school's been in existence for a hundred and seventeen years and there's never been a Black person on the baseball team (Dwayne, personal communication, December 11, 2011).

As Dwayne recounted his story he admitted to not challenging the teacher about his grades. Dwayne did not want to cause more trouble for himself but he says he took notice of the difference in treatment.

...from time to time.... It was just certain little stuff. You [math teacher] want to make fun of me but couldn't but it was obvious that he was trying to put me out there. That you didn't like me....His other students, the White students, got a little special treatment. They cut up in class but they get away with it; but other students like African Americans you do something you got approached about it. I went to a catholic school, so you have to have your shirt buttoned, belt on everything, right shoes and he always checked... All the teachers never checked and he always checked before class if you had a belt and if you didn't have a belt, ya know you got sent down to the principal's office and would have to be after school for about an hour. That's what we always had. Ya know that was a pretty stupid rule but that's what we had. Yeah, he always seemed to check and its - obviously you could see the white students would tuck their pants in all the way and you could see that they didn't have a belt but some days, he'll know that they don't have a belt but he don't check but when he see they have a belt, he'll check. I always got caught most of the time cause I forget to put my belt on sometimes and your shirt tucked in, something like that (Dwayne, personal communication, December 11, 2011).

Repeatedly finding himself in detention for his infractions (inappropriate uniform), Dwayne says that he and his classmates recognized that there was a system of favoritism that encouraged many of the Black students to leave.

My freshman year....We had an orientation that the whole freshman class come together. I think that second week, we had an overnight thing and you look around, then you see all the Black people you have. Then the next year, you see

all that left and the next year you see all that left and when you graduate, you see how many you end up with outta when you started that freshman year when we was all together....The way they was treated ... they didn't like the school. They didn't see no other Black teachers in there that they could relate to. It was all White teachers and how strict they was. It was a real strict school and it was more strict on us (Dwayne, personal communication, December 11, 2011).

Dwayne did not seem to have any fond memories of being a student at the Catholic High School. On most days, he looked forward to getting out at the end of the day. However, he does have advice for other African American students who may find themselves in a position similar to what he experienced.

I was pretty average and I would get in and do my work and soon as that bell rings Imma be outta there, but [for African American students] strive to do the best even though it may be hard and you might face some difficult times. Try to avoid all conflict, if you see racism or - tell somebody that you are being treated this way (Dwayne, personal communication, December 11, 2011).

Freddie's Story

Freddie is an 18 year old college freshman attending a four year institution in the south. My meeting Freddie was a surprise because, after hearing from one of her friends (who was not a participant) that I was on campus doing interviews; Freddie agreed to come by and share her story. Prior to coming to campus and before meeting her, I received a message that there was someone else on campus that I should meet. However, I had no idea that I would meet her on that day. When she arrived, I introduced myself and gave her a brief overview of the study. She agreed to participate and began to fill out

the pre-questionnaire. I reviewed the questionnaire and assessed that she did meet the criteria for the study.

Before the interview, we spent some time talking. From our conversation, I found that Freddie was from a small city in the Southern United States. She constantly referred to this area as “the hood.” In speaking with Freddie, I begin to get the idea that she was a determined young lady who felt trapped in an environment where she could not fulfill her dreams. When describing her situation to me, Freddie’s facial expressions would shift back and forth from a frown to a snarl. I could tell she was not just disappointed with where she lived and attended school but she was also appalled at the conditions of the area. Freddie exhibited no school pride and was only happy to say that she graduated and would not have to go back.

Freddie lived with her mother and several other family members, including her grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. She also told me that her father and step-mother lived in the state near the school that she is now attending and his presence in that area is what persuaded her to move from her state of birth to attend college. After she graduated from high school she chose to live with her father so that she would not have to live on campus. She said that her father was very easy-going and allowed her the freedom to truly experience college life. His main concern was that she was being responsible and getting what she needed from college.

Before college, Freddie describes her educational experience as very basic. She was a “B-C” student who adamantly proclaims that she was glad to get out of her school because it was in “the hood” and she knew that life there would not be productive. Although, Freddie’s school was located in a predominantly Black area of town, she says

that there was some diversity in her school's population. According to her the faculty was mixed but the African American students out-numbered the other students by a significant amount but she also notes that people rarely saw any of the White students because they were enrolled in the IB courses (courses regulated by the International Baccalaureate) or AP/honors (advanced placement) courses. She says that the majority of non-White students were enrolled in regular courses and none of them were enrolled in IB courses. Freddie says that if you were enrolled in the regular classes you would have teachers that "just didn't care" about whether you completed any work or came to school. In addition to feeling as though her teachers did not care about the students, Freddie says that the school was a violent place to be.

Freddie was very unhappy with her school. However, this did not stop her from being very involved. She says that she joined many organizations and was designated manager of most of the committees that she joined. She sought out adults in the building and asked for guidance, because she wanted to achieve her goal. Her goal, as she continually explained, was to get away from her neighborhood and her school as fast as she could.

My conversation with Freddie was quite enlightening for both of us. Freddie entered the room ready to talk about her high school. Although, initially, Freddie did not believe she had anything to say about race issues, she wanted to be a part of a process that compels people to hear about the conditions of urban schools. As we sat down, I asked her to tell me how she felt about her school and to explain her feelings.

I felt like I had to get out of there as quick as possible, basically. My school was basically in the hood. It was in the middle of where I stayed. It's called [*small*

town school]. It's much the urban area. Like, we had the projects right across the street. We had people coming onto campus all the time. It was horrible. That's basically what it was (Freddie, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

In trying to situate how Freddie experienced being in this "hood" school, I asked her to describe what it was like to attend school there. As Freddie began to talk about her experiences she revealed that she did not have any major issues because she was so active.

It was all right. I was active. I was in a lot of stuff. I was like manager of everything. I was a teacher's assistant in my senior year – you had like TAs, or whatever. I was administrative assistant, office assistant, I was active. I think everybody was treated mostly the same. Maybe like some of the athletes and stuff got special treatment, but that was it (Freddie, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

As Freddie spoke about all students being treated the same, I asked her whether race factored into the ways that students were taught.

I don't think so mostly because I think that academic – I wasn't in like IB classes or anything. Of course, the IB classes were all White. There were probably like two in the whole school – two Black kids in the whole school – that were in IB programs, and stuff. But, so like the academic programs, they basically like – you had to teach yourself. It was like they gave you the book and told you to do the work, and all this other stuff. They didn't do anything to help us out, or anything. You were basically on your own (Freddie, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

After Freddie declared that there were no race related issues involved in the way students were instructed she went on to describe the academic program in her school.

I think my senior class, probably about 50 to 60 people in the IB program total, and it was all White kids. And, I remember exactly it was only like two Black kids that were in there. I think they treated the IB kids with the most support, like they got the better teachers and they were always talked up, but in the academic classes, like I said, they didn't do anything to help you. You were basically on your own, unless you knew somebody, or you made a real effort to get to know your teachers, and stuff, then you were on your own. I don't know why.... I know we had a senior project that you had to pass in order to graduate, and I think they didn't give as much help as they could have. I think that was the only thing on like the senior projects and stuff like that, because I think of course the whole school academically catered to the White kids (Freddie, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

Continuing our conversation about academics, Freddie acknowledged that she did not feel as though she had much academic support from the staff at her school. She said she had to find ways to cope with the lack of support.

I wasn't like the A+ student, or whatever, but I did my work. I always did my work. I know I had help with - like my mom, and support from my family and stuff. So, if I ever needed anything I would go to them. Or, I had a good relationship with like my teachers, and stuff. So, if you actually took the effort to be on them - like you actually had to bother them for them to actually help you.... I know from my school, they had a habit of messing up your schedules, and not

doing what they were supposed to. So, if you needed – I know my freshman year I was close to my guidance counselor because I went a lot and made sure my schedule was okay, or whatever. But, I know when my cousin had transferred to my school, his schedule and stuff – he didn't have – you were supposed to have like four maths to graduate. They wouldn't give him the maths he needed the year he needed them. You're supposed to take a math every year. They wouldn't give him – so they made it so his senior year he had to take like two maths. And, you're only supposed to take a math a year. So, I know they messed up people's schedules. It just seemed like it was everybody's. They didn't really care. They put you into classes. For half of their students, their senior year was like the year they had to make up for it most. But, for myself, I was pretty much straight. I had help because I would speak up for myself (Freddie, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

Freddie recognized that she was able to succeed because she was determined to do so, but she also revealed that she feels that it was harder to succeed in her school because of the students who attended and where the school was located.

I think they felt like, "This is a "hood" school. This certain type of class doesn't need to be catered to as much because of how they acted and stuff like that." I think the teachers that didn't care – we saw that they didn't care, so they [some African American students] acted out because they didn't care. And, they thought that they could do that because they knew certain things weren't gonna happen to them (Freddie, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

Although early in our conversation, Freddie did not recognize race as a factor in how students were educated in her school she did have some definite opinions about the overall condition of schools in her community and she steadfastly stated what she felt needed to be done to help African American students become more successful.

I think... the state, or somebody needs to step in when it comes to those certain types of schools when they're mostly like in the urban communities, because I feel like they don't – they see all these White schools around. They get all these new facilities, and they're always being moved to these different schools, and all this other stuff. And, I feel like they just don't give as much attention, or as much care to who they hire as teachers, or all this other stuff... We don't have good teachers like all these other schools have. Like, if you would compare our scores to these other scores – the other White schools we have in our city—it would be down the drain. We would be at the bottom of all the time. I feel like they just don't treat us as well as they could have. I think they need more—better teachers. I don't know – better facility, one; to get us out of the area we're in would help (Freddie, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

Jaleesa's Story

Jaleesa is an outgoing, highly verbal 22 year old college student from the Southern United States. Although she has several siblings, Jaleesa is the only child of her biological parents. This position in the family placed her in a unique place. Unlike any of her other siblings, Jaleesa was sent to a private, exclusive, and very expensive Christian school in the south where over 99 percent of the student population is Caucasian. This school houses students from K-12th grade and has a very selective admissions policy.

After being interviewed, tested, and observed to assess her readiness to attend this school, Jaleesa's parents were told by school officials that she qualified for admission but they did not recommend that Jaleesa attend the school. After being prodded to explain their comments about their recommendations, school officials pointed out that no other African American child had successfully completed the program. Undeterred by this, Jaleesa's parents enrolled her in this school.

As Jaleesa sits down to tell me her story, I am struck by the pride she exudes as she begins to talk about the school where she spent her K-12th grade years. She begins with a smile saying that she graduated from a school that "they" thought she would not make it through. Suddenly, I realized that Jaleesa's pride comes from her sense of accomplishment. She is proud that she was one of three African Americans to "make it" through this school. Jaleesa describes herself as a very smart individual with a great personality. She says that she can easily converse with anyone and that she is usually very well liked. She attributes most of these qualities to her upbringing but she also recognizes attendance in that school placed her in some unique positions. She asserts that her education at that school provided her with opportunities that she would never have experienced had she not attended.

Despite her school pride, Jaleesa acknowledges her attendance in this school always created for her a sense that she was different than the other students. Being at such a prestigious school, defined the lines between race and social class. While Jaleesa was able to establish very close friendships, and was invited to events hosted by the upper echelon in the community, Jaleesa knew that this way of life was exclusive to her school

friends. She was invited but not included. She recognized that there were major differences between her family life and the life of her friends.

At times, life in school was somewhat challenging for Jaleesa, she says there were reminders that she was different from all the other students. Harsher punishments, stiffer penalties, and even denial of parts in school plays always reminded her of her difference. While Jaleesa says that her behavior in school was similar to the behavior of her friends, she says that early in her school experience she was singled out for having disruptive behavior. Her teachers constantly sent her to the counselor's office for behavior referrals. Due to the number of counselor referrals, Jaleesa was considered a child with behavior issues. Jaleesa explains those years in school as some of her worst years. Although those years are far in her past, Jaleesa spoke of them as though they had *just* occurred and she was adamant about letting me know that she was NOT a bad child. It was during those trying school years when she learned that she needed to speak up for herself. She established relationships with some of the teachers and spoke to them about what she felt was unequal treatment. She says that the experiences in her school helped to change her into the outspoken person that she is today.

Jaleesa represents a contrasting voice in this study. While recognizing there were many trade-offs along the way, she truly enjoyed her overall experience in school and graduated with a sense of pride about having attended such a prestigious school.

...for the most part, I enjoyed it. There were certain students that did cross that line and considering that I had been there K-whatever, I became liked in the end because I was Black [chuckles] and I was smart so... I was predominantly

popular but that was because I stood out because I was the Black girl and I was pretty... (Jaleesa, personal communication, October 23, 2011).

As Jaleesa reflects on her overall experience in school, she readily reports that she believes race was a significant factor in her education.

I feel like if I woulda went to a different school, I wouldn't be nearly as intelligent as I am. The way they teach White people, Caucasian people is completely different to me than the way Black people are taught or what kinda atmosphere we're placed in and that has a huge factor on how we end up turning out. And, to be honest, yeah racism, I went through that. It made me a stronger person. I would put my same child in that situation. I would. Even though I didn't get to date cause you know that was bad. You couldn't do that.... But it's a trade off. I wouldn't have had nearly as many experiences. I went to the Dominican Republic for my senior trip. Who does that? [laughter] We went to the Dominican Republic. Flights. Not one flight, flights. I wouldn't have been able to say. Oh, I've done this because some of my Black friends haven't. I had the opportunity to go to France but I didn't ... I ended up having to help pay for it but I can say that I've ridden in some of the nicest cars. I've been to some of the nicest places in [my town], where if you're Black, you're not going in there. But because I was a part of their group, I went to the country club. I got invited to all kinds of cotillions and I wouldn't have had those experiences if I wasn't friends with White people (Jaleesa, personal communication, October 23, 2011).

Because she had such ease when she applied to local colleges and she notes the changes in attitude when she announces where she went to school, Jaleesa believes that her

association with that school places her at an advantage that she would not have enjoyed had she not attended.

When I go somewhere in [*town*] and they ask me what high school did you go to I tell them and I have... it's like I'm no longer here... (raising her hand higher in the air) I'm here.... I'm right here with you. You can't just say... oh just another "N" that went to [*the Black school*]. That's what they say. And they say, wow you went to [*that school*], really? Really! (Jaleesa, personal communication, October 23, 2011).

Although Jaleesa can boast about having attended this school she says that her attendance did not come without a price. She recounted for me many instances when she says her race was a factor is how she was treated.

For instance, [*a White male student*], rich family, filthy rich. His parents owned like one third of [*the town*]. He called me the "N" word in the hallway...
...when I was little and I first started going there, they didn't wanna let me attend. They told my daddy that they didn't think I was gonna make it because not one Black person has made it yet and they didn't want me to be in there with their people...
...All the way, K-4th grade, my teachers were harder on me. I thought they were picking on me because I was different. I wasn't like everybody else. And my worst year was 4th grade, when I was constantly sent to the counselor's office and that's when I actually started to speak up and say what was on my mind because it was wrong what they were doing

...I remember, we had an upstairs which was K-6th and then we had another part of the building which was 6th through 12. But on the opposite of that was another building where we had lunch. So we had to go through the whole school to get to the lunch building. And we'd be eating with K-6th. So somehow me and like 5 other people got separated from our line so we just went back to the room and lunch was over and I remember my teacher [*Ms. M.*] she went off on me and just started yelling at me and everything and I was like we got lost, got separated. I came back to the room, I wasn't doing anything bad and I was the only one who got written up and sent home. My conduct grade that year was horrible but I had fine grades. My conduct grade was horrible because she was just always on me all the time...

...[*Ms. B.*] didn't - She wasn't very nice. She always had an attitude with me. I don't know why. She didn't like me. She would nit-pick with more stuff with me. Like... Oh this isn't right. And I'm like well, you just told the whole class to do this way. But she would tell me to do it over (*Jaleesa, personal communication, October 23, 2011*).

In terms of academics, *Jaleesa* gave a list of other issues that she referred to as trade-offs.

They never had anybody that was an actual teacher under tenure that was Black. There was no Black history month. I don't even remember them talking about Martin Luther King in any grade, K-12. We talked about Harriet Tubman. That's about it. We really didn't. There wasn't like a celebration for Black History Month like it would be at a - There was no Black history class. Most schools have Black history classes. No! We didn't have a Black history class and I can say the

same for [*the other private schools in the area*], those were our rivals. [*Mr. J's*] class, [*Mrs. K's*] class, we didn't talk about it in government... (Jaleesa, personal communication, October 23, 2011).

Although, today, she recognizes the lack of education regarding African American history, she says she did not miss it because it was never talked about. It just was not included in their curriculum. She lists this as one of the trade-offs to getting what she believes is a great education. Then, just as our conversation was coming to an end, Jaleesa wonders out loud.

All those things in high school affected how I view life, drastically.

And I wonder how much different would things be if I woulda went to a Black school. Would I be stronger? Would I be weaker? Because I don't think I'm weak (Jaleesa, personal communication, October 23, 2011).

CHAPTER FIVE

DATA ANALYSIS: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

I am thoughtful about the ways in which human interactions can affect who we are and how we view ourselves. I am also curious, recognizing that my own experiences have brought me much insight; I also acknowledge that more can be learned from others. For this purpose, the purpose of knowing and understanding, I have engaged the voices of young African American students. Listening to the voices of students has created for me a way of knowing and understanding that was not possible through simple observation or by recalling my past and projecting my experiences and my way of knowing onto others. By listening to these students, who so graciously shared their time and parts of themselves, I have recognized that each of the students, though unique, share some commonalities in the ways they have experienced school. These commonalities are revealed through the themes that emerged as I listened to their stories. The themes were developed and analyzed using critical race theory (CRT), as CRT honors the perspectives shared by each of these students and recognizes their lived experiences as a legitimate way of knowing. The thoughts, experiences, and understanding revealed, reflect the ways that these African American students perceived their academic experiences.

This research study was intended to understand how a selected group of African American students who possessed characteristics of being at-risk of failing high school, negotiated their knowledge of self and the perceptions of others in terms of their academic identity. The aim was to understand the ways that these African American youth handled their challenges and recognized themselves as achievers in spite of the fact that they were often unfavorably characterized in their schools and critically

characterized in literature. I used critical race theory as a framework for analyzing the students' interviews. The themes that emerged are (1) supportive relationships (2) better schools (3) perception and experience (4) racism and identity (5) personal determination and agency.

Supportive Relationships

As I listened to the students tell their stories, one obvious dynamic became very clear to me. Without exception, each of the students told of an individual whose influence sustained their success through school. For each of the students, at least one adult helped them to cope with the race related issues that they faced in school. The presence of an adult figure in a child's life can make the difference between success and lack of success (Irvine, 1991). The students told of how an adult in their lives provided support and instilled in them the desire to succeed. Some of these supportive relationships developed with individuals outside of the home, while others received the support and guidance they needed from family members. Students expressed having developed supportive relationships from one of three sources, family members, teachers/counselors, and/or mentors.

According to Friend (1996), for the African American student, support from family members is a vital way to help students develop positive self-esteem. Irvine (1991) asserts strong family support, particularly from mothers and grandmothers, influences students' determination to succeed in schools where challenging circumstances exist. Family support can consist of behaviors, attitudes, or activities that occur both within and outside of the home that support students' academic or behavioral success in school. For Ron, the support he received from his grandparents was not only

important in terms of his academic success but it was also important in terms of his survival. Having never enjoyed a stable home environment, Ron felt lost and afraid that he and his brothers would be forever separated and forced to live in different states. During middle school, Ron lost his ability to focus on school work and became concerned with finding jobs to take care of himself. Ron admits that his grandparents are the reason he and his brothers are still together. Denise also credits her mom and grandmother with guiding her through tough experiences in school. After Denise was suspended she expressed feelings of not wanting to go back to school and she looked to her family for support. Denise says:

My family is not the type of people that are gonna be like, “All right, it got you down.” My mom is like, “All right, you know what? You need to get it back in gear. Get back in school. I understand you’re upset.” Because, I didn’t want to go to school after that...(Denise, personal communication, November 25, 2011).

For these students, support from their family help them to refocus their attention on achieving success in school. When family members are involved in their child’s schooling, it significantly influences the student’s perceptions of school (Irvine, 1991). In the home environment, when students see that education is made a priority and considered important they are more likely to internalize those values and to seek ways to achieve. Denise’s assertion regarding how her family members influenced her success epitomizes this point. When asked about the important factors that influenced her success she states, “My mom, because she’s so hard. She’s absolutely hard...” Denise’s mom was a guiding force in her life. According to Denise, her mom tried to provide the tools that she would need in order to succeed in school. From her mom, Denise would often

hear, “Get your education, do what you got to do, and get out there and handle your business”. This advice helped Denise to understand and internalize the work ethic that her mom valued. Denise not only received support from her mom but Denise proudly offers that her strong, 80 + year old grandmother, who sternly questioned her about her grades, would also continually admonish:

“Don’t be that punk. How your grades looking.” I’m just like, “It’s good, grandma.” “Are you gonna graduate? I’m coming down to see you graduate.” And, she moved 700 miles to see me graduate. And, I said, “My grandma must love me.” (Denise, personal communication, November 25, 2011).

Denise deeply appreciated the love that her mom and grandmother showed her and in return, Denise decided that she would never do anything that would embarrass her family or cause them to question her choices. Denise states that she knows if she does not live up to her family’s expectations she would receive countless phone calls from family members who would chastise her and offer more advice. Therefore, not wanting to disappoint her family, Denise stayed focused on her school work and set out to graduate from high school.

Family members were not the only source of support for these students. Many of them recalled teachers or counselors who actively worked to help them in difficult situations. Teachers can provide students with the necessary skills that help them achieve their goals. Although most of the students felt that their schools’ faculty participated in practices that treated African American students as different, many of the students in this study acknowledged that they were able to engage at least one adult in the school who worked to ensure that they would successfully graduate from high school. Irvine (2003)

asserts that teachers do more than influence students' understanding of facts and information; she insists that they also impact students' self-concepts and attitudes toward life and learning. Irvine (1991) declares that in her research, students often identify teachers as noteworthy people in their lives. She goes on to say "how a child feels about himself or herself is to a large extent determined by the child's perceptions of how the teacher feels about him/her" (p.48). Irvine recognizes the correlation between student self-concept and teacher perception. Consequently, the relationship between students and their teachers greatly impacts academic success. Thus, when teachers lend their support to students, especially students who are experiencing problems at school or who lack parental support, they can significantly impact the students' success.

Kim, Freddie, and Ron were each able to recall one teacher who reached out to them to provide guidance and instruction on how to achieve their goals. Kim explains that she formed a bond with a teacher because that teacher "knew the stereotypes and the types of situations" that Kim endured on a daily basis. Kim says this teacher demonstrated that she cared and offered advice that not only helped her to navigate her way through the racial tension at school but this teacher also provided guidance on the undergraduate admissions process. Ladson-Billings (1994) asserts that when teachers make connections with their students they have a more positive effect on the students' academic outcomes. Through these connections students are more inclined to persist in their academic pursuits rather than give up in frustration. As Ron explained, his renewed desire to achieve in school was spurred by his high school English teacher. Ron believed that his interaction with this teacher, whom he says "knew his situation", encouraged his dream of becoming a writer and a public speaker. Because Ron's teacher made an effort

to connect with him, both his grades and his self-esteem improved. As Ron began to see his grades improving, his self-confidence also grew and he started to feel that he could accomplish his goals. Ron credits this teacher with helping him improve to the point that he was able to go to college. Ron along with most of the other students in this study recognized at least one teacher or counselor who helped them to persist through the challenges they faced during their years in school.

Also prominent in this study was the impact that mentors and mentoring had on the students. Although only two of the participants selected for this study mentioned the impact of their mentors or mentoring programs, the effect of their involvement is worth mentioning. Gloria and Kurpius (2001) contend that interactions between students and their mentors foster a sense of purpose and strengthen the students' career goals. Mentors who spend a significant amount of time with the student and take an active interest in the student's life can have a great impact on the student. As the case with the students in this study, mentors are often role models and are thought to embody some form of success that the student wants to emulate. Thus, students often hold their mentors in high esteem and heed the advice that is offered. Ron and Denise were two students whose lives were deeply affected by their mentors and the mentoring programs in which they were involved. Ron explains:

I ... met my mentor, [CT, attorney], and I had told him what I wanted in life.

He...told me what I needed to get there. So, I mean, it didn't matter anymore if I hated a subject. It didn't matter. I'm gonna get it. I'm gonna do whatever it takes to get it, because this is what I'm trying to get. And, it's like he almost confirmed for me if I do this, this will happened....I met him. He told me, "Look, you need

to go for a 3.0.” And, I finished with a 3.54 every semester after that. Over 3.5. Two or three semesters I made a 4.0. It was just no matter what I was really active in education (Ron, personal communication, November 19, 2011).

Ron’s mentor changed his entire outlook on education. *CT* helped Ron develop the skills and focus necessary to achieve success. He taught Ron the importance of persistence and shared his personal stories of success. In addition, *CT* spends time with Ron acting, at times, as a surrogate father, a counselor, and friend. *CT* is honest and lets Ron know when he is not working up to his potential but he has also been an advocate for Ron when he needed an adult to speak on his behalf. With his mentor, Ron continues to strive toward his goals.

Having good, positive, supportive relationships with adults has greatly affected each of the students in this study. The stories of these adults interceding, teaching, and guiding students when they were experiencing trouble, spoke greatly to the impact that these relationships had on each participant. The assistance that these adults provided helped each student to recognize themselves as achievers.

Better Schools – It’s a Trade-off

Within a school district there are often variations in student performance. Wide gaps exist in student achievement within a single grade level among schools in the same school district (Georgia School Superintendant, public forum, October, 2011). School districts often composed of various communities and neighborhoods, even in this post-segregation era, are often racially segregated. Within a single school district per-pupil funding varies according to where the school is located. Further, in the same district, the availability of advanced placement and/or college credit courses also varies depending on

which schools the child attends (King & Cardwell, 2009). Thus, a student's address often dictates whether the child will have free and convenient access to schools with more advanced courses and increased funding.

Research suggests that students who attend schools in African American communities of lower socio-economic status will have fewer resources, fewer chances to take advanced college preparatory classes, fewer up-to-date textbooks, and fewer certified teachers (King & Cardwell, Noguera, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Duncan (2006) maintains "that urban schools typically subject students to anachronistic (dated), liminal (suspended), asynchronous (out of sync) and/or dychronous (context-inappropriate) conditions" (p.197). According to Noguera (2005), these schools also have a higher rate of discipline referrals. These conditions create an undesirable effect and cause students to recognize that there is a difference in the schools in their neighborhoods.

Students like Freddie noticed the difference and internalized it as a symbol of disregard for her and the members of her neighborhood. When queried about what African American students need to be successful, Freddie began to make comparisons between her school and the surrounding schools which were located in predominantly White neighborhoods. Freddie emphatically stated that she believes state government officials do not pay as much attention, if any, to the conditions of schools in urban communities. Freddie alluded to the issue of inadequate funding when she astutely contrasted the schools in her neighborhood with the "White schools" in surrounding neighborhoods. Freddie seemed disgusted as she revealed noticing that schools in Caucasian neighborhoods were newer, better maintained, and better staffed. By contrast,

Freddie revealed feeling as though she and the other Black students, who attend schools in urban areas, are not treated well in terms of their education. Freddie's assessment of her school's condition is not based on assumptions. Freddie points out that "if you would compare our scores to these other scores – the other white schools we have in our city – it would be down the drain. We would be at the bottom of all the time." Citing teacher apathy and poor facilities, Freddie expressed a desire to "get out" of her neighborhood school.

Students like Freddie attend neighborhood schools such as the one she described because they are within district; they are free, and conveniently located. However, many parents, despite incurring financial strain, opt not to send their child to the schools in their neighborhoods because of the conditions that Freddie described. Parents wanting their children to have the best opportunities look for ways to best educate their children (Irvine, 2003). For some parents, if they can overcome the financial burden, they will pay to send their child to a *better school*. This school is often located in a neighborhood, miles away from where the child lives and it houses students who are predominantly White. All but one of the students who participated in this study attended a school that was located outside of their neighborhood. Overwhelmingly, the students admitted that they attended these schools because they felt they could only receive a better education by leaving their own neighborhoods.

As a matter of law, many school districts have closed enrollment policies that mandate attendance zones for its students (Tang, 2011). Students do not have free choice of where they will attend schools. By law, they must attend schools within their school zone. A student's school zone is determined by the student's address. Hence, if a student

lives in a neighborhood surrounded by low-performing schools, the student cannot freely choose to attend a different school within their district. “Closed enrollment policies thus function to deny those children – who are disproportionately low-income and children of color – access to [tuition-free] high performing schools...” (Tang, 2011, p. 1107). Some states, however, do have choice policies in place. The programs appear to provide all students with the option of attending free, better performing schools within district lines. These choice programs, however, are impeded by requirements that dictate strict criteria as a condition of enrollment. Such criteria effectively exclude some students from poorer neighborhoods. For example, parents from those neighborhoods must provide their own transportation for their child to attend school outside of their school zone. In some cases, some students must possess high scores on achievement tests in order to be admitted to other schools. Students in lower performing schools do not always have the highest achievement scores. However, in other instances when open enrollment or choice programs are available, districts hold the right to deny students the access to other schools for any reason (Tang, 2011). Often, districts cite financial reasons because schools often receive less per pupil funding for out of district students. Further, by law, some school districts can only allow a very small percent of its students to transfer to other schools within the school’s district (Tang, 2011). Therefore, choice programs, purported to promote equity, are less likely to provide feasible options for low income parents and their children. As an alternative, the parents of students who live in poorer neighborhoods, who are zoned to attend low-performing schools, sometimes feel obligated to send their child to other, often predominantly White schools where they are required to pay tuition.

The data revealed that many of the students in this study found that they needed to attend schools outside of their neighborhood. While attending schools outside of their neighborhoods the students in this study admitted to being treated differently because of their race. Of the five who attended these schools, one decided to leave the predominantly White school because he felt there was too much racism. The other four remained and chose various strategies that helped them cope with the race related issues at their schools. Jaleesa referred to the choice to attend this school as a “trade off.” Jaleesa, like the other students and their parents, believed that she could not get a good education by attending the schools in her neighborhood. In fact, most of the participants and their parents also believed they could only get a better education by attending the predominantly White schools that were located in other communities. Further, as Jaleesa noted, the students realized that they were thought of and treated differently, but they were willing to experience school in this manner because they placed a high value on education.

All students, regardless of neighborhood or community, should have free and equitable access to all of society’s knowledge. All students, in all neighborhoods should have the opportunity to attend excellent public schools where resources are equitably distributed. Schools should be structured in a way that does not advantage some while leaving others to feel disregarded. It is in this way of school governance that inequities in opportunities, access, and resources are created. Students should not have to seek out special schools in order to receive the best possible education. As evidenced in this study schools are not responding appropriately to the needs of African American students which forces them to seek education in areas outside of their neighborhoods where their

racial and cultural differences are perceived as different or lacking. In this way, the student's race is a determining factor in the educational opportunities that the student will have.

When African American students do not have the same educational opportunities as their Caucasian counterparts they are said to lack privilege. Tatum (1997) explains this as a form of systemic racism that disadvantages African American students. White privilege, as Tatum explains, is when Caucasian students have certain advantages and opportunities based on race that students of color do not have. In this case, African American students do not have the opportunity to attend quality schools in their neighborhoods that are free of racial bias. Lacking that privilege, the African American students and their parents have chosen the "trade-off".

The idea that African American students must make this trade-off sends strong messages to both the African American students who attend their neighborhood schools and those who do not. As Freddie pointed out, it makes students feel as though nobody cares about students in Black neighborhoods and it relegates those who attend the neighborhood schools to a more inferior status. Jaleesa makes this plain when she reveals that people in her community appear to change their perception of her when she tells where she attended school. She says that she notices changes in facial expressions and tones of voice when she acknowledges where she was enrolled. She goes on to say that, in her community, people who attended private schools, like the one she attended, are elevated to a higher status. In this way, in this study, it was apparent that some African American students felt they had to deal with being treated in discriminatory ways in order

to get a better education. Since the students and the parents place high value on education they feel it is worth the trade-off.

Perceptions of Experience

Most significantly, throughout the data, each student communicated how issues of racism affected their educational experiences. Analysis of their stories through a lens of critical race theory means exposing how, within the context of schools, issues with race can create obstacles that must be resisted and overcome. The stories are varied and illustrate ways that the epistemological perspectives of the dominant group can lead to practices that are discriminatory in nature. Despite the commonly held belief that racism is always overt and consciously carried out through acts of aggression, critical race theory recognizes the subtle ways racism is perpetuated by framing certain abilities, behaviors, and expressions of intelligence as normal (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Grant's (1984) study on the ways African American girls are socialized in the classroom is highly relevant as it illustrates ways racism can be subtle and seemingly unintentional. After completing a long term qualitative study of the schooling experiences of African American girls, Grant (1984) found that African American female students receive an average amount of academic praise from classroom teachers; though this praise was conditional in nature. Conditional praise, according to Grant, is praise that includes recommendations for improvements. As Grant suggests, conditional praise includes statements like, "A good paper; much better than yesterday's." This type of conditional praise was evident as both Denise and Jaleesa, recalled instances where instructors were not able to recognize their participation in class in the same way they recognized the other students in their all white classrooms. Both young ladies pointed out

many instances where they felt their teachers would deny giving them credit for correct answers but would praise other students in the class for providing the same answers that each young lady had given. Denise recalls feeling confused after being *encouraged* to perform better after giving a correct answer to a math problem. As she explains, her confusion came after her teacher praised another student for getting the same answer to the same problem. This was not a singular incident, as both students indicated that with certain teachers, this was a reoccurring problem. For Denise, this problem with her math teacher resulted in lower grades. A critical analysis of this situation might cause one to question whether Denise's grades dropped due to her interactions with this teacher. Denise recalls that she did not have any problems in math until she transferred to the predominantly White school.

Failure to recognize and give credence to their work devalues their academic abilities and relegates them to marginal positions within the classroom. The teachers' actions may reflect their perceptions about African American students and can diminish their ability to effectively teach them. Grant (1984) suggests that teachers' interactions with students can have a negative impact on how students understand themselves in the classroom. For example, Grant (1984) found that teachers more often assign white females the role of academic peer tutor while encouraging African American females to assist peers in nonacademic matters. These differences in role assignments, though slight, convey to the students that teachers do not perceive that their African American female students are the most competent in terms of their academic abilities. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), teachers' negative perceptions about students are often manifested in the learning environment and shape the degree to which teachers believe

their students can achieve. One perspective regarding misjudgments and lowered expectations about African American students stems from stereotypical attitudes and beliefs regarding African American culture. A major part of the negative stereotype about African Americans involves beliefs regarding inferior intellectual ability (Steele, 2003). These attitudes and beliefs become apparent through assimilationist teaching. Ladson-Billings (1994) refers to assimilationist teachers as those who wish to ensure that students are able to conform to dominant societal notions. In this way, the teacher's actions are based on her thinking about the students and her words reflect her beliefs. Her words reflect to the students what she believes about their ability in comparison to what she believes about the abilities of the other students in the class. In this way the teacher exposes the students as different.

Being thought of as different or being relegated to the position of other can affect students' concepts of school. The data suggest that students often experienced school in two dimensions. The first dimension encompasses the ways in which the student conceived of themselves in terms of their own abilities. The second dimension is the awareness of how others viewed them in terms of their abilities. The study revealed that most students had a positive view of their academic abilities. Meaning no student reported being incapable of learning; by contrast, all thought of themselves as capable students with the ability to do well in school. No student reported failing all courses during their high school years and all students reported having achieved success in one or more courses. Overall, all students conceived of their academic abilities in positive terms. However, the data also reveal that students' experiences with school were affected by the understanding that they were thought of in terms of their racial classification. The

students in this study were constantly aware and reminded that they were not just students; they were Black students and being Black seemed to have negative connotations attached to it. Further, the students in this study reported that when they attended class in their predominantly White schools, they were always conscious of being Black. Kim explains:

...So, I came in and everybody just looked at me different. Yeah, looks like that, like, “Wow, what is she doing here?” type of looks...[It’s] Like, no one saw me as another person, another teenager, another them. It was just more they see you as a Black girl. Like, they can’t get past the fact that you’re Black. And, I tried to tell them over and over again, I don’t wake up, like, “Oh, I’m Black today. What am I going to do as the Black me? It’s just me being me living my life.” But, they can’t get past the skin tone difference.

Davis (1982) explains that people are affected by the knowledge of how they believe others perceive them. The experience of being *looked* at and categorized by others causes individuals to look at themselves through a dual lens. Davis concludes,

“Alone, I can see myself as pure consciousness in a world of possible projects; the Other’s look makes me see myself as an object in another perception....The result is a cycle of conflicting and shifting subject-object relationships in which both sides try simultaneously to remain in control of the relationship and to use the Other’s look to confirm identity (p.324-325).

Students in the study acknowledged this gaze and although they did not articulate it; they internalized it and recognized its weight on their academic experiences. For instance, Kim reported becoming angry when teachers did not reflect back to her the image she

had of herself. Feeling that teachers thought she was less intelligent darkened her academic experience and compelled her to confront those who denied her intelligence. However, the heaviness of his dual identity produced a constrained silence in Dwayne. Afraid that his teacher's dislike for him would jeopardize his academic goals, Dwayne remained exceptionally quiet while he failed his math class, a subject where he had traditionally excelled. Freddie, on the other hand, recognized her plight and set out to determine her own fate. Freddie would not accept the classification that she was just another "hood" child; instead, she found teachers and counselors to help propel her to the next level.

A recurring theme within education is the idea of equal opportunity. Most schools operate under the guise that all students have access to the same opportunities and contend that every student has the opportunity to succeed. Green (1999) asserts that in order to meet the diverse needs of every student and to ensure that every child reaches their full potential students are positioned in the courses that are deemed most suitable for them. The idea seems equitable, in that the students with the highest ability are placed in courses that more effectively meet their needs. However, this system of tracking only exposes some students to higher level, college preparatory courses. Students on higher tracks are taught to expand their critical thinking skills as they spend more time conceptualizing problems and exploring concepts with greater depth. Students assigned to lower tracks have fewer opportunities to attain higher level academic skills, they spend time on fewer academic tasks while allocating more time on corrective tasks and teachers often have lower expectations of them (Green, 1999). Green (1999) also contends that teachers more often place African American students in lower level courses.

This phenomenon was found with the students in this study. Freddie, for example, noted that within her senior class, there were only two African American students who were enrolled in the IB program (which included college level courses), the other students were Caucasian. Freddie recalls the IB program as being special. She states that her school “catered” to the students in this program by providing them with extra academic support, preparing their schedules appropriately, and acknowledging them during school assemblies and in the school paper. By contrast, Freddie noted that the other students, not enrolled in the IB program, were virtually ignored. According to Freddie, the lack of support was even extended to AP (advanced placement) honor students. Freddie says she realized that unless you were enrolled in the IB program “you were on your own” academically. Dwayne concurs, saying that although his school was predominantly white, there were plenty African American students; though none of them were placed in accelerated courses. In this way, tracking seemingly disadvantages African American students. Although the students were able to attend diverse schools they were still racially separated, with the African American students assigned less rigorous coursework.

Racism and Identity

As Tatum (1997) explains African American adolescents are often more aware of their racial identities because of their interactions with others. Individuals tend to recognize the part of their identity that is more often reflected back to them. This was found to be true among the participants in this study. Each of the students shared stories about instances where they feel they were treated in a certain manner specifically because of their racial identity and all of the students understood their experiences in terms of

racial discrimination or differential treatment, but some of them initially believed that there was not any racism or race related issues in their school. Denise makes this point after conceding that the anti-Obama slogans written on the walls of her school made her realize that students could be separated on the basis of race. However, Denise felt that there was not a big issue with race because she was able to get along and establish friendships with non-Black students. Denise cited instances where she was able to work well with non-Black students on school assignments. For Denise, the idea that Black students and White students worked well together created a sense that race was not an issue in her school. Denise, like some of the other students in the study recognized discriminatory acts and considered them as isolated, particular to a certain teacher, or the students thought of those acts as inevitable and were not fazed by them to the point of alarm. In fact, as we began our conversations, many of the students communicated that when they entered their high schools, they did not believe that racism existed in the school in any way. As Tatum (1997) points out, racism, often conjures images of name-calling, verbalized hatred, and blatant acts of violence meant to hurt or harm. Since this was not the case in their schools, as young students, the participants were not able to recognize their schools as being places where racism was prevalent. Instead, students, like Denise, focused on the fact that she did not want to stand out and she sought to develop friendships and to get along with the other students in her school. Dwayne tried to avoid any additional attention because he did not want to cause any added trouble for himself. Dwayne said that he felt he could not approach his teacher or any school official regarding his experiences so he and his friends would “joke” about their experiences in private. As we began our discussions, some of the students revealed that initially, they

had not connected their individual experiences of differential treatment with the concept of racism. Denise, for example, initially attended schools in predominantly Black neighborhoods and had always been recognized in positive ways in terms of her academic achievements. Denise was well liked by her teachers and other students. Therefore, when she arrived at the new school, she did not immediately attribute her experiences to racism or racial discrimination. She recalls being completely naïve about her experience; she only recalls feeling “singled out.”

While some of the students originally did not associate their experiences with racism, others did. They believed that their teachers recognized them as inferior and they resolved to reject this classification. Ron chose to enroll in another school when he felt that his teachers were treating him as though he did not belong in *their* catholic school. Ron explained that although other students in his class had freedom to choose where they would sit, he was assigned a seat in the front row of the classroom. He also recalled feeling singled out during instructional time as teachers would point him out when he did not know the answer to a question. Kim, on the other hand, became angry and resented the teachers when she felt that they did not acknowledge her as an intelligent student. Kim’s perception of the incident that involved her psychology teacher is evident of this fact. Kim was insulted when, as she recalls, her teacher wrongly assumed that Kim’s vocabulary was limited and proceeded to “dumb down” his explanation of a particular concept. Kim’s reaction solidified her stance on his behavior. She felt he was wrong and she quickly “cut him off” and promptly corrected him in an oppositional gesture, acknowledging her annoyance and displeasure with his assumptions.

Although, the students' initial understanding and reactions to their experiences varied, each student recognized that the treatment was a result of their racial identity. Yet, not all students were able to name their experiences as acts of racism. Tatum (1997) defines racism as a system that advantages some through "cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals" (p.7). While all of the students had experienced acts that they recognized as racially motivated all of them did not connect those acts to systems of racism. Nevertheless, African American students are placed at a disadvantage when they cannot participate in the learning process in a way that does not cause them to feel unintelligent, despised, or marginalized.

For some adolescents schools are the first places they are able to interact with people outside of their culture. When they experience a difference in treatment some struggle with how to deal with it; while others look for ways to diminish its effects; and some become angry and confront the issues. The students in this study used one or all of these coping strategies. The strategies that students use when confronted by issues of racism vary and can depend on where the student is in his or her racial identity development. As noted in the literature, Cross (1991) introduced five stages of racial identity development. His theory offers a framework for understanding the process that students go through in recognizing, internalizing, and understanding their racial identity. Cross's theory, separated into five stages, offers some insight into the behaviors of the students in this study. The two stages that are most relevant in this analysis are the pre-encounter and encounter stage.

In the pre-encounter stage, although they were aware of their race, the students were not focused on their race as being a factor of their academic selves. Students, like Denise, Kim and Jaleesa thought of themselves as good students who were all smart and very capable learners. Each participant recognized herself as a hard worker who was well liked by her teachers. Other students like Ron, Dwayne, and Freddie initially embraced schools as positive places to be. In elementary school, Ron strived to be a part of the process of learning. He wanted to blend in and to feel a sense of success. Both Freddie and Dwayne sought ways to be involved in school programs.

In the pre-encounter stage, according to Cross (1991), individuals do not place a great significance on their race. They may place value in their school work, having friendships, music, sports, or other activities that bring them a sense of stability and satisfaction. As long as individuals are content in this stage, they are not compelled to seek new ways of understanding their identity. In this stage, one's racial identity does not figure prominently in his or her academic identity. In fact, as Cross outlines, at this stage, individuals tend to believe and value hard work as the only factor in achieving success. Accepting the academic world as a meritocracy, and primarily focusing on their abilities, the students in this study initially recognized themselves as capable achievers. In fact, before encountering discriminatory behavior in schools, each of them placed more value on their skills than on their racial identity.

As an individual engages with others in their external environment they often encounter new information and new ways of understanding both themselves and others (Cross, 1991). Through these encounters the individual begins to filter in the new information and assimilates it into his or her current way of thinking about himself or

herself. When individuals have an experience(s) or interaction(s) that they cannot assimilate into their existing way of being and thinking they begin to develop new ways of understanding both themselves and others (Tatum, 1997). This represents the encounter stage. During the encounter stage, the individual must, not only have an experience, but they must also personalize the experience before it will cause them to change the way they understand themselves. For the students in this study, those experiences came through interactions at school. For example, after Denise, who was accused of distributing drugs at school, was suspended and made to attend a hearing that would determine whether she would be expelled from school, she felt ashamed and confused. Prior to coming to the new school, Denise thought of herself in terms of her academic feats. She was smart and well liked and felt she could accomplish anything but within two months of entering the new school, she was accused, suspended, and her academic abilities questioned. Denise had a difficult time contrasting her old identity of being the good kid with the circumstances that she faced in the new school. Denise writes:

I'd just moved to a predominantly White area, but the Black population grew quickly, and I was there only two months before I'd found trouble. I will say that, that year I felt really singled out.... I came from another school where I was on top of everything. I had gotten into trouble and an almost all White administration made it seem as though they were going to use me as an example for an innocent mistake. My mindset thereafter did change as I continued on through high school” (Denise, Pre-questionnaire, October 17, 2011).

As a person enters into the encounter stage, his or her initial reaction may include shock, confusion, anger, or disappointment (Cross, 1991). This was certainly the case for the students in this study. Each of the students expressed one or all of these emotions which caused them to view their educational experience through a lens of difference. The students did not have the privilege of experiencing school free from racial tension. As Irvine (1991) points out when students are positioned so that they must *prove* that they do not embody the typical stereotypes associated with African American students, they often experience school with a heightened sense of anxiety that other students do not possess. With this, the students in this study attended school clearly aware of their Black identity and clearly aware that their identity affected how they were going to be treated. These experiences triggered a new consciousness that caused the students to readjust their understanding of how they were perceived as students. All of the participants in this study recalled instances when they realized that their racial differences made a difference in their academic careers. Jaleesa and Denise recalled times when they were not appropriately given credit for their academic endeavors, Ron recalled being singled out in the all White catholic school, Freddie recognized that schools in urban areas were more disregarded than schools in other areas, and Dwayne and Kim remember *feeling* different as they encountered the eyes of the students and faculty members in their predominantly White schools. Kim, for example, realized that, in her school, she was not thought of as she thought of herself. Instead, she felt that, in her school, she was stripped of her other attributes and only recognized by the negative stereotypical concepts that are often associated with African American identity.

As individuals enter the encounter stage they begin to look critically at themselves and examine how they will handle their new understanding of self. This critical consciousness pushes individuals beyond looking at themselves in the old ways and it compels them to seek new understanding. Understanding that they would have to deal with additional issues because of their race, these students determined to move forward either by confronting individuals who treated them in a negative manner based on their race or by finding allies to help them deal with obstacles that interfered with their educational experiences. Freddie represents a prime example of this. Although Freddie did not initially recognize a race issue in her school, she did notice tragic differences in the ways that African Americans were educated and as we spoke she began to develop a critical consciousness about the difference in treatment of the African American students and the Caucasian students in her school. Freddie revealed that because she believed no one cared about the “hood” students in her school, she would have to control her own success. She contends that she sought out help from adults in the building to help her with her school work as well as to provide academic guidance so that she could make sure she would graduate. The other students in this study demonstrated that same level of critical consciousness as they were determined to both graduate and to continue their education on the college level.

Agency and Personal Determination

School success for African American students depends of various factors. One major factor is agency. Agency, as explained by Murrell (2009) is having the “ability to accommodate, reconfigure, or resist the available sociocultural discourses” (p. 94). In order to achieve success, African American students have a great need to resist the

understanding of being stigmatized, devalued, or positioned as *other*. Within schools African American students are often marginally positioned in terms of their academic abilities. This results from inappropriate and oversimplified interpretations of the achievement gap which imply that the disparities in achievement signify that African American students are less intelligent than others. African American students can and do act in ways that defeat this ideal. The way students position themselves within the school contributes to how they will perform in school. In the school setting African American students often must negotiate their Black identity with conditions of difference. This gives students the opportunity to determine how they want to represent themselves.

Human agency relates to how individuals respond to institutional forces that effect experience. To resist hegemonic structures, one must act in a way as to exert some control over the situation. Critical race theory embraces the understanding that in order for individuals to effectively struggle against the dominant discourse of racism they must assert their voice and assist in reframing the conversation. One way critical race theorists explore student agency is through the phenomenon of resistance in schools. Resistance can be both positive and negative. Students can exert positive resistance by critically assessing the dominant ideology of inferiority and work toward changing those ideas.

Clear in the data are the students' efforts at reframing and challenging the discriminatory behaviors of their teachers and administrators. Kim's proactive efforts help her deal with the problems of discrimination. When challenged with issues of racial discrimination, Kim would confront the problems directly by addressing the authority figures in her school. Kim did not shy away from confronting any teachers or administrators about her concerns. Recognizing herself as an equal, not an inferior

student, Kim questioned stereotypical comments, practices, and behaviors that imposed upon her characteristics, that she did not embrace. On those occasions when, as she describes, baseless, racially infused, accusations persisted, Kim would enlist the help of her mother to address the offending faculty member. Kim possessed what Yosso (2006) calls resistant capital. Resistant capital are those “knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional inequality” (Yosso, 2006, p. 80). Kim’s actions challenged and often disrupted many misjudgments and some notions about African American students. Miron and Lauria (1998) argue that student resistance is a significant form of agency. Through their study, they reveal that inner city high school students assert their agency vigorously by voicing concern and challenging those practices that they deem inequitable. The students in their study did not allow adversity to deter their desires for academic success.

As students act on their own behalf they demonstrate a personal determination to want to succeed. This determination to succeed is what makes the difference in their success. Although the discourse concerning students from single parent homes, with low socio-economic backgrounds, and troublesome school experiences is often inundated with chronicles of failure and blame, the data in this study uncover the ways that persistence and self-determination can influence student achievement. Ron’s story, for example, epitomizes this idea. By his own admission, Ron does not believe he should have successfully completed high school or continued on into a well respected four year institution. He says that his home situation and the example set by his parents should have caused him to give up and find a adequate life on the streets, but he recognized in himself a determined nature that compelled him to reach for something more. He sought

out his mentor and initiated the communication that led to the very close relationship that they have developed. Ron gives his mentor a lot of credit for his academic success but Ron would not have been successful had he not sought help from capable adults in his community and his school. Ron's story represents what Yosso (2006) terms aspirational capital, "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p.77). Despite being raised by a mom who was addicted to drugs, experiencing school failure, and finding himself homeless on occasion, Ron says that, as a high school student, he did not doubt that he would eventually become successful. Asserting that his self-esteem developed "along the way of hell," Ron found and inner determination that sustained his academic endeavors. Freddie's story is also filled with personal determination. Having prior knowledge about the faculty's attitude about guiding African American students, Freddie chose to seek out and bond with her school counselors. This helped Freddie to acquire the appropriate courses that she would need in order to graduate and to gain admission to a four year institution of higher learning.

These stories above are not exhaustive, each of the students who participated in this study shared stories of perseverance and determination. They did not give up when they were faced with adversity. They found ways to cope with and overcome the issues of racism and differential treatment. These students either garnered support or directly addressed any issues that they faced. Demonstrating resistance, they alter the common discourse on the academic failures of at-risk students.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

As I set forth to undertake this enormous task, I was initially overwhelmed. I wasn't sure whether I would be able to get college students, who were essentially strangers, to share their high school experiences with me. I was nervous, questioning, wondering how I would get them to share very personal details of their lives, their understandings, and their reflections with me. Even more daunting, during this process, I was often cautioned that African American youth did not consider race and issue in the context of their lives. If this was the case, I wondered how students would respond to my questions; and I wondered whether African American students were aware that, in the research, they were already being discussed in terms of their race. With this nagging thought in my mind, I wanted to know if college students were willing to join the conversation and share their insights. Finally, knowing that my own experiences in high school have created for me a new dimension, a new way to understand myself, I wondered how or if these students' experiences had affected them in terms of their academic endeavors. (Ché, 2012, Personal Reflection)

To develop a perfect understanding of another human being is not possible. To do so, according to Seidman (2006), “would mean that we had entered into the other’s stream of consciousness and experienced” the situation in the exact same way (p. 9). Appreciating that our ability to understand others is limited, narrative inquiry seeks to involve participants in telling and reflecting on their experiences. Narrative inquiry creates space for individuals to assert their voice into research in a way that is significant, vivid, and meaningful. This inquiry intends to identify how a selected group of African

American students negotiated their knowledge of self and the perceptions of others in terms of their academic identity. Using a critical race theory framework, I aspired to decenter common discourse on African American students and academic achievement. Solorzano and Yosso (2009) proclaim that majoritarian stories marginalize students of color and challenge researchers to develop new ways to better understand individuals who have been marginalized. To decenter thoughts and beliefs that render students of color “epistemologically marginalized, silenced, and disempowered,” this research invited African American students to expose the ways they experienced school (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009, p.142). By citing the voices of the young African American participants, this work reveals their understandings, their frustrations, their challenges, and their feats. It also provides these students with an opportunity to enter into the discussion of achievement and to enlighten majoritarian theories of youth who are considered at-risk of failing to graduate from high school. Through this work, I sought to incorporate student perspectives and to provide a space for young African Americans to challenge perceptions of their academic identities.

To gain understanding of experiences and to infer what meaning is generated from those experiences is a process that involves communicating and interacting with others (Seidman, 2006). This process began as I sat down to hear what the participants had to say. As I listened to their stories, I found myself submerged in their lives as I envisioned their words. By repeatedly listening to their voices, I began to notice some emergent themes. The first theme, apparent in every narrative involved supportive relationships. Whether in the form of parents, teachers, or mentors each of the participants had someone to provide them with guidance and direction to help navigate

through the challenges of school and home. Throughout the data, it is apparent that parents, mentors, and teachers worked to instill in these students a firm foundation from which to negotiate life's obstacles. This means that students gained more from their relationships with these adults than information on how to maintain passing grades; these adults provided students with life skills that will help them cope as they encounter new obstacles and situational challenges. Through these relationships, the students learned about perseverance, they learned how to confront and resolve conflicts, and they learned the meaning of determination. Finally, when students realized that an issue was too much for them to handle, they were able to rely on their mentor, teacher, or parent to step in on their behalf. Building bonds and establishing supportive relationships helped each of the participants develop into self-reliant and confident young college students.

A second theme that emerged from the data was the students' tolerance of the trade-offs that they would need to make in order to obtain a better education. Students recognized and seemed to accept, without critically assessing, that the schools in their neighborhoods were less than suitable. Instead, most of the students seemed to accept as normal the idea that they would need to travel beyond their local schools in order to attend better schools. This idea intrigued me because as I sat with the students I began to realize that as a child I never questioned why or how it developed that the schools in my own neighborhood would be deficient as compared to the schools in predominantly white areas. Left unanalyzed and deemed acceptable practice, African American students will continue to need to travel away from their communities in order to find a place where they will be properly educated. However, as the students began speaking about the racial concerns they faced in high school, some of them began to develop a critical

consciousness that caused them to question this phenomenon. Issues of inequality and inequity cannot be addressed unless there is critical awareness.

The third concept involved perception and experience. The data revealed each of the participants experienced school in multidimensional ways. This means that as the students brought one concept of themselves into the classroom, they were met with a different concept. Students reported that their teachers did not always recognize the students' abilities in the same way the students recognized their own abilities. The students thought of themselves as capable learners but they were not always received in that manner. As the data revealed, students often felt that teachers lowered their expectations for African American students and undervalued their academic abilities. Also present in the data was the, seldom theorized but often encountered, issue that African American females face within the classroom. Although there is not a great deal of information specifically aimed at African American females in terms of the interactions with teachers, there is some information which reveals that African American females have differing experiences in the classroom than other students (Grant, 1984). This study concurs with that point of view. African American females in my study also felt their difference in their classrooms. At some point during our conversations, every student reported feeling that he or she was perceived as different and was, at times, very aware of his or her racial identity.

The fourth theme emerged as students discovered that some of their encounters with others were solely based on race and were discriminatory in nature. Racism and identity developed as a theme as students began to recognize that their racial identity affected their experiences in school. The data show that many of the students underwent

changes in their understanding of self as a result of interactions they encountered in school. Students, initially believing themselves to be *regular* and *normal*, developed a new way of being after realizing that they were not always regarded as *normal* by others. They were seen as different. Recognizing how they were perceived by others not only caused a shift in their understanding of self but it also changed the way they perceived their experiences. As students encountered forces, ideas, or behaviors that caused them to reexamine themselves they began to think critically about how they will handle future situations where race is a factor.

Personal determination and agency emerged as the fifth theme. The fact that each student possessed personal determination was not surprising. Students in at-risk situations must show determination in order to successfully navigate the challenges of school. As no one can truly make another individual want to succeed, the desire to do so must develop internally. Parents, teachers, and mentors can only provide encouragement but they cannot coerce another individual to desire to succeed. The data presented in this study exemplified what Yosso (2006) characterized as aspirational capital. The students were not only determined but many of them demonstrated this determination in the absence of true examples of success and while facing personal and academic challenges. However, the fact that each student demonstrated personal determination was not a surprise. The surprise, though, was the level of agency that each student exhibited. Most of the students did not wait for someone to fix their problems nor did they refuse to deal with their problems. The students, despite their situations, took the initiative to act on their own behalf. Whether it was confronting a teacher, an administrator, or seeking help

or guidance, each of these students stepped up and pursued whatever they felt would push them to the next level.

As I review the data, I am reminded of the words of Solorzano and Yosso (2009) as they profess the purposes and the tenets of critical race theory in education. For educational researchers, critical race theory demands that we center race and expose racism throughout the course of the research. It also grants the researcher permission to challenge traditional discourse that marginalizes students of color by establishing a place for students to voice their experiences. Finally, among other things, it views students' telling of experiences as experiential knowledge that can serve as a source of strength that empowers students (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). I believe that, as I have chosen to frame this study using critical race theory, I have employed the tenets and provided a space to hear and receive the knowledge that African American students bring to the discourse on education and achievement.

Framing the Findings

This study contributes to the literature by providing space for young African American students to discuss their experiences in high school from the perspective of their perceptions of racial identity. Traditionally, discussions about African American students and academics are addressed from a deficit perspective (Ladson-Billings, 2000). The plight of African American education customarily involves other stakeholders, such as educational researchers, teachers, and administrators (Wells, 1989). Further, such discourse frequently centers on questioning what is wrong with the student, their parents, or the teachers. From that discourse, scholars then work to discover solutions for correcting the students or their parents and devising better, at times, scripted lesson plans

for the teacher (Wells, 1989). However, these conversations about African American achievement or lack of achievement do not usually involve the student. Instead, students, especially students who possess characteristics that place them at risk of academic failure, are often left out of the conversation. This study is unique in that it not only involves students who possessed characteristics of being at-risk; it also centered their experiences and represented them from an epistemological perspective. In this study, students' stories are honored and treated as valid ways to knowing, learning, and understanding.

Studies, such as the ones conducted by Chavous, et. al. (2003) consider racial identity and academic attainment in terms of how and to what extent the student feels connected with their racial identity. Determining their connectedness, Chavous, et. al (2003) reveal correlations between academic attainment and the degrees to which students feel connected to their racial identity. While this study disclosed noteworthy findings, it did not engage the reader in understanding the personal experiences of students of color. As previously stated, as they continue to seek understanding regarding African American achievement, researchers must effectively engage those whom they seek to understand (Seidman, 2006). By recognizing the experiential experience of the participants, this work suggests a new direction for the literature.

Also, in general, studies on African American students who have been declared at-risk of failure often focus on the factors that contribute to student failure. Studies such as the ones conducted by Lee (1999) and the Nation Center for Educational Statistics (1992) concentrate on examining failure and analyzing the factors the trigger the at-risk status.

This work is different in that it engages African American students who possess factors for being at-risk, but it examines the students' experiences while focusing on students who demonstrated the ability to overcome obstacles in order to successfully graduate from high school. This work recognizes the agency of the "at-risk" student. This study enters the field of educational research seeking to transform the perceptions that persist about *all* at-risk, African American students and acknowledges their ability to achieve.

Summary

The Stares to Achievement was intended to understand how African American students cope with the *glares* that render them as *other* while seeking to overcome challenges to their success. Having experienced high school as *other*, navigated the in-between spaces, recognized myself as other, and watched as my African American friends received harsher punishment for minor infractions, I started to wonder. I wondered how a student's understanding of self as mediated through the eyes of others could affect the student's ability to achieve in school. Through this work, I am able to develop a deeper understanding of how some African American students have negotiated their beliefs about themselves in relation to how others view them. Rejecting and resisting stereotypical images that disregard their determination and minimize their intellectual abilities, the students in this study pressed forward determined not only to graduate high school but also to attend a four year institution of their choice.

Their success, their thoughts, and their reflections offer direction for students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members regarding ways to help African American students succeed in school. Through their stories, it becomes evident

that students need caring relationships to help guide them as they face challenges both within their home environment and within their schools. By developing bonds with family members, parents, teachers, and mentors, the students were able to overcome the obstacles that could have prevented them from graduating high school. When teachers reach out to students it reflects to the student that teachers care and want them to succeed. Also clear from this study is that students need to possess self determination. The students in this study did not settle for mediocre and did not accept any adverse opinions about their characters. Instead, they resisted and sought to change or improve their difficult situations. Recognizing that their situations were less than ideal, these students understood that they needed to act on their own behalves. Finally, through this study, it becomes apparent that as students, parents, and teachers begin to recognize and think critically about racism and differential treatment within schools, they can address those issues and create environments and schools that are more suitable for African American students to achieve success.

This study called on the voices of African American students asking for their stories and their thoughts as a way to better understand their experiences, learn from their experiences, and project their voices into the discussion on African American student achievement. As majoritarian discourse regularly ignores successful students who are considered at-risk, their voices interrupt the silence that refuses to acknowledge their existence. Their voices shout a resounding, “*We are here and we have resisted and accomplished those things that many did not believe we could accomplish*”. These students’ stories represent a continuation of the rich academic tradition developed within the African American community during the pre-civil rights era because during that time,

African Americans craved education as a means to resist being devalued and considered unintelligent. This research has reinforced the idea that African American students, despite their situations can and do succeed.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:	Informed Consent
Appendix B:	Pre-Questionnaire
Appendix C:	Individual Interview Questions
Appendix D:	Criteria for Participants
Appendix E:	IRB Letter of Approval

Appendix A



DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM, FOUNDATIONS, AND READING

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Ché Wyatt, a doctoral student from Georgia Southern University. I hope to learn how racial identity and the perceptions of others affect behavior and academic performance in school.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight from participants, who have experienced personal or academic challenges, about their school experiences. Also, I hope to gain understanding of how each participant's experiences and perceptions influenced their academic performance. I hope to gain insight as to how each participant overcame their challenges in order to graduate.

This study will benefit current students and teachers by providing insight that will allow teachers to better educate African American students. This study will benefit current students by removing any misconceptions or racial stereotypes and it will help teachers to better understand African American students and to recognize their diverse skills and abilities.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire and participate in a one-on-one interview. The questionnaire will be emailed to you and should take no longer than 20 minutes to complete. The completed questionnaire can be returned through email. After the questionnaire is completed and reviewed, participants will be selected to participate in an interview. The interview will take no longer than 1-2 hours. During the interview, you will be encouraged to share your school experiences with race related issues. The interviews will be recorded by audio tape. The audio tapes will be kept in a secure location. To preserve confidentiality, participants' names will not be used. Instead, participants will be given pseudonyms.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants will not be financially compensated. There are no physical risks associated with participation in this study. However, if you feel any level of discomfort, you may choose not to answer any question(s) for any reason and you are also welcomed to discontinue participation at any time, without penalty.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Participant identities will be kept confidential. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms and will only be identified by the pseudonyms during the study.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study at any time, please feel free to contact me at 770 827-2647 or email at cyw_24@yahoo.com. To contact the Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs for answers to questions about the rights of research participants please email IRB@georgiasouthern.edu or call 912 478-0843.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. This project has been reviewed and approved by the GSU Institutional Review Board under tracking number H12083.

Title of Project: Racial Identity: The perceptions, the Challenges and the Performance of African Americans

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Participant Signature

Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

Investigator Signature

Date

Appendix B

PRE-QUESTIONNAIRE

Read each statement. Answer as accurately as possible.

1. My first name is _____.
2. I am _____ years old.
3. I would define my race as _____.
4. During high school, I lived with:

5. My high school was located in
 - A. Rural area
 - B. Urban area
6. In school, I felt as though:
 - A. I was a valuable part of the school community.
 - B. I was a member of a subordinate group.
 - C. I was neither an important or unimportant part of the school community.
7. Read the following, circle all that apply.
 - A. I was retained in a grade.
 - B. I had low scores on standardized test.
 - C. I dropped out of school,
 - D. I was cited on multiple occasions for truancy.
 - E. I met with a counselor or administrator on more than three occasions for discipline referrals.
 - F. I had a child or became pregnant while in school,
8. Briefly describe your feelings about your education (8th – 12th).

Appendix C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe yourself to others?
2. How do you feel about school?
3. What kind of student were you?
4. How important was school to you? Why?
5. How do you feel about the ways that you were taught?
6. How do you think people viewed you in school?
7. Describe the way you were treated in school?
8. Were all students given the same support in school? If no, how did it differ?
9. In terms of your academic goals, what type of guidance did you receive from your school's administrative team, counselors, academic coaches, or teachers?
10. As an African American student, what presented the biggest problems for you at school? How did you cope with these problems?
11. When did you feel successful/ when did you feel unsuccessful at school?
12. What factors differentiate successful students from unsuccessful students?
13. Who or what are the most important factors that influence your academic development?
14. What factors need to be improved in order for African American students to be successful?

Appendix D

Criteria for Participants

Name	Age & Class	Gender	Family Structure (SFH- single family home) (2PH- 2 parent home)	Low Socio-Economic Status	Academic or Counselor Referral	Low Standardized Test Scores
Dwayne	22 Senior	M	SFH	Y	N	N
Kim	18 Freshman	F	2PH	Y	N	N
Denise	19 Sophomore	F	SFH	N	Y	N
Ron	20 Sophomore	M	SFH	Y	Y	Y
Freddie	18 Freshman	F	SFH	Y	N	N
Jaleesa	22 Senior	F	2PH	N	Y	N

Appendix E

Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs		
Institutional Review Board (IRB)		
Phone: 912-478-0843		Veazey Hall 2021
		P.O. Box 8005
Fax: 912-478-0719	IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu	Statesboro, GA 30460

To: Che Wyatt
Dr. Lorraine Gilpin

CC: Charles E. Patterson
Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College

From: Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

Initial Approval Date: 10/3/11

Expiration Date: 3/31/12

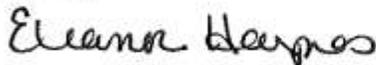
Subject: Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered **H12083** and titled "**Racial Identity: The Perceptions, the Challenges and the Performance of African American Students,**" it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable. You are authorized to enroll up to a maximum of 12 subjects.

Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.

If at the end of this approval period there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period. Total project approval on this application may not exceed 36 months. If additional time is required, a new application may be submitted for continuing work. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,



Eleanor Haynes
Compliance Officer